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# Motherhood is a choice

**PLYMOUTH** – Women enter motherhood in many different ways including fostering, adoption, miscarriage, and spiritual influence.

Just mentioning the name Mother brings a flood of memories to my mind. Childhood memories of how proud I was of my beautiful Mother and how I wanted to be like her, and look like her.

How she lovingly cared for me the many times I was ill, or just skinned my knees and needed a “special” bandage. I will never forget the big smiles and applause I received whenever I accomplished something challenging in my life, and especially how she faithfully taught me that Jesus loved me and died for me.

My experience of being a mother looked much different than the mother of my memories. She was so feminine, graceful and hospitable, and taught her daughters how to be a lady.

I had the privilege of rearing two pretty amazing sons. When their tiny little hands closed around my finger for the first time all the discomfort of being pregnant and giving birth to them quickly faded away into some misty memory as they captured my heart. In the beginning, being a “boy mom” was very scary to me; I had no clue how to bring up a boy.

It took a lot (and I mean a lot) of prayer, not because they were difficult, but because I didn’t want to get it wrong. I got many things wrong, but loving them was not one of them. Letting them go into adulthood was a whole different feeling. In the blink of an eye, they were teenagers and then in another blink, I watched them walk down the aisle with their new beautiful brides. A piece of me was ripped out knowing they no longer needed me like they did when they were younger.

As life has progressed and I found myself getting older I now find myself in a new arena of life. Grandmother!

Those two amazing sons gave me 5 of the most beautiful granddaughters a GeeGee could ever dream of having. They have brought pure joy into my life.

As all children declare the funniest sayings, mine were no exception. One day Sarah piped up and said, “GeeGee, we’re just alike! Except you’re strict.” Abby told me, “GeeGee, you should dress up like a witch for Halloween since you have the witch laugh down.” Or when Abby announced I was her second favorite, after her dog Oscar. And when Sarah walked into my closet and matter of factly said, “GeeGee, your closet looks like a mall – except there isn’t any popcorn or pretzels in it.”

Then there was the time during Christmas my oldest granddaughter Kailyn, who was 2 1/2 years old at the time, said all she wanted for Christmas was a “pink” present. It didn’t matter

what was in the wrapping as long as it was a “pink” present. She loved everything she received with a childlike wonder. She even slept that night with her Cinderella ornament, and then the next night with her Cinderella wand, and the following night she slept all evening in her Cinderella fuzzy house slippers.

Just like my little granddaughter’s fun and good gifts at Christmas, God gives us good gifts every day. And whether you are a mother by giving birth, adoption, fostering, grandparenting or a spiritual parent to someone, you and I have been given the gift and responsibility to encourage and “provoke” others toward a godliness that results in tangible transformation. As Hebrews 10:24 tells us, we are the provokers of great love and good works.

Hebrews 10:24 says, “And let us watch out for one another to provoke love and good works.”

Below is one of my favorite quotes on motherhood, though I’m not sure of the source. I pray it is an encouragement to you and reminds us all of the privilege and high calling of being a mother.

"Motherhood is a choice you make every day to put someone else's happiness and well-being ahead of your own, to teach the hard lessons, to do the right thing even when you're not sure what the right thing is... And to forgive yourself over and over again, for doing everything wrong." – Donna Hall

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Sabrina Patterson is the wife of Tim Patterson, Executive Director/Treasurer of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. She is mother to Micah Joel and Aaron Paige, and Grammie to Kailyn, Sarah, Abby, Jordan and Avery.

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## **Black pastors forming new state fellowships, pastors’ wives network**

**NEW ORLEANS (BP)** – The National African American Fellowship (NAAF) of the Southern Baptist Convention will announce three new state fellowships and a support network for the wives of senior pastors ahead of the 2023 SBC Annual Meeting in New Orleans.

Wives of senior pastors face unique challenges that NAAF is poised to help them address, NAAF leaders told Baptist Press.

“There is an unmet need and an opportunity to encourage and support the wives of senior pastors,” NAAF Executive Director Dennis Mitchell said, “by helping them to develop a support system. The hope is that just as we have NAAF state fellowships, that wherever we have a state fellowship there can be a first ladies’ support system.”

NAAF at-large board members Kim Hardy, a Bible teacher, author and wife of Dexter Hardy, founding pastor of Lifepoint Church in Marietta, Ga.; and Peggy Alexander, a Christian education director and wife of former East Bay Baptist Association (San Leandro, Calif.) Director of Missions Lyman Alexander, will lead the initiative.

New state fellowships are in varying stages of development in North Carolina, Alabama and Arizona, Mitchell said, applauding respective state convention executive directors for their support.

NAAF events in advance of the SBC annual meeting kick off with a worship service June 11 at 6:30 p.m. at Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, 8282 I-10 Service Rd. in New Orleans, where host pastor Fred Luter will preach. NAAF will honor Luter, past NAAF presidents and retiring NAAF historian Robert Wilson and others at the worship service.

The worship service will mark the 30th anniversary of the gathering that spurred NAAF’s formation, Mitchell said, and will kick off a yearlong recognition of NAAF’s 2024 30th anniversary.

“June, 30 years ago at Brentwood Baptist Church in Houston, that was the first gathering of a fellowship that one year later would officially become NAAF,” Mitchell said. “Our 30th anniversary, technically, will be June of 2024. That’s when NAAF was formally established. However, we’re going to kick off a yearlong 30th anniversary celebration in New Orleans, an entire year celebrating 30 years, culminating in June of 2024.”

“Moving Forward Together” will be the theme of the combined celebrations of the first fellowship and the formal establishment of the group.

The theme, Williams said, “is an emphasis on our legacy churches and pastors, with our emerging leaders and pastors and with church planters. There’s the sense here that NAAF wants to really chart a course forward that includes these ministry leaders.”

NAAF will further honor Luter by attending the Fred Luter Jr. Student Center Dedication Ceremony and Celebration June 14 from 6-9 p.m. at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS), 3939 Gentilly Blvd. in New Orleans.

“Dr. Luter has been a faithful servant and pastor in New Orleans and beyond,” Williams said. “His work has impacted the Southern Baptist Convention nationally as a former SBC president. He has touched many of our lives personally, pastorally. And Dr. Luter’s record and character speak volumes to us, especially during our time today.

“The honor of having the student center named after him is a reflection of that kind of faithfulness and that kind of character and that kind of service for the glory of God.” NOBTS trustees approved at their April 2022 meeting the renovation and renaming of the student center to honor Luter as part of a \$12 million campus renovation.

In its business meeting June 12 from 4-6 p.m. in rooms 201-202 of the convention center, NAAF will elect new officers including a vice president, secretary and parliamentarian. Current President Frank Williams will remain in his post, serving a third year, as NAAF works to establish a greater sense of continuity in its administration.

The business meeting is billed as an opportunity for pastors to focus on upcoming initiatives and plans to empower African American churches, leaders, and planters for the work of the Great Commission through resources, networking, and more.

Hardy and Alexander will lead the wives of senior pastors in an organizational meeting during the business meeting time slot, NAAF leaders said, with a meeting location being finalized.

