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## Is this my court?

**BURTON** – I want to be better. At 6'3" it is a shame that the only post I'm going to be playing on a basketball team is the kind that checks the mail. If only I had the natural talent and life of instruction drilled into my mindset and frame. This is not a court I seem to be made for.

I want to be better. I've been in the process of growing in my education professionally for 25+ years of my forty-something life and I still have difficulty on certain projects and papers. It seems professional education does not always overcome someone's more than amateur-crastination practice. I am left wondering if this is not a court I seem to be made for.

I want to be better. I look back on my forty-something years and behold that I've been in some sort of ministerial labor since the 1900s. Yet, I have not been able to apprehend all that is required to be a faithful servant who walks in a manner worthy of the gospel, and I am astounded at how often I fall short of the shepherding stewardship that has been entrusted in my calling. I am left wondering why this is a court I am supposedly meant for.

I want to be better. As a husband of 20 years and a father to 1 adult, 2 teenagers, and 1 child, I think upon how I feel less like the lofty pop-culture example of Bandit Heeler, and more like the goof-ball father figures of my 80's childhood. I am astounded that this could ever be a court I am intended for.

I want to be better.

While I probably won't be able to do much of anything about my skills in basketball... there is something that we can take to heart as husbands and fathers. Paul wrote to the Corinthians...

"By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."

This is such good news, ultimately in context of the resurrection, but also as a reminder that the same gospel that brings new life to our souls is what is more than to bring new life in our homes as husbands & fathers.

As we walk in the footsteps of the ultimate Father, God, we have been given the opportunity to shape and mold our kids beyond just physical presence & provision. As much as this is needed and as much as we want to be better... We point them to the Lord who has a hope that does not disappoint. We point them to the Lord whose promises never fail. We point them to the height, depth, length, and width of His love that is able to save, sanctify, and sustain. We point them to the Lord who gives and serves even in the difficulties. We point them to the Lord who is mighty yet meek, holy yet humble, conquering yet compassionate.

And all the while we take this grace dispensed to us with greater astonishment...we may see where we fall short and desire to be better...but we are drawn closer to the Father that loves you too brothers. Don't just seek to be better, trust and be His. This is the court that you have been welcomed into.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jerome Taylor is the pastor of Eastgate Baptist Church in Burton, MI, co-director of the Genesee Baptist Association, Recording Secretary & former President of the BSCM, and a Send Relief Projects Manager for Serve Tour Flint. He is the husband of Melinda, and father the Abigail, Jackson, Hannah, and Naomi.

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## **As annual meeting approaches, 'pastor' amendment opinions abound**

**INDIANAPOLIS, IN (BP)** – Messengers to the 2024 SBC Annual Meeting are being asked to weigh in a second time on whether to add to the SBC Constitution an amendment regarding churches that employ women in pastoral roles.

The amendment's proponents have often cited a June 2023 report, which [listed](#) 99 Southern Baptist churches with female pastors and a total of 149 female pastors from a sample size of 3,847 "randomized" churches. When extrapolated to the then-figure of 47,614 cooperating churches (now 46,906), the report estimated 1,844 female pastors serving in 1,225 churches.

Of those 99 original churches, nine listed women with the singular title of "pastor." Another one was the "lead" pastor while two more used the term "senior pastor." Seven are "co-lead" with one titled "senior leader" (lead pastor with husband). The remaining 73 women serve in an associational role or a role designated as a particular ministry.

For some, the above is proof that the Southern Baptist Convention needs clarity on the office of pastor/elder/overseer and the amendment is the way forward.

For others, the numbers show that the nation's largest Protestant faith group is overwhelmingly complementarian in makeup and practice and such an amendment is unnecessary. Opponents also point to last year's change to the Baptist Faith and Message strengthening its complementarian language as well as messengers' overwhelming votes to remove two churches from friendly cooperation due to their have women in lead pastor roles.

## Start of the (current) conversation

Mike Law, pastor of Arlington (Va.) Baptist Church, originally introduced a motion at the 2022 SBC Annual Meeting in Anaheim to add a sixth item to the SBC Constitution, Article III: that cooperating churches would not “affirm, appoint, or employ a woman as a pastor of any kind.” That motion was referred to the Executive Committee, which [placed it in front of messengers](#) last summer in New Orleans for a vote in spite of registering opposition to it.

After a [clarifying amendment](#) brought by Texas pastor Juan Sanchez, Southern Baptists gave the amendment [its first](#) of two required two-thirds votes of approval. Perhaps with one eye on the tone of discussions leading up to the first vote and another on a year ahead of podcasts, social media posts and pontificating from all around, Sanchez’s comments after the vote were prophetic.