NAAF will present its annual George Liele Missions Banquet June 12 from 6:30-8:30 p.m. in the Mosaic Room of the convention center. Williams will preach the banquet sermon at the event named in honor of America’s first missionary and raising money to fund missions. Tickets, \$65 each, are available [here](#).

With Wilson’s retirement after serving nearly two decades as NAAF historian, Lyman Alexander of California will assume that role, Mitchell said.

In addition to the three new state fellowships, NAAF has fellowships in Alaska, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland-Delaware, Michigan, Minnesota-Wisconsin, Missouri, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania-South Jersey, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia, according to [naaftogether.org](http://naaftogether.org).

NAAF represents and serves pastors of about 4,000 majority African American Southern Baptist churches and missions, collaborating with SBC entities and humanitarian and advocacy groups in its work.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press’ senior writer.

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# Better together

**PLYMOUTH** – My good friend and counterpart in Arizona, David Johnson, recently wrote an article and it was published in the Baptist Press. I wanted to share just an excerpt from it that I feel is very helpful for many of us in the Southern Baptist Convention today.

There has been so much negativity and conflict within our ranks, one could almost believe that all we do is fuss and fight, and never accomplish anything for the Kingdom. The fact is quite the opposite.

That does not mean that we have no problems or issues that need to be addressed. We do! It has often been said, “When two or more of us gather together, someone is ticked off about something!”

Thus is the nature of a people who are passionate about their Lord, and serious about the work of ministry to which we have been called. Also, when you have millions within our churches, the law of averages tells us there are going to be some real stinkers among us. Every family has some crazy uncles, and we have our fair share, and our family tree produces some real nuts.

I choose to be part of this family we call Southern Baptist for a plethora of reasons. Do we have faults? Yes. Are there some fissures forming within our ranks? Possibly. Do we need to make some changes? Obviously. Is it really worth it? Absolutely.

The SBC family may be a mess at times, but it is still our family and good families stay together and work through their problems.

[The following is from an article by David Johnson, Executive Director of the Arizona Convention.](#) It is by no means an exhaustive list but a very good reminder.

## **18 good things about being Southern Baptist right now:**

1. We are reaching the nations together through the International Mission Board to address the world’s greatest problem: lostness!
2. We are planting new churches together in our state and across North America through the North American Mission Board.
3. We are preparing people for all kinds of ministry through our seminaries around the country.
4. We are not ignoring the sexual abuse issue. We have recognized the problem and are taking action to address it.
5. We are helping people in crisis through Disaster Relief in places that have experienced devastating events like hurricanes, tornadoes, fire, and floods.

6. We are responding to human needs around the world through Send Relief in refugee camps, clean water wells and famine projects.
7. We are staying true to biblical truth as expressed in our shared confession, The Baptist Faith and Message (2000).
8. We are helping churches share the Gospel through evangelism training and equipping partnering with the North American Mission Board.
9. We are helping feed the poor through hunger relief funds provided by the World Hunger Offering.
10. We are reaching college students with the Gospel through collegiate ministries on campuses around the country.
11. We are responding to children and families in need through children's homes and family ministries in our states.
12. We are working to revitalize and replant churches in our local associations.
13. We have a resource for advocacy and expertise dealing with political issues that affect us through the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.
14. We are taking care of retired pastors and their widows in need through Mission Dignity.
15. We are the most ethnically diverse denomination in America, which gives us greater strength and a stronger witness to the world.
16. We have a network of state conventions and local associations to partner together for more effective ministry and mission work.
17. We have the best resource for Bible study and discipleship materials in the world through Lifeway Christian Resources.
18. We still have the best missionary supporting system on the planet, the Cooperative Program!

#### **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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## Foster parenting; the blessing and the struggle

**CANTON** – I have always had a heart for two things: God and children. I spent my life loving and serving kids in church, at camps, and have always been a sappy Jesus lover. As a child I had all these dreams of living my life abandoned to Jesus, serving Him, and loving kids that are not my own by fostering, running an orphanage, and adopting.

My husband and I decided to start fostering during the heart of the Pandemic as we were sitting at home desperately desiring that God use us to accomplish his glory. We desired to show struggling families compassion, and take care of vulnerable children. We wanted to offer what we have to God to use it for His plan.

In my mind I must have pictured fostering as this sweet, idyllic triumph of ours. Dan and I, these wonderful parents, loving kids through the tough times. Which IS true. But fostering, in my experience, has been much more like a constant fight. I often gird up my loins, put on armor, and go into battle, bruised, weary and disillusioned. I am so tired and weary. And maybe you are too.

When I have time alone with the Father I picture myself as a warrior child, coming desperately to my Father for rest. Because this is hard! We are constantly at the mercy of adults who don't know this child, the whims of broken and desperate people, changes to schedule and plans, and workers who change often. There are so many hard things about fostering. However, my greatest struggle has been with someone I didn't expect.  
Me.

My flesh is so weak. Nothing has demonstrated this more than being a foster parent. I want to wrap my baby up and protect him. I want to take control. I want my plans to come true. I am often anxious, sad, and desperate. I resent the sacrifice and hardship it brings along with it. I get angry, often irrationally. I tell God I deserve to be this boy's momma. I think my ways are better than an almighty God whose loving kindness already has this baby's future planned out.

I constantly require bringing my thoughts and my heart under the submission of Christ. To know that He is the Loving Father with complete sovereignty. That's the best truth.

So, I lay myself before the God I love with all my idolatry, anger, fear, and anxiety. And I repent. I seek forgiveness. I remind myself that this baby is not mine, (even if we adopt) that his real father is our Heavenly Father who loves him more than I ever could, and has plans greater than mine could ever be.

In a position of very little control, I see who truly is on the Throne.



I am just a steward, a temporary owner of this precious little life. Yet, the one who holds it is his Creator.

I find peace knowing God loves this child more than I ever could. And that He has planned his life from the beginning of time. I work (hard) to take every thought captive to Christ, to rest and find strength in Him.

This choice we made has changed me more than I think it's changing the children in our care. God is using me, yes, absolutely! But more than that He is molding me, shaping, and refining me to be MORE useful, more obedient and more like HIM.

It urges me to ask you: where are you weary and need rest? Where is life and circumstances getting in the way of your true worship of God? What hard places in life might God be using to teach you and make you more like Him?

My prayer for you and for me is that we would keep our eyes on the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. That we would seek His kingdom and His righteousness no matter the cost. That we never stop boldly knowing and seeking Him. And Hey! If this article touched something in you to become a foster parent, we NEED Christian foster parents. Maybe that is the hard thing God is calling you to right now...

If you're interested in Fostering check here:

<https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/adult-child-serv/foster-care>

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Claire Carty is a wife and foster momma in Canton, MI. I adore my husband, our foster son, our doggie Daisy, pink sunsets, and summertime. I am a former teacher and now work at an engineering company.

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## **Appetite**

**PLYMOUTH** – We had been collecting “coke” bottles for most of the day. Both of us had gone from house to house and asked our neighbors if they had any lying around, they did not want. Some folks were very kind and generous while others just directed us back to the street from whence we had come.

There was one gentleman on “Avenue D” who had what seemed to be an inordinate passion for Dr. Pepper. He also knew that periodically Ricky Burrows and I would be coming by asking for pop bottle donations to our very worthy causes.