“I think part of the problem is we are talking past each other in many ways,” Sanchez said. “I’m confident that there’s confusion about terminology that we should be having conversations about.

“One of one of the things I lament in our conversations in the Southern Baptist Convention right now is that there’s a lot of weaponizing of language and there’s a lot of tactics of fear.”

## Choices and what follows

Columnists whose pieces have been posted at Baptist Press have sought to stay away from those kinds of tactics, instead establishing positions on the amendment while expressing support for those on the other side.

Denny Burk, professor of Biblical Studies at Boyce College, has written two pieces shared with BP. The first one in late November pointed to “no little bit of misunderstanding among some about the precise issues in dispute.

“Southern Baptist aren’t debating whether women may serve in church staff ministry positions,” [he said](#). “Of course they can and do, and I can’t think of any Southern Baptist who would say otherwise. Nor are Southern Baptists debating whether women should teach mixed-gendered Sunday School classes.”

The debate isn’t even about complementarianism, he added, noting that the term wasn’t mentioned in the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (BF&M). The debate is centered on if that document allows for women to be pastors and “whether the BF&M should be the basis for friendly cooperation within the SBC.”

Where churches fall on those positions impacts the doctrinal integrity of the SBC. A stable middle way “is only a mirage,” he said.

Burk followed up his comments with another post in February addressing the question of what happens with [females on church staffs](#) in roles like children's pastor.

"The answer to the question is *'No, it doesn't force their removal,'*" he wrote. "The fact that so many seem to think that it does reveals that we have a pretty widespread misunderstanding of our polity."

Burk went on to say he has "zero interest" in "adjudicating a glut of membership challenges concerning such churches." In citing the vote to [uphold Saddleback Church's disfellowship](#), he pointed out that messengers already have the power to take such steps. In short, the amendment's passage would not make a church's removal automatic.

[In a discussion](#) one month earlier at First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., SBC President Bart Barber agreed with Burk's premise. However, he took a position contrary to Burk's.

"The SBC already requires that churches limit the office of pastor to men without the Law amendment," he said, citing the votes at the 2023 Annual Meeting.

"I think that when we face extremely confusing and convoluted questions, we ought to just let the messenger body pray about it and sort that out," Barber said. "We have the framework in place right now without any amendment."

### **Debate over function**

In late February, North Carolina pastor Bruce Frank brought his thoughts on why the amendment is [understandable, but unnecessary](#).

It's "unneeded, unclear and could lead to the potential unraveling of the SBC as we know it," he said.

A culture attempting to redefine gender makes it important for churches to emphasize the "biblical truth regarding God's good design," added Frank in lauding the SBC's "unapologetically complementarian" position. "... The blurring of the God-given gender distinctives has often accompanied a denominational direction away from the authority of Scripture."

Agreeing with Barber, Frank, pastor of Biltmore Church near Asheville, said that "if the current mechanism is in place to remove one of the largest churches in the SBC, as it did in 2023, then the framework already exists for removing a church that wanders too far from the Baptist Faith and Message."

Frank also cited the debate over the amendment and the "function" of a pastor and how the amendment could be applied to women serving with the title of pastor, but in a non-senior role.

The amendment's phrase "of any kind" opens up those doors, he said. Frank added that Scripture calls on elders to lead in churches, protect churches from false teachings, pray for the sick and use good judgement in doctrinal issues.

"We see men and women who are not elders being encouraged to carry out almost all of these functions in the New Testament churches," he said.

Baptist Press reached out to Law for clarity on whether the amendment's aim is to address churches with women serving with the title of pastor, in the function of pastor or both and whether the amendment's language was sufficient for those tasks.

"The aim of the Amendment is to help the Convention walk in faithfulness to Scripture," he said. "The Bible knows of no pastor/elder/overseer who does not perform the duties of the office. According to 1 Timothy 2:12, 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, Scripture does not permit women to serve in the office of or under the title pastor/elder/overseer.

"Yes, the language is sufficient, and it is complementary to Scripture and the Baptist Faith and Message."

The "potential unraveling" Frank alluded to can come through Southern Baptists failing to maintain a "missional passion with doctrinal integrity." Fears about where the amendment could take the Convention, he said, could lead churches to "voluntarily opt out."

This will not happen because churches "don't have complementarian convictions but because they didn't sign up for denominational drama that demands increasing uniformity on an ever-widening set of issues," Frank wrote.