We always had a worthy cause, and as far as we were concerned, collecting enough money for the movies or for a box of “b-b’s” was as admirable as any foundation raising money for orphaned children.

On this particular day we had decided that we needed food supplies for our “fort”. It wasn’t much of a fort, just a few scraps of tin and some construction wire covered with a tarp I had borrowed from Dad’s shed.

We knew full well that any standing army must be well fed to do battle with marauding savages, Nazi’s, or motorcycle gangs. (There were thousands of them in our small hamlet!)

After several hours of collecting, we made our way to the local “Pick-Pac” convenience store, traded in our bottles, and purchased the needed provisions. We bought the largest jar of peanut butter that we could find and a loaf of bread.

Now, of course, we didn’t buy the expensive Jif, but some store brand that had about an inch of oil floating on top. This didn’t deter us but merely gave us an opportunity to play in the pasty brown concoction until the oil was well mixed.

It was about 4:00 p.m. when we finally made it back to the fort and that is when the feasting began. One after the other, Ricky and I ingested sandwich after sandwich. I think I ate four or five myself. When we could eat no more, all we could do was lay there like a couple of old hound dogs that just gorged themselves on fresh roadkill. We were full and miserable.

About that time, I heard my dad’s familiar whistle, and I knew it was time for supper. I slowly, but obediently, got up and headed for home. When I walked in the back door, there spread out over the kitchen bar was a feast fit for a king. It was payday, and Mom had prepared my favorite meal. Fried shrimp, french-fries and all the fixings. I could not believe my eyes or my lack of appetite. I could not eat one bite of food. In fact, the smell even made me a bit nauseous. The infamous “spoiled appetite” had overcome me.

I cannot tell you the number of times I have heard people say, “I just didn’t get anything out of the worship service today. The preaching was boring, the music was dead, and no one talked to me.”

The problem is that the majority of those who voice that complaint came to church with a “spoiled appetite” for the things of God. All week long they have filled their spiritual stomachs with the food of the world, and when they come to God’s house to be fed, they can’t “stomach” it. In fact, it is distasteful to them.

(Of course, the problem does not lie with them or their lack of discipline but with the pastor and the rest of those Christians!)

Friends, when we have developed a taste for the things of the world, and fill our lives with them, no wonder we cannot grow spiritually and we have no desire for His Word. This is one reason why so many of those who claim to be Christians today are spiritually malnourished, dying a slow spiritual death, and have great difficulty living the victorious Christian life.

This week carefully consider what you are feeding your soul. It may taste good, but it could very well spoil your appetite.

### **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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## **Low-cost, high-value summer mission trip**

**PLYMOUTH** – Leaders of all shapes, sizes, languages, and locations; I have a summer idea that you will love. An international mission trip in Michigan!

During May, start planning a cross-cultural excursion into the lives of immigrants, refugees, and internationals who live around you in your daily lives, right here in Michigan. Think about it. People from around the world are all around you. Listen to their accent when they speak English. Watch for the decorations in their places of business. Smell the aromas coming from the apartments in your building. Your daily life is more international than you currently realize.

The owner of the auto repair garage, the family running the restaurant in your hometown, the mothers of children who live in your neighborhood, and the students going to the university in your county who will spend the summer 5,000 or 8,000 miles away from family would welcome your approach and a friendship with an American family. It all starts with you taking the first step. The long sunny days of Michigan will provide a canopy of blue skies and mild temperatures for outdoor activities and shared meals.

You do not have to do this alone. The International Mission Board (IMB) offers online courses used for international encounters. Look at <https://www.imb.org/training/> to locate studies that

you can use to prepare teenagers, adults, your family, or the entire church to take an international mission trip this summer.

Did you know that a tiny portion of those born outside the United States, and who choose to live in America ever enter an American home? It is heartbreaking that so few who choose to make America their home share life with those of us born here.

The Bible urges us to be warm, loving, and hospitable to those from other nations living among us. Imagine the experience you would receive getting to know someone from another part of the world. Imagine that through your friendship that person or his and her family became followers of Jesus Christ because of your gesture of friendship.

During May, gather some family members, friends at church, or the entire church and start brainstorming how you could use the materials from the IMB to use the months of June, July, and August to cross into new relationships. What do you need to do?

1. Pray with others asking the Lord for direction.
2. Calendar frequent meetings to get things started, coordinated, and follow-through.
3. Establish whether everyone in the meeting will make new friends by themselves, or will all of you work together as a team in each one's neighborhood. Or will you mix it up throughout the summer?
4. Calendar and protect the summer days right away for the international experiences, if not you will lose the opportunities.
5. Invite those who come to your mind to share special events with you, such as family picnics on Memorial Day, Independence Day, or Labor Day. Explain the meaning behind the celebration.
6. Invite those who are on your heart to share in a classical American experience, like a fishing trip, an overnight camp out with friends, a baseball game, or a birthday party.
7. Offer to share in the cultural celebrations of those who came to live near you. Others, even when they live in America, observe traditional celebrations from their homeland similar to our celebrations.

When you get all of your ideas planned, underway, and carried out, reach out to me so we can celebrate together. It would be great to have 2-5 stories in an upcoming issue of the Baptist Beacon retelling the joy you experienced during your Michigan International Mission Trip.

Write to me or call if you need guidance getting underway. I am here to serve you.  
[tlynn@namb.net](mailto:tlynn@namb.net) or (734) 770-0608.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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

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## **The Titanic: sharing the gospel with his last breath**

**PLYMOUTH** – It is forever etched in history. April 14th, 1912. That was the night 111 years ago that the RMS Titanic hit an iceberg on her maiden voyage. The ship was built so well that some said even God couldn't sink her. Two hours and forty minutes after impact, it was covered completely by the cold darkness of the Atlantic Ocean in a watery grave.

News of the tragedy quickly spread in newspapers across the nation - much of it totally wrong in the early hours. An internet search of newspaper headlines from April 15th paints an overwhelmingly hopeful portrait of what happened.

The British White Star Line, operator of the ill-fated ship, sent out a news release stating: "I am free to say that no matter how bad the collision with an iceberg, the Titanic would float. She is an unsinkable ship."

"Titanic Sinking" was the eye-catching headline in the Oakland Examiner April 15th. The subtitle read, "Ill-fated vessel begins to founder while limping toward Halifax after all aboard are rescued."

The headline of the Evening Observer in New York reported in bold print, "TITANIC RAMMED AN ICEBERG, LARGEST SHIP EVER BUILT WRECKED ON MAIDEN TRIP." The article declared, "Great Steamers Rushed to Her Assistance When Wireless Flashed Out the Call for Help - Passengers Transferred In Safety--Crippled Monster Being Towed to Halifax.

The Evening Sun (Baltimore) proclaimed in all caps "ALL TITANIC PASSENGERS ARE SAFE; TRANSFERRED IN LIFEBOATS AT SEA".

By April 16th the true horror about the tragic loss of life and the sinking of the Titanic was beginning to emerge. Less than one-third (706 people) of those aboard the ill-fated ship survived. 1,517 people died. Only six of those who fell into the frigid water survived. "In total, 50% of the children survived, 20% of the men and 75% of the women" (Wikipedia).

The tragic news brought 40,000 thousand people to the dock in New York to encourage, comfort and help the survivors brought to safety by the Carpathia.

Investigations in the United States and the United Kingdom sought to discover what actually happened and what could be done to prevent such a disaster in the future. It was discovered that one ship, the Californian, was near enough to the Titanic to see the distress signals, but failed to respond. British investigators came to the conclusion that had the California responded, "she might have saved many, if not all, of the lives that were lost." The committee in the United States concluded that the Californian was "nearer the Titanic than the 19 miles reported by her Captain, and that her officers and crew saw the distress of the Titanic and failed to respond to them in accordance with the dictates of humanity, international usage, and the requirements of law" (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Not everyone agrees with the conclusions of the investigations. From the beginning, there has been both information and misinformation. Stories of heroism and selflessness abound. One of my favorites is about John Harper - a Scottish preacher on his way to preach for 3 months at the famed Moody Church in Chicago. He traveled on the Titanic with his six-year-old daughter.

After the collision, Harper made sure that his daughter was placed in one of the lifeboats. Survivors reported that after she was secured, he was heard shouting, "Let the women, children and the unsaved into the lifeboats." He gave his life jacket to a man who had none, saying "Don't worry about me. I'm going up, not down."

As the Titanic sank into the depths, passengers jumped into the frigid waters, including Harper.

Four years after the Titanic sank, one of the survivors shared this testimony at a reunion of survivors in Ontario, Canada. As he clung to a piece of debris from the wreckage, "Harper, who was struggling in the water near him, shouted out, "Are you saved?" "No," the man replied. Harper then shouted the words from Scripture: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." The man did not answer, and a moment later he drifted away on the waves.

A few minutes later, the current brought the two men back together. Again, Harper asked, "Are you saved?" Once again, the answer was "no." With his dying breath, Harper shouted, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." He then slipped under the waves for the last time.

Then and there, the man he had witnessed to decided to turn his life over to Christ"  
(BREAKPOINT Commentary - April 14, 1999 By Charles W. Colson).

It was one week after Easter in 1912 that the Titanic struck the iceberg. John Harper believed the Gospel, lived the Gospel, and shared the Gospel. His life inspires us and challenges us to do the same. Happy Easter!

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mike Durbin is the State Evangelism Director for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Before joining the state convention staff, Mike served as Church Planting Catalyst and Director of Missions in Metro Detroit since 2007. He also has served as a pastor and bi-vocational pastor in Michigan, as well as International Missionary to Brazil.

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## **You need a friend**

**WINDSOR, ONTARIO** – It was early Thursday morning. We met in the usual breakfast joint where the eggs-and-bacon special was always \$2.99. Here we could talk openly and honestly.

We met here every week for years. We shared a lot of life in that spot. Four guys huddled in a booth talking about kids, marriages, careers, hopes, joys, and church.

One guy was a parts manager at the local Ford dealership. Another, a social worker. Steve was the city Parks Manager. And I was a young pastor with two small kids.

On this day, when I walked through the door, my heart was heavy, and they could sense it. I tried to keep it together emotionally because the restaurant was full, and I didn't want to break down and cry in front of all these people. The mayor and some of his cronies were sitting just two tables away!

Our daughter Jamie was not quite three years old, but something serious was going on with her. We would later discover that she had a rare genetic condition that could cause severe mental and physical disability.

In this breakfast meeting the weight of the world was on my shoulders. The pressure in my chest was so intense I could hardly breathe. But I was The Pastor to these men, and I had to "hold it together." At least that's what I told myself. That's what pastors do, right?

I finally cracked and told the guys what was happening in my soul and in my home. It wasn't pretty and I was scared. Broken, scared, and so alone... Our daughter was three and she could not walk or talk or feed herself. Our marriage was strained. I didn't know what to do. I felt paralyzed.

"I don't think I can walk out of this place," I said. "I am so drained and broken-hearted." That's when Steve said to me with tears in his eyes, "Then let us carry you!"

That was more than 30 years ago, but I will never forget those words. “Let us carry you.”

When we survey the life and ministry of the apostle Paul, we see his confidence in the sufficiency of the gospel, his commitment to making disciples, and his willingness to suffer for Jesus. But there’s another, often overlooked, feature of the Pauline mission: friendship. As Paul planted churches throughout the Roman world, he didn’t do so as a one-man band.

Paul was relationally connected. He traveled with friends, stayed in their homes, and visited them. He worked and preached alongside his friends. He encouraged them and stood by them.

A quick read through Acts shows Paul’s commitment to, and genuine concern for, his friends: Barnabas, Titus, Silas, Luke, Priscilla, Aquilla, Lydia, Onesiphorus, Epaphroditus, John Mark, the Ephesian elders, and more.

In Romans 16, he mentions more than 30 names. The list oozes with affection. It magnifies the gospel, demonstrates grace in diversity, and contains moving expressions of honor.

In our zeal to help churches take their next step and accelerate the gospel movement in Michigan, we emphasize Paul’s pattern of preaching the grace of Christ. But we should also highlight his deep commitment to friendship.

Jesus regularly strengthens us through the presence and ministry of others. Consider Paul’s statement about Titus: “For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without, and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus” (2 Cor. 7:5–6). God used Titus to give Paul a boost.

Let’s learn to carry one another, encourage one another and build each other up (1 Thess. 5:11). I lead a cohort of pastors once a month in which we help one another seek first the kingdom of God, accelerate gospel movement, and develop a healthy, humble posture in ministry. If you need more information about forming a cohort in your area, please contact Pastor Luke Bilberry of [Chapel Pointe Church](#), Hudsonville, MI at [Be The Church](#). He’ll be glad to help!

Eugene Peterson once said that “Friendship is a much-underestimated aspect of spirituality. It’s every bit as significant as prayer and fasting.”

So, Pastor, who are your friends? Who is pouring into your life? What can you do to cultivate gospel friendships in your sphere of influence?

Who will carry you?



## 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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## The shadow of “what if?”

**ROSCOMMON** – The great philosopher, Jimmy Buffett, released a song in the late 70’s called Volcano. The hook of the song had these words - “I don’t know where I’m a gonna go when the volcano blows!”

According to Wikipedia “the album and its title song are named for the then dormant [Soufrière Hills volcano](#) on the island of [Montserrat](#) in the [British West Indies](#) where Buffett recorded the album in May 1979 at [AIR Studios](#).” Ironically the studio was severely damaged when the Volcano erupted in 1995 further bolstering the notoriety of the song. I remember hearing my dad sing or hum the chorus quite often as I was growing up, and of course, it got stuck in my head and my own kids have had to endure me singing it.

Over the last 20 years of my life the big “what if” in the chorus of the song has resonated louder and louder in my mind. “What if” the Volcano blows? “What if” my health or my wife’s health goes bad? “What if” the economy tanks? “What if” my kids make poor life choices? “What if, What if, What if”?!?

Unfortunately, it’s easy as a husband, dad, or pastor to get caught-up in listening to the broken record of “What if”. It seems every arena in my life can cause worries to play in my mind and sometimes become louder than reality. I imagine if you’re reading this you have experienced or do experience this to some degree.

Reality is we will always be inundated with worries, fears, and anxieties. “The presence of anxiety is unavoidable, but the prison of anxiety is optional” –Max Lucado.