"Missionaries will come home. That's not hyperbole; it's just math."

### **Church autonomy**

Tennessee Baptists' state executive Randy Davis became the first of his peers to publicly comment on the amendment in a column from early May.

[Davis pointed to](#) the amendment's potential impact on historic Southern Baptist polity and possible unintended consequences.

"Southern Baptists throughout our history have respected differences of opinion on doctrinal issues for the sake of a shared mission," Davis said. "I sincerely pray we can capture that civility regarding this challenge. I respect views on both sides of the Law Amendment, but I believe we would do well to pause and give its implications thoughtful consideration."

One point of concern is how the amendment could effectively alter the purpose of the Baptist Faith and Message. Rather than promoting missions and including churches “of all sizes and cultures,” a “legalistically narrow road” could form.

“Our historical Baptist polity is to trust the local church to decide its own structures under the umbrella of our doctrinal belief system,” Davis said.

Fracturing that trust could lead to future debates about other issues that may affect cooperation – issues like using a particular Bible translation or whether churches adhere to reformed or non-reformed teachings.

“At what point will we have thwarted the local church’s autonomy while continuing to propagate the idea that its members have freedom to govern themselves?” asked Davis.

“As one of my fellow state executives said last summer, ‘The Southern Baptist Convention is organized to promote a mission not to police our churches.’”

Shortly thereafter, Robin Hadaway [shared a story](#) where, as a first-term International Mission Board missionary to Tanzania in 1985, he found himself in a hard position.

“I want to be a pastor,” he said in recollecting the words of a woman who had recently graduated from Tanzania’s Baptist seminary. “I explained to her why this was not biblical.”

In 2002, Hadaway was regional leader for eastern South America and supervising about 350 missionaries when he encountered a similar instance.

“I received word that a local Brazilian church had ordained a female IMB missionary,” said Hadaway, who is semi-retired while serving as senior professor of missions at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. “A trustee and I asked her to rescind the ordination. She agreed, but soon after her retirement, a stateside Southern Baptist church ordained her.”

The amendment “is not about a woman’s status before the Lord,” he said. While men and women are equal, they are different while complementing each other. Hadaway does not believe the amendment’s passage would result in a flood of churches submitted to the Credentials Committee, citing that group’s history in responding to issues rather than searching for violations.

### **Considering consequences**

Last week, newly elected Executive Committee President and CEO Jeff Iorg [said the amendment](#) reflected his “theological commitments” in church governance. It’s the standard he upheld as president of Gateway Seminary for the last 20 years. However, the potential “complications and consequences” that could come from it are leading him to oppose it.

Those implications begin with determining the amendment's relevance to both the title and function of a pastor. If the former, churches can simply update the staff page on the website and reprint some business cards. However, Iorg said, continuing to function in the role as before "does not seem to fulfill the goal of the amendment."

"If the issue is function, then the SBC Credentials Committee must investigate job descriptions, church governing documents, work records and personnel policies of local churches to determine if a woman is functioning as a pastor," he said. "This is unsustainable due to the number of churches to be evaluated by a volunteer committee which meets once a month."

Executive Committee staff created a list of churches in the SBC as an administrative tool 25 years ago, Iorg said. Since then, qualifiers amended into the Constitution have led to a change in perception – from the Convention consisting of messengers to instead consisting of churches.

The result has become "a substantive change that is reshaping our identity" and led to a tension about when "church autonomy intersects with Convention autonomy."

His position is also influenced by two decades' worth of observations leading the only Southern Baptist entity outside of the South.

Pastors and church members tend to view the SBC through their local lens, belief system and interpretation of the Bible, believing most Southern Baptists agree with them, or should, Iorg said.

"Some either do not appreciate the breadth of theological diversity in the SBC or, if they do understand it, find it troublesome or threatening," he said.

The "elasticity" of the BF&M and SBC polity has been "a hallmark of our success" that could be endangered.

"By codifying a narrower interpretation of one part of our confessional statement in our Constitution, this may become a precursor to similar actions on other issues. Many Southern Baptist churches are out of alignment with the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 on issues like regenerate church membership, Lord's Supper practices, mode and purpose of baptism, democratic church government, church/state relationships, etc."

He has also heard from pastors who are "quietly disengaging."

"They are too focused on the demands of pastoral ministry to participate in denominational infighting over something they do not perceive as worth the battle," he said. "...For some, the SBC is just not worth the hassle anymore."

### **Determining boundaries**



Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Al Mohler unofficially supported the amendment before it existed, stating from the floor at the 2022 Anaheim annual meeting that Southern Baptists [are not confused](#) when it comes to the meaning of “pastor.”