God never intended for our lives to be ruled by anxiety and “What if”. The apostle Paul explains this in Philippians 4:6-7

“Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”

Paul is giving us some practical steps we can take to avoid being a prisoner of worry and anxiety - talk to God, ask for help, and thank Him for His help and presence in our lives.

The promise of God's supernatural peace is His protection for us against the onslaught of fear and worry. How awesome is that! Peace instead of anxiousness! All I have to do is set my eyes on Him and not the specter of "What if". So what if the Volcano blows?

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mick Schatz serves on the staff of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. He is the State Director of Spiritual Enrichment and Retreats and lives at Bambi Lake.

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## **The calmest person in the room**

**PLYMOUTH** – I recently heard someone say that during a stressful situation, as Jesus followers we should be the calmest person in the room. Why? Because we know that God is in control. He is Sovereign. He is the Creator and Sustainer of life.

I don't know why I have to remind myself to call out to God for help during moments of fear or frustration instead of it being a spiritual muscle memory response. But God pours out a promise on us in His Word, Psalm 34:4, "I sought the Lord, and He answered me and delivered me from all my fears."

This month we'll celebrate our mothers. As moms, we set the example for our families. Our children, other family members, and friends all unintentionally observe and evaluate how we handle difficult times as Jesus-following women. Is the way I express stress and frustration what a true disciple of Christ should be exhibiting? Not always...

I remember well when my husband, Tony, and I were working as IMB missionaries to France and one of my adult children was going through something horrible with her husband and 3 young children. My heart was broken for them. We did everything we could over the phone, praying, and crying with our daughter. I felt shattered and struggled not to rush back to the US to 'fix' things. I felt panicky and out of control. But God, full of love and grace for both me and our daughter, poured out Scripture verses that covered my heart like a gentle balm:

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." John 14:27

"Cast your burden on the Lord, and He will sustain you; He will never permit the righteous to be moved." Psalm 55:22

God used that time in my life to deepen my trust and show me how completely dependent I need to be on Him. He cares about our sorrows, frustrations, and stresses. Psalm 94:18-19 gave me a firm foundation to stand on when I felt my world crumbling:

When I thought, "My foot slips," your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up. When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul.

My daughter leaned on a church's small group to help her grow strong as she overcame the crisis with God's help and wisdom. I love the verse from Psalm 94:22,

"But the Lord has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge."

Why would I ever want to go through the storms in my life without His help and guidance? I've been able to help others with what God taught me during that crisis and many others that I've had since then. But God in His mercy had me share with other mothers that were sinking in despair, how God calmed and strengthened me during my rough times. Keeping our hearts tuned to God is difficult when the struggle seems bigger than our Savior.

God is calling us to live our lives as women of God, totally reliant on Him. May our lives be a strength and encouragement to those around us, always pointing them to God and asking for forgiveness when we mess up. May we serve everyone who the Lord brings into our path, including our precious families. May our hearts be ever learning to love and obey the Lord more. When the crazy storms of life come our way, may we be the calmest person in the room.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jamie Lynn is the Communications Director for the BSCM. Jamie loves working for the Michigan churches at the State Convention Office. She is married to Dr. Tony Lynn, State Director of Missions and enthusiastic follower of Jesus Christ. They have 3 married children and 9 amazing grandchildren.

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## **Spiritual mothers**

**SHELBY TOWNSHIP** – A mother is someone who guides, nurtures, and corrects. A mother loves unconditionally and wants the best for her children. In a similar way, a spiritual mother offers these same things.

A few years ago, God brought a woman into my life who helped me through a difficult time. Since then, she has been mentoring me and guiding me along my own journey. She has truly become a spiritual mother to me. She guides me when I need godly advice, she loves me as I am, and she points things out that I may be blind to. Her deep love for God and strong relationship with Him is what drew me to her. She knows just how to ask the right questions that the Holy Spirit then uses in my life to teach me the things He wants me to learn. When I think of her, I am reminded of the passage in Titus where Paul is teaching Titus how to lead the church.

Similarly, teach the older women to live in a way that honors God. They must not slander others or be heavy drinkers. Instead, they should teach others what is good. These older women must train the younger women to love their children, to live wisely and be pure, to work in their homes, to do good, and to be submissive to their husbands. Then they will not bring shame on the word of God. Titus 2: 3-5 (NLT)

After experiencing this type of relationship in my own life, I recognized the need for mentoring relationships within the women of my church. A few years ago, I began to feel overwhelmed by trying to disciple and to help meet the needs of many women in our growing church family. I began praying about how a mentor ministry could be developed and for God to lead the way. When we surrender our plans to God, He is faithful to take the lead and show us exactly what His plan is! He confirmed this desire of my heart during time with God one day when I was reading in Numbers about Moses and how he was tired of carrying the load of all the Israelites.

In Numbers 11:14 Moses tells God, "I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me." (NIV)

I completely understood what Moses was saying here. This was the exact thing I had been praying to God about. I couldn't keep up with all the needs of the women of our church. I am only one person.

Continuing in Numbers 11:16 God responds to Moses, "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone." (NIV)

I don't think God could have spoken any clearer to me! Three years into this ministry, and it is still going strong! We have seen much fruit, not only from the women who are being mentored, but also within the spiritual mothers as well. When you mentor, you grow right alongside your mentee.

Have you ever experienced a relationship like this before? Do you know of someone who could use a little encouragement and guidance in their life? If God has put someone in your life and you feel led to walk alongside them, reach out to them. Chances are, God is already preparing

their heart for you. Or maybe you are someone who longs to have a spiritual mother. If this is the case, begin praying for God to send the exact person you need. He doesn't want us to do life alone. God created us for community, and we are to encourage each other in our faith and help each other grow.

#### **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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## **The international mission field next door**

**DETROIT** – What makes America unique is its great ability to unite despite differences. America is considered a melting pot that has the ability to unite civilizations, races, ideologies, and religions together in orchestrated harmony.

Despite all the differences and the wars that are taking place between different cultures and religions outside of the United States, here, we live in harmony together both in the spiritual and the political arenas.

The genius of those who charted the constitution is that it provided equal and free access without discrimination and with no regard to race, political affiliation, religion, or creed. What a great accomplishment! But do you understand that this great and wonderful provision puts a great responsibility on the church?

Because of our constitution, the world desires to become part of this great nation. Immigrants from other countries pour into the United States seeking the freedom, life, prosperity, accessibility to worship without the fear of being persecuted.

Unfortunately, the church has not always been prepared to embrace and serve the needs of those who migrated or escaped persecution seeking refuge in this country. If the American churches do not reach out to immigrants and refugees, it goes against our call in the Gospel.

While the Church is opening its eyes to the needs of other nations, it is often blinded to the influx of refugees and illegal immigrants who are now here in our state. Large sums of money are raised for mission work to reach the world with the Gospel message, but many of these

same nations are represented in the refugees who come to America. The immigrants are flooding communities with their cultures, religions, and languages to the point that the mission field is now not only outside the US, but actually inside every community, city, and state.

I see the need for our American churches to steer the direction of missions to the needs of the refugees and immigrants inside our borders while still engaging to reach the outside world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We can reach the nations by starting with the people who have moved into our state as neighbors.