In February, [he reiterated](#) his support.

“I see it as not only something that we need to pass, but we need to just have it as a part of our bylaws in such a way that it settles a question,” said Mohler, adding that if the amendment fails, the issue would not go away and be reintroduced annually.

May 23, he released a video expressing his “confidence” in Southern Baptists as the annual meeting approaches.

The SBC, Mohler said, faces “an inescapable theological responsibility” to reassert “the boundaries of our cooperation.”

Previous generations of Southern Baptists didn’t have to say that the office of pastors is limited to men, he pointed out. “Southern Baptists, I believe, still are quite aware and quite convictional about [that] fact,” he said. But “confusion among us” has become “very dangerous” and “subversive to our ability to cooperate.”

Mohler pointed to the “clarity and overwhelming consensus” of the 2023 votes over churches who were deemed to no longer be in fellowship.

“Southern Baptists really do believe in the autonomy of the local church,” he said. “We can’t force any church to be a part of the Southern Baptist Convention.

“But the SBC also has the responsibility to define what are the boundaries, what is the basis, the foundation for the cooperation that brings us together for common work.”

Messengers will vote on the amendment at this year’s SBC annual meeting June 11-12 in Indianapolis.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Scott Barkley is national correspondent for Baptist Press.

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## Healthy church planted

**ROSEVILLE** – From 1928 to 1934 the Portsmouth Spartans were a professional football team in Portsmouth, Ohio (near where David and Krista Dunham hail from). They played against the Green Bay Packers and beat them one year 19-0 in the famed “iron man” game. It was called this because the Spartan coach refused to make any substitutions and only used 11 guys the entire game. They also played against the Chicago Bears.

In 1934 they were purchased by George Richards. George was the owner of WJR in Detroit and in a compliment of sorts to the Detroit Tigers, George named his team, the Detroit Lions. For 90 years Detroit has had a football team. It feels good to see George’s desire for his team to be the “Lions of the NFL” taking place.

Why did Christ establish the church? The local church is the means that God set up to display his glory to the nations. The local church is the gathering of the people of God in an area to preach God’s Word, encourage one another, and equip one another so that we live as salt and light in our arenas and share the gospel with others.

Evangelism is necessary. But, without a local church, the believers will be ineffectual, and eventually the gospel in that area will be lost. At the same time, it is not enough for a church to simply exist. A church has to know its purpose and mission, and must keep its eye on it.

We’ve seen too many seasons where it seemed that the Lions were content with having a team. Now the goal seems to be intensely focused on winning and winning it all. We are seeing how much excitement and sacrifice people are willing to make to accomplish that.

On an eternally larger scale, we need to think that way about the church. It is not enough to exist. We have to be committed to the goal of making Christ known, being faithful to the gospel, taking the gospel to unreached peoples, and establishing and encouraging healthy churches. The process looks like this:

1. The gospel is proclaimed and shared in an area.
2. The conversion of new believers occurs.
3. A church is established.
4. More people are sent out so that the gospel can be proclaimed in other areas.
5. Repeat 1-4 (until Christ returns)

None of these steps will take place unless there is intentionality and commitment. For many years we have (and continue) to be very intentional about preaching the gospel and building people up in it. God has kindly given us a good church. Therefore, we have been purposeful in seeking to help influence many other churches to help them pursue gospel integrity, biblical faithfulness, and health so that together we can help establish more churches and send out more church planters here and around the world. Our goal is to give away much resources and

people in order that more gospel is proclaimed, and more churches are established and strengthened.

It is gratifying to see the many ways the Lord has allowed us to be part of some strategic opportunities. I think we are just at the beginning of some great things. So, I want to encourage you. Jesus is worth a beautiful bride. Your faithfulness to gathering on Sunday (not watching on-line unless you are physically unable to come), your faithfulness to loving and serving one another, your faithfulness to pursuing godliness, your faithfulness to sharing the gospel, and your faithfulness in giving really, really matter.

It is not enough to have a team. You want the team to win. It is not enough to have a church. You want the church to pursue its purpose. It's not enough to do evangelism. We have to see healthy churches get established. God has established local churches to display his glory to the nations; and THAT is the goal!!

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Bob Johnson has been serving as the Senior Pastor of Cornerstone since 1989. He has a Master of Divinity degree from the Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary (1997).

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## **Positive, neutral, or negative**

**PLYMOUTH** – It's great that we set aside a day each year to celebrate our fathers! The older I get and the more people I have deep conversations with, I see how crazy important fathers are to a family.