The mission we are called to fulfill includes our own Jerusalem and Samaria. The church must move forward before time runs out. Churches must continue announcing the truth of the Word of God.

Every U.S. president inaugurated puts his hand on the Bible affirming the foundation of justice, liberty, and freedom given in this land. Many Americans do not realize that some of the nations coming to this country come from places like the Middle East where Christians are under attack.

It is imperative that the church move forward and proclaim boldly the message of truth and love in the Bible, and especially the Lord Jesus Christ whose message and life transforms the human race. It is our responsibility to stand for what God has entrusted to the Church.

The Church MUST act firmly and move forward before time runs out. A sobering word I leave with you was uttered by Christ himself warning and questioning the Church by asking,

“When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on earth?” Luke 18:8

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Amgad Beshai is the pastor of the Evangel Arabic Baptist Church in Troy, Michigan. He and his wife, Eman, have a daughter, Vernie, and two sons, Kevin and Chris.

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## **When Motherhood Overwhelms You**

**DETROIT** – Many days I feel like one of those memes with a crazed-looking woman that says something like “I’m just over here trying to keep my kids alive, drink enough water, exercise, read my Bible, pay my bills, and dig myself out of a massive pile of laundry”.

I can get overwhelmed thinking about all the things God’s given me a passion for, all the people

He's placed in my life, all the needs around me. Especially as a church planting wife, my eyes can be easily drawn to the things that should be done or improved.

Psalm 27:4 has brought me back from the brink of crazy too many times to count.

"I have asked one thing from the Lord;  
it is what I desire:  
to dwell in the house of the Lord  
all the days of my life,  
gazing on the beauty of the Lord  
and seeking him in his temple."

I love the simplicity of this one desire that trumps all else: to dwell with God, gaze upon His beauty, and come to God to seek/meditate/inquire. It feels like a breath of fresh air to my soul to lay down the laundry, pause my kids' ministry prep, and sit at His feet.

In Matthew 16 the disciples were talking about how they forgot to bring bread with them. Jesus says "Don't you understand yet? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand and how many baskets you collected? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand and how many large baskets you collected?"

I find myself asking the same question. "Don't I understand yet?" My God is provider. He is sovereign. In each season of motherhood we need to find creative ways to spend intimate time at His feet asking Him to show us again who He is, what He's like, what He's doing, where we're headed, and to help our hearts understand the implications of that, that we might rightly and fully trust Him.

Watching for God's unwavering faithfulness and promise-keeping throughout scripture is the best dose of encouragement for our hearts in the thick of motherhood. Seeing God be the same throughout history and move powerfully over and over again gives us great confidence that He will do it again in our lives. Our God can feed the 5,000, cares for the lilies and sparrows, raised Himself from the dead, etc. Will He not surely take care of us, our kids, and our ministries?

Later on in Matthew 16, "Jesus turned and told Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me because you're not thinking about God's concerns but human concerns.'" This is another question I ask myself regularly. Am I thinking about God's concerns or human ones? Am I living in light of my future hope in Christ or do I have tunnel vision on my tasks for today?

I often need to let someone in on my craziness. When I feel scattered and overwhelmed, I know I need to humble myself, let my community see where I'm at and encourage and pray for me. It can be uncomfortable to start letting others see that we don't have it together, but it is a beautiful thing to watch our vulnerability give others the freedom to share their struggles too.

When the overwhelm sets in:

- Find a way to sit at Jesus' feet and gaze upon His beauty.
- Remember who God is. Count the ways He's been faithful throughout scripture, history, and your own life. "Don't I understand yet?"
- Pray for God to reorient your eyes to your future hope, that you might live in light of that and not be distracted by the things that won't matter in light of it.
- Remember you are not alone. God has given us a new family: brothers and sisters to walk with as we navigate this broken world together as those who have experienced redemption and restoration through the gospel.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alyssa Fleet has been involved in three church plants with her husband Ben Fleet, who is lead Pastor of One Eight Church in the Downriver area, south of Detroit. She is a mother of two and is passionate about discipleship, building community, and sharing her life and the gospel with her neighbors. Alyssa has a heart for missions and church planting and feels so blessed to get to live this church planting life by God's grace.

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## **God's mercy never fails**

**ALTO** – It is the first anniversary of losing my mom. With losing her, also came the rapid decline and the eventual loss of my father. I know I am not alone in losing a parent, or even the loss of both in a short time. However, they were my parents and my loss.

The call came at the beginning of December telling me my mom had fallen again, and they found a mass on her brain that was not there in September. I rushed home to Ohio. I will never forget sitting with the oncologist team as they told us they were not recommending treatment. My mother had 1-2 months max. She would need to go to a rehab center and may never come home. They also told me my mother would forget who we were, how to swallow, and would be in much pain in the end.

My parents still lived on their own. My father was relatively healthy, and my mom's main caregiver. I looked at him and asked "Dad, do you understand what they are saying?" He was in so much shock we had to explain it to him several times.

I went to my childhood home that night and sobbed. "God, how am I going to get through this? I don't live here!" My thoughts were, she will never come home again, I will never get to take



her shopping (she loved to shop), never get to take her to lunch, never go on another drive to see nature.

But God had other plans. After 21 days my mother was strong enough to come home. I brought her home Christmas Eve. We contacted a care company that could be with my parents on the weekends, and my sister and I would take every other week.

God gave me the opportunity to minister and slowly say goodbye to my mom as well as witness to my father who was not a believer at the time. I was able to take her shopping and to lunch one last time. I took them out for drives whenever weather permitted. Although we are not always granted prayers the way we ask for them, God gave me mine. I was able to spend the next 5 months every other Monday through Friday with my parents.

God was my strength and my peace. When days were hard and lonely, I would sing hymns and songs of praise with my mom. The first few months she was even able to sing with me. I meditated on verses of strength and joy in the Psalms. I laughed at the funny things that in her mind she thought were going on. I wish I could tell you I was always joyful and patient. I was not! There were many sleepless nights with long days, but God would always renew me.

Not only did we get FIVE months, but my mother never had any of the effects of the tumor. She knew us, just not all the circumstances. She never knew she was sick and was never in pain.

One of the last songs I sang to her while she was awake was the "Goodness of God". I love the first few lines.

"I love You Lord. Your mercy never fails me. All my days I've been held in Your hands. From the moment that I wake up un?l I lay my head, I will sing of the goodness of God."

I could not pen words that are truer for my life. He is Good, Faithful, He is Lord.

He gave me strength to endure not only her passing, but my father 8 months later. I can assure you that He is there in the Darkest nights. He is close, He will sustain you.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Laura Render graduated from Georgetown College with a BA. She has served at Lakeside Community Church for over 31 years as leader to women and families. She is a mother and grandmother. She also is a realtor with Keller Williams.

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## Personal victory from pornography addiction drives church recovery ministry

**LANSING, MI (BP)** – Sam Black walked outside his Florida home decades ago and saw his older brother and a friend reading a magazine sideways.

“That didn’t make any sense. How can you read sideways?”

The teenagers turned the magazine around and exposed a 10-year-old Black to pornography, a centerfold of a nude woman that piqued Black’s curiosity.

“And though I grew up in a Christian home I didn’t step away,” Black said. “Dopamine focuses your attention when sexual cues are picked up. It can focus your attention very well. And all kids are naturally curious about what the opposite sex looks like naked. That’s normal.

“But,” Black said, “while that curiosity is normal, pornography – and especially today’s pornography – is often violent and so much more. It’s overwhelming for a child. But even just plain nudity, I stepped forward and I wanted a closer look.”

The early exposure, fueled by what Black describes as a violent and controlling hypocritical Christian childhood home, sent him spiraling into a pornography addiction that he didn’t understand or conquer until after he married.

Two-thirds of men and a third of women who regularly attend church say they struggle with pornography, Black said, sharing research from the [National Library of Medicine](#) that also aligns reduced church attendance and participation with pornography use.

Now 55, he helps churches provide a safe place for men and women to honestly confess pornography use and find grace-filled healing. Black is director of life change education for Covenant Eyes, an ecumenical, relationship-driven accountability ministry aimed at helping adults overcome pornography.

Black found healing through a church ministry his wife invited him to early in their marriage. While his path to addiction is common, Black describes his path to recovery as unique. Most pastors, he said, don’t have a good understanding of pornography addiction and how to lead victims to recovery.

“I really do have a great sense of empathy for pastors and ministry leaders on this in general,” he said. “Often there is not a safe place (at church) to have this conversation, so people feel a great deal of shame, especially something like pornography.

“I mean we have looked at (First) Corinthians 6:18 and Paul has warned us that when we sin sexually the sexually immoral person has sinned against their own body,” Black said. “We have used that as a warning, but we’ve not given anyone an opportunity to say, ‘This is the warning because Paul is not saying this sin is worse in God’s eyes; he’s divinely warned us that the effects of sexual sin are more damaging to the person in their mind, body and spirit.’”

Black describes sexual sin as a detonating bomb that impacts relationships, pointing out that pornography use is a major contributor to 56 percent of divorces in the U.S.

“Paul is begging us to pay attention to sexual sin,” Black said. “But we don’t stop with the warning. We help give people a pathway to freedom.”

Seminary training often does not address the issue of pornography, Black said. In preparing to write a new [Covenant Eyes resource](#) that releases in May, “The Healing Church: What Churches Get Wrong About Pornography and How to Fix It,” Black searched for churches that were ministering well to those overcome by pornography.

“Not just to be drawing from my own experience,” Black said. “I wanted to go out and find churches that were doing this work well, and show (other churches) the examples of that restorative process where they were creating safe places, or safe processes, that fit their denomination, that fit their theology (so that) in their churches they were bringing freedom to men and women and teens who were struggling deeply with pornography.”

Such struggles negatively impact the religious landscape and church ministries, research has found.

“There’s a direct correlation between pornography use by the individual,” Black said, “and reduced church attendance, diminished faith, increased religious doubts, less volunteerism.”

Black shared the [study](#) “Seeing is (Not) Believing: How Viewing Pornography Shapes the Religious Lives of Young Americans,” available at the U.S. National Institutes of Health’s National Library of Medicine.

“If pornography use weakens attachment to religion among young Americans,” researchers wrote in the abstract to the study, “as viewing pornography becomes more common with each generation, it may contribute to rising secularization among younger cohorts. Thus, to the extent that younger generations are increasingly exposed to pornographic materials, and to the extent that viewing pornography has a secularizing effect, these factors may shape the future landscape of American religion itself.”

Black has found churches that not only didn’t provide a safe place for people to discuss their struggles with pornography, but he found churches that punished believers for seeking help.

“I found many churches who literally kicked out people from their church, or especially (those involved in) any volunteer efforts. Not only was he stripped of any of his duties in the church,” Black writes of one man who asked his pastor for help, “but he was told that you can’t attend church unless you do so with your wife accompanying you. There were numbers of people, men and women, who just didn’t feel safe.”

Black described to Baptist Press a “spectrum of safety” varying among churches that spans from one extreme of accepting sinners without encouraging them to change, to the opposite extreme of denying that the person struggling has actually accepted Jesus as Savior.

“What we need is that center,” he said, “where it’s safe to come as you are, even Christians who are struggling, but it’s not OK to stay how you are.”

Children are being exposed to pornography as early as 6 years of age, Black said, when their brains are not fully developed and they are not able to reason rationally.

“There’s a lot to this that really makes it harder for a child to turn away,” Black said. After exposure, pornography can become a way of escape from life’s struggles that continues as a coping mechanism into adulthood.

“Children and teens learn to begin escapism at a young age, and that escapism follows through their adolescence and teen years, and then into their adulthood, often into their trade school or college, and then into marriage,” Black said. “And then when it comes into marriage, we’re like, ‘Oh, you’re not supposed to be doing this.’”

“Well, they’ve been doing it for often a decade or more, and suddenly we’re just expected to shut that valve off that has been going full tilt for a while. But it has been ingrained in their mind, body and spirit, and so we need to address this struggle in mind, body and spirit as well.”

Before Black began his recovery journey, he used pornography as a panacea for whatever ailed him from childhood into adulthood.

“When I felt fear or frustration or anger, I didn’t even realize that I was using pornography as a dirty bandage for how I was feeling,” he said. “That would expand to things like boredom and I didn’t do well at school or something happened at school, or you name it. I didn’t feel good about myself, I could run to pornography.”

“And I would carry pornography with me from middle school, to high school, through college, into my marriage.”

He was becoming agnostic when his wife invited him to a marriage class at a small church in their community.

“These people were not like any Christians I had met growing up,” Black said. “They would close the door and the facilitators would turn around and look at the class and smile real big, and say, ‘This is a safe place. What is said here stays here.’”

People told of personal struggles they were seeking to overcome and become more Christlike. There, Black was relieved to discover that pornography could be compulsive or addictive.

“From a secular perspective that meant evolution didn’t make me this way,” he said. “And from a religious perspective, God didn’t make me this way, and I didn’t have to stay this way.

“And with the support of men, good reading, a lot of understanding and growing, I began a pathway, a journey – that didn’t come overnight, but came with that kind of support – to live in freedom.”

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press’ senior writer.

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## **State of the Bible 2023: Scripture engagement still down, but interest up**

**PHILADELPHIA (BP)** – Scripture engagement remains down among Americans, but a widespread curiosity gives ground for evangelism, the American Bible Society (ABS) said in releasing the first chapter of its 2023 State of the Bible [survey](#).

Only 47 million Americans, or about 18 percent of the adult population, ranked as Scripture-Engaged in the 2023 study, using a descriptor based on Bible use and its impact in one’s life. Scripture-engaged described 49 million adults in 2022, down from 71 million adults in 2020 or about 27 percent of the adult population.

While Scripture engagement remains low, adults ranked in a category termed the Movable Middle grew by 10 million from 2022 to 2023, the study found, rising to 76 million. The movable middle spiked to 95 million in the 2021 COVID-19 pandemic year, but dropped back to pre-pandemic levels in 2022, reverting to 66 million.

The ABS finds hope in the newest numbers.