I've spoken with grown adults who are struggling with some part of their life. Often, they will bring up their father having been absent, abusive, neglectful, disinterested, or if he was engaged with the family, loving, and helpful. Dads are extremely important in setting the course of their children's lives. Children use their dad as a pattern for a how-to book of life.

Dads who have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of their life have excellent help in the Bible and from the Holy Spirit's guidance.

*As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. – Psalm 103:13 ESV*

(I love how the Message version of the Bible voices the same verse:

*As parents feel for their children, God feels for those who fear him.)*

Children thrive and flourish when they know they are dearly loved by their dad. I think that is why God called himself our Father. Even when we aren't given a godly physical dad on earth, we can have an eternal Father God through Jesus Christ.

I worked in a Michigan public high school with students who had massive absenteeism and were generally known as at-risk teens. They were at-risk of dropping out of high school, as well as not making it in society and the community. Through numerous conversations with these students, many described their fathers who had left, were abusive, didn't love or interact with them, didn't work or provide a living, or who abused drugs or alcohol. Their fathers had strong effects on the student's views of life.

To have a quick reminder for myself as I spoke with a student, I mentally began a general evaluation system of these students' fathers. I would think a father was either a positive (+) in the student's life (student felt supported and loved), or a neutral (0) (student felt ignored, unimportant), or a negative (-) (student felt unsafe and unloved).

God is always a 100% positive Father. He has proven his faithfulness to us over and over in our lives and all throughout the generations as testified in the Bible. He loves us with an overwhelming love that provides salvation for us to come into a right relationship with Him.

As Jesus-following dads, let's love our children with abandonment! There should never be any doubt in our kids' minds that they are loved by us. Out of love for our children, let's point them to the Father that will never leave them and will love them with a fierce love.

*He (God) who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? – Romans 8:32*

*For I am sure that neither death nor life, not angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. – Romans 8:38-39*

Fathers, you don't have to be a superstar, the most handsome, smartest, richest, or in the best shape... just be a dad who loves your kids like God loves them – fiercely!

Let your kids catch you reading the Bible at home, praying for them by name, and taking them to church with a joyful attitude. (Don't forget to show your wife love, respect, and tenderness in front of your kids so that your children learn how a Jesus following husband treats his wife.) Nurture your children as they grow in strength and wisdom in the Lord

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jamie works as Executive Assistant for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Her greatest joy is serving Jesus Christ. Her husband, Tony, their three children, and nine grandchildren are

gifts from God that fill Jamie's life to overflowing. Mentoring young women in the Lord is a ministry of delight. Jamie and her family served 13 years with the IMB international mission work in Niger Republic, West Africa, and Paris, France.

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## Absolute

**PLYMOUTH** – Many years ago, I had to make a trip to Texas from Florida, which required that I employ the services of one of the available airlines. The flight to Dallas was uneventful and brief in comparison to the 16 to 18 hours it would have taken if I had gone by way of automobile.

The second leg of my journey was a bit different as I flew from Dallas to Corpus Christi, Texas but this time, I was in a petite propeller driven craft that was quite small and cramped in comparison to the jetliner I had taken out of Jacksonville

It was a very overcast day and the moment we took off we were in the clouds. No sight visibility, just blind flying through the soup. Bouncing. Rough. Sometimes moving up and down and side to side as much as we pushed forward.

For one who has a great deal more faith in “terra firma” than in man-made flying machines, this made for a rather nervous and unsettling situation. The pilots had a door between them and the passengers. During the flight it sprang open as the result of a severe bounce the plane took when encountering an air pocket.

I looked in at them and one pilot was reading a newspaper while the other sat casually peering over his instruments and completely ignoring the view through his cockpit window.

They were flying by instrument and had engaged the autopilot. These pilots were being guided by a standard of reference that was outside of themselves. It mattered not what was going on inside that cabin, or for that matter in the immediate surroundings. That which was guiding them and ultimately us to our final destination was a set of directional beacons and transmitters that were constant and never changing, no matter what the pilots did or what the weather might be.

The pilots knew that they must obey the instruments whether they felt like it or not. They understood that their own senses and feelings could be deceiving and unreliable, especially during times of turbulence and the loss of visibility. Those pilots had faith in their instruments and that is what brought us safely and uneventfully to our planned destination.

Society could benefit greatly from the actions and attitudes of these pilots. In the moral and spiritual areas, modern man has decided that he needs no outside standard of reference. From the perspective of most in our society today, the only point of reference that is needed is within oneself.

This has given birth to a people where there are no absolute standards of right or wrong. Everyone does his or her own thing. Everyone is free to take his or her own path and to go in whatever direction they desire. They falsely assume that all roads lead to the same destination.

Without a standard of reference outside of ourselves, we as human beings are bound for disaster. Our opinions are faulty. Our perspectives are skewed. Our morals have been corrupted and the standards of right and wrong have been so warped that they are hardly recognizable.

The only hope that we have of arriving at our appointed destination as individuals and as humanity is by putting our trust in God's standards of right and wrong and let Him guide our lives. Only He can see matters in their completeness, and view them from a Heavenly perspective. It is imperative that we take our hands off the wheel and put our trust in the God of all creation who can and does have a perfect perspective.

It is a scary thing to let go and trust completely in an outside source, but it is the only way to fly.

#### **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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## **Pop Quiz: Billy Graham, Paul, Fatherhood**

**PLYMOUTH** – Fatherhood and Christian fatherhood are radically two different things! Billy Graham, the famous, world-traveling evangelist, understood that difference; but he likely captured that distinction during his daily devotions by reading the Bible throughout his lifetime for his own spiritual growth.

While living as a global, spiritual mentor to millions, he never forgot his children nor abandoned his responsibility to disciple his children who were nestled away with their mother in the mountains of North Carolina.

The Billy Graham Library collected quotes from many years, about fatherhood, from Graham. While Graham was in his home in North Carolina, with his two sons, Ned and Franklin, in 1965, he said:

- “A good father is one of the most unsung, unpraised, unnoticed, and yet one of the most valuable assets in our society.”
- “The greatest tribute a boy can give to his father is to say, ‘When I grow up, I want to be just like my dad.’ It is a convicting responsibility for us fathers and grandfathers.”
- “Our lives speak loudly to those around us, especially the children in our home.”

In Graham’s autobiography, *Just As I Am*, he wrote:

“I tried to let all five of the children know that I loved them, no matter what they did; that I missed them when I was away . . . and that I wanted them to discover God’s perfect plan for each of them.”

The Billy Graham Library shared a statement written into Graham’s last will and testament. The declaration was about fatherhood. He said:

- “I have loved and been proud of all five of my children and those whom they chose to marry. I have loved all of you equally, while each of you maintain a separate spot in my heart.”

On another occasion, Graham spoke candidly about the ethical, moral, and practical impact of behaving as a godly father when he said:

- “If there were no heaven and no hell, I would still want to be a Christian because of what it does for our home and our families in this life.”

Billy Graham once described what it was like to leave for another crusade after having spent time being refreshed at home in North Carolina surrounded by his wife and children. He said:

- “Many a time, I’ve driven down that driveway with tears coming down my cheeks, not wanting to leave.”

## **Paul and Fatherhood**

Graham lived to be 99-years old. Much of what he said and wrote was recorded due to the fact that he was one of the most recognizable people in the world and his influence for the Lord was widespread. But Graham’s opportunity to influence his own children and grandchildren toward the Lord is similar to the occasion typical men have with their own children.

A pressing question is, “How intentional are today’s men at being ‘Christian’ fathers to their own children?” More specifically, “Do today’s men, who declare themselves as followers of

Jesus Christ, see themselves as ‘Christian’ fathers with specific responsibilities to promote a Christian faith with their children, and is there an example to follow?” The Apostle Paul of the New Testament saw himself as a spiritual father to many. Paul wrote to the people of Corinth and said:

“I am not writing these things to shame you, but to warn you as my beloved children. For even if you had ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, you have only one spiritual father. For I became your father in Christ Jesus when I preached the Good News to you. So, I urge you to imitate me. That’s why I have sent Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord. He will remind you of how I follow Christ Jesus, just as I teach in all the churches wherever I go,” (1 Corinthians 4:14-17, New Living Translation).

Look at the source, the start, the style, and the cycle of Christian fatherhood described in Paul’s words:

1. **Sincere Love** – Verse 14 indicates that shaming others does not create spiritual growth, rather spiritual growth blooms best from sincere love.
2. **Spiritual Fatherhood** – Verse 15 declares that spiritual nourishment for those young in the faith must come from a trusted source, rather than just any source.
3. **Sterling Example** – Verse 16 boasts that those new in the faith could copy Paul’s life and testimony. Would today’s typical man say to young ones, “Copy me?”
4. **Subsequent Generations** – Verse 17 displays the reality that newborns in the Lord need good examples to follow with each new generation and each phase of life.