“The Movable Middle is awash in curiosity, with more than two thirds (68 percent) “very” or “extremely” curious and only a smidgen (3 percent) not curious at all,” the ABS wrote. “Granted, there’s a difference between wondering and actively searching, but this is a start. Curiosity is a growth platform for Bible ministry in the U.S. How will we respond?”

While 138 million adults are ranked as Bible Disengaged – those who score lowest on the Bible engagement scale – the number is lower than the 145 million who were characterized as disengaged in 2022. And those who are disengaged see Scripture as increasingly central to their lives and impactful in their behavior.

“That leads us to say that, not only are there 10 million fewer Bible Disengaged Americans than there were last year, they aren’t as disengaged as they used to be,” the ABS said. “If the trend continues, we might see even more migration into the Movable Middle in 2024.”

Participants in the study registered frustrations in Bible reading. Including all three categories of scripture engagement, 26 percent said they don’t have enough time to read the Bible; 17 percent don’t know where to start, 16 percent are not excited to read Scripture, 15 percent have difficulty relating to the language, 9 percent find the layout difficult to navigate, and 8 percent find the stories confusing.

But those who do read the Bible cite positive motivations including wanting to be closer to God (47 percent), gaining wisdom for making life decision (20 percent), for comfort (15 percent), learning God’s nature (9 percent), learning how to treat others (4 percent), a sense of duty (3 percent) and to fulfill class or Bible study requirements (2 percent).

The ABS encourages churches to engage members in Scripture by asking communities about their practices, motivations and frustrations regarding the Bible, sincerely listening to their answers and finding ways to help; making a positive case for the benefits of Scripture engagement in youth, showing people how to start reading Scripture, and creating or curating mood-based resources to engage those who rank as Bible-disengaged.

The ABS released its first chapter of the 2023 study April 6 and plans to release subsequent chapters monthly, focusing on Changing Faith and The Faith of Our Mothers, Flourishing and the Bible, Spiritual Vitality in America, The Faith of Generation Z, The Bible and Behavior in America, Technology and the Bible and Giving it All: Philanthropy and Service.

Now in its 13th year, the State of the Bible annually looks at the Bible, faith and the church in America. The ABS collaborated with the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in designing the study conducted online and via telephone to NORC’s AmeriSpeak Panel. The 18-minute survey, conducted Jan. 5-30, produced 2,761 responses from a representative sample of adults 18 and older within the 50 states and D.C.

The first chapter is available [here](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press' senior writer.

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# Boston pastor runs personal best on 10th anniversary of marathon bombing

**BOSTON (BP)** – Had it gone as planned, Josh Wyatt's wife Becky and their three young children would have been outside Marathon Sports when the first explosion blasted the storefront at the finish line of the 2013 Boston Marathon.

Wyatt himself was on a plane, hoping to land and join his family as they cheered a family friend who was running the race.

"By the grace of God that morning, one of my wife's friends talked her out of going to the finish line," Wyatt, founding pastor of Charles River Church in Boston, told Baptist Press. "They said it would be just too difficult with three young children to meet me there. I'm so grateful to the Lord that she took that advice."

As Boston marked the 10th anniversary of the bombing, Wyatt's family – his children now 16, 14 and 12 – and members of his congregation cheered him as he joined a field of 30,000 in the iconic race and clocked a personal best of 03:00:22, he told Baptist Press.

"It was a stark contrast to 2013," he said. "Ten years later, there was so much joy and excitement, and (we were) just able to see the resiliency of the city, and that was very encouraging. We had lots of folks from our church family scattered throughout the marathon course cheering me on. (There was) lots of joy compared to the horror of that day 10 years ago."

[Charles River Church](#) ministered to the community and first responders after the 2013 bombing that killed three pedestrians on race day, a police officer who was killed in a confrontation with the bombers and a second police officer who died in 2014 of a head injury suffered in pursuing the suspects. Another 281 were injured along the route.

The tragedy lit a fire in Wyatt's heart. The 2023 race was his third Boston Marathon in a line of several he has run.

“That year when the bomb went off,” he said, “from that point forward there was a draw in my heart towards all things Boston Marathon. I just love the race. I love the people of Boston. From that point forward I just started to feel a tug towards the marathon. I eventually started to do the work to qualify for the marathon, and 10 marathons later I found myself running my first Boston marathon.

“Yesterday I set a personal record and had the best time I ever had.”

Wyatt planted Charles River Church in 2012, and it had about 40 members when the bombing occurred. It has grown to 280 members, with some of them classified as covenant members who have signed church covenants or pledges. Aided by others, the young church distributed care packages to medical workers at Massachusetts General Hospital where many of the injured were taken.

Running the race on the 10th anniversary of the bombing was important to Wyatt.

“It just meant so much to me,” he said. “It means I’m joining so many of my friends in this city who love this city and are excited to see the city bounce back and show its resiliency after just a really horrific season.”

The City of Boston held numerous anniversary events the weekend before this year’s race to honor victims, with family members of those killed participating, Boston.com [reported](#).

Killed in the bombing were Martin Richland, 8; Lingzu Lu, 23, and Krystle Campbell, 28. Police officers who died were Sean Collier in 2013 and Dennis Simmonds in 2014. Many of the injured lost limbs in the bombing.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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## **Refugee resettlement up in U.S., still below government limit**

**WASHINGTON (BP)** – Refugee resettlement in the U.S., a cause promoted by Southern Baptists and other evangelicals, doubled in March from the previous month, the Department of State said in its monthly report.



The U.S. accepted 6,122 refugees in March, double the February total of 3,069 and far surpassing previous months this fiscal year ranging from 2,152 to 2,481. Yet, if resettlement continues monthly at the March count, resettlement would fall far below the annual national cap of 125,000, the National Immigration Forum reported.

The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) praised the increase but said more progress is needed.

“It is encouraging to see, at long last, the U.S. refugee resettlement program regain traction in helping the most vulnerable reach safety” ERLC Policy Manager Hannah Daniel told Baptist Press. “There is certainly more work to be done in rebuilding this vital program, but these recent numbers offer a first glimpse that progress is being made.

“Southern Baptists remain committed to supporting the refugee resettlement program, welcoming those who arrive in our communities, and sharing the Gospel with as many of them as possible.”

At the March rate, the U.S. would accept about 55,000 refugees through the fiscal year ending in September, less than half the number allowed. Resettlement through March this fiscal year is 18,429.

The ERLC has advocated for an increase in the refugee resettlement ceiling and the amount of resources committed to the work to help a range of refugees including those persecuted for their faith and those fleeing hostile authoritarian regimes.

Texas accepted the largest number of refugees in March – 1,664 – although the report doesn’t indicate whether the refugees remained within the state. Others accepting the largest numbers, according to the State Department, were New York at 1,125, California with 1,089, Kentucky, 964, and North Carolina, 850. The smallest numbers were reported for Mississippi, which accepted none; followed by Alaska with 11, Arizona with 12 and Louisiana, 26.

Refugees predominantly came from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2,441; Syria, 711; Afghanistan, 495, and Iraq, 169, but numbers and origins vary greatly monthly.

An influx of asylum seekers at the southern border is anticipated in May when Title 42 limitations aimed at controlling COVID-19 will expire. The limitations allowed asylum seekers to be returned to their country of origin or the country through which they entered the U.S., often Mexico.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press’ senior writer.

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