Do today’s Christian men see spiritual guidance as a heritage to be handed down into each new generation of children, as much as the Apostle Paul? How much more would the world resemble what the Lord desires if Christian men followed Paul’s example?

Today’s life patterns would have to change for us to see a positive, spiritual impact. If hours of watching baseball or golf were replaced with spiritual guidance in the lives of those young in the faith, what would happen?

If training partnerships in Bible reading, prayer, and service projects overcame the importance of tackling techniques and three-point shooting, what could the new generations achieve?

If wasting vast amounts of the day scanning and touching digital screens were ended and meaningful conversations were started between fathers and children, what new discoveries in following the Lord could be enjoyed by each coming generation? We will only know if changes in life’s patterns occur!

### **Pop Quiz for Fathers**

Research and observation tell us that most boys who grow up to become men do not enjoy reading. That same research tells us that men often only read what significant women place in



front of them to read. So, the following pop quiz may never be seen by a man unless a woman places it in front of the man in her life along with the promise of a reward. But this “pop quiz” may be worth more than one could imagine. It could lead to a life change in the man and the new generations that enter his life.

### **A Father’s Pop Quiz**

1. Using street signs as an indicator, which of the following street signs would you put up for your children/grandchildren if they thought of looking closely at and imitating your spiritual life?

- a. Enter
- b. No Trespassing
- c. Caution
- d. Danger
- e. Construction Ahead

2. If your children/grandchildren were to write down a list of evidence that you are a follower of Jesus Christ, what would they put on their list?

3. Where are you on a list of the top five people who influence your children/grandchildren toward the Lord?

4. What would it take to increase your influence over your children/grandchildren to follow the Lord?

5. If you were to create two “punch lists” of things 1) to improve your Christian life and to 2) stop from damaging your Christian life, what would be the leading three things on each list?

After taking this pop quiz, each father/grandfather will have an assessment guide measuring his effectiveness at influencing his children/grandchildren to follow the Lord. It would be wise for each man to sit and discuss the results during the month of June with his wife or another man who could help him become a stronger Christian father.

Setting goals, changing patterns and scheduling follow-up assessments every two to three months between this Father’s Day and next year’s celebration could help those in the coming generations. Share this article and the pop quiz with others during June.

In the meantime, Happy Father’s Day!

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Tony L. Lynn is the Send Network Director for Michigan and the Language/Ethnic Church Planting Catalyst. Before coming on staff at the BSCM, Tony served as a lead pastor in Michigan

churches and as an international missionary, along with his wife Jamie, in the Niger Republic, France, and Canada.

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## How do you measure up?

**WINDSOR, ONTARIO** – We often measure success by how popular or by how famous someone is. We measure success by our position in the office, by the size of a home, the cost of a car, or the length of a boat.

But God uses a very different standard when he measures success. When God measures a man, he doesn't put the tape measure around his head or his wallet, but around his heart.

In 1 Samuel 16 God sends Samuel to Bethlehem to find a king, and this is where we read the familiar statement, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

You cannot measure a man's effectiveness by the standards of the world. God has different measurements in mind for fathers and grandfathers.

There are several measurements we need to consider.

### **Commitment**

Effective fathers are committed first to the Lord Jesus Christ, and to living their lives for his honor and glory. Don't be pressed or pressured into the world's mold (Romans 12:1-2). Be transformed in your heart and mind. Follow Jesus and obey his Word. Your spiritual commitment to Jesus will lead you into a deeper commitment to your wife and your family!

Oliver DeVinck was just three months developed in his mother's womb when his mother had an accident. Gas leaked from the stove in the kitchen, and Catherine lost consciousness. She was rescued a short while later, but when Oliver was born six months later, they discovered he was blind. Eventually the doctors would tell the DeVincks that Oliver not only couldn't see, but he also had severe brain damage. The gas that Catherine inhaled early in her pregnancy had affected Oliver's development.

The DeVincks asked the examining physician what they might do for their son. The doctor suggested they place him in a group home where he'd be comfortable. Jose and Catherine refused to consider such a possibility. "He is our son," Jose said. "We will take Oliver home."

“Then take him home and love him,” the doctor replied. They did. For thirty-three years. They had a different definition of *commitment*.

## **Appreciation**

The second measurement God uses is appreciation. Effective fathers express their appreciation for their children and to their children often.

The Apostle Paul told the church at Philippi that he loved them and longed for them. He said they were his “joy and crown” (Philippians 4:1).

Can you imagine what those same words might do in the heart of your son or your daughter? *You are my joy and my crown! You are stinking delightful! You’ve got what it takes!* Your children, and your spiritual children, need plenty of encouragement and appreciation.

One young man said, “Growing up, I remember my dad coming into my room every night after I had slipped under the covers. He would kneel beside my bed and stroke my hair back and then he would tell me something specific that he appreciated about me.

“Sometimes my father would focus his comments on my schoolwork or my sports. Often, he would comment on the way I cared for my siblings or helped my mother. But every night I went to sleep knowing that my father loves me and appreciates me.”

## **Time Together**

Effective fathers also spend time with their families, and they communicate when they are together. In a survey conducted several years ago, 1500 schoolchildren were asked one simple question: “What do you think makes a happy family?” They didn’t list money, cars, large houses, or computers. The answer they gave most frequently was “doing things together.”

What makes a happy family? Doing things together!

A debate has raged for years over whether dads need quality time or quantity of time with their children. But you can’t have quality without quantity! You must spend time together for your words of encouragement and advice to find their way into the hearts of your kids and your grandkids.

## **Spiritual coaching**

Paul specifically addresses fathers in Ephesians 6:4 where he says, “Dads, you need to bring up your children in the training and instruction of the Lord.” We cannot delegate or neglect that

assignment. Our first disciple-making responsibility is at home. It's easy to be intimidated by this, but we need to embrace our role as spiritual leaders in the home.

Deuteronomy 6:5-7 tells us to teach God's Word to our children diligently and talk about the Word when we sit at the dinner table, and when we go for a walk; when we lie down, and when we rise. In other words, dads, take *every* advantage of *every* opportunity *every* day to encourage *every* one of your children to walk with God.

When God measures a man,  
he doesn't put the tape measure around  
his head or his wallet,  
but around his heart.

I believe with all my heart, that in Christ Jesus and through the power of the Holy Spirit who is at work in you, you have what it takes to be an effective father or grandfather. With the resurrection power of Jesus Christ working in you and through you, you will measure up, and you can do this!

Happy Father's Day!

#### **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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## **A father who leads well**

**PLYMOUTH** – Father's Day in my home was always a great day! I knew that as a kid, after church, the smell of charcoal would permeate our backyard and house as we cooked Dad his favorite meal - steak.

I still remember it was a big day when Dad finally trusted me to cook it on my own! Once lunch was done, the best apple pie ever made would be for dessert, oftentimes with some homemade vanilla ice cream. My mom set such a great example for my sister and me on how to celebrate my dad on Father's Day.

As I got older, I became more aware of why my dad was worth celebrating. My dad has spent his entire adult life in ministry, and many of those years as a pastor leading country churches.

He will never be famous or well-known here on earth, but I am thankful that God allowed me to be raised by a man of God who pursued His Savior, and loves his wife and kids so well. To this day, I know I have a father who loves me and prays for me daily. When I look at Scripture, **1 Corinthians 16:13** comes to mind where Paul wrote:

*Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.* I am glad to say my father lives this verse out daily!

We live in a society that has devalued fathers. Because of the vacuum created, so grow up without the example of a good father. Unfortunately, Christians are not exempt from this either. So many in the church have never experienced what a loving, godly father can be in their life.

In spite of all of that, we have a heavenly Father who loves us, cares for us, and is strong when we are weak. He sets an example for every father to emulate. Even though Scripture tells us of the glory of God, and how His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts, Scripture also shows us in 1 John 3:1a that he has loved us and chosen us when John wrote,

*See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.*

As we reflect on our fathers this month, can I encourage the men out there to be men who stand firm in the faith and be strong? Your wife and your family need a husband and father that will lead well. But in that leading, let us never forget to pursue Christ. Be consistent in your walk with Him, stand strong on what Scripture teaches, and never forget to lead through the lens of grace!

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Barry Martin is the location pastor for Mile City Plymouth. His wife, April as well as Caleb, Chloe, and Liam have called Michigan home for the past 7 years and love the beauty of up north! Barry enjoys seeing people finding the call that God has on their life and helping them fulfill their purpose. In his free time, Barry loves to golf and spend time coaching basketball.

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## **Thoughts while painting a fence**

**ROSCOMMON** – When one is in a quiet place for hours painting a fence, it gives one plenty of time to think. It was just my granddaughter and I painting the fence around the playground on the Bambi Lake campground.

She was listening to podcasts, and I was thinking. "This is a long fence for just the two of us to paint. I wish we had more hands available. What if we are not able to finish it in the days we have here. Then people that come will say, 'Why did they only paint part of the fence'." Then I thought of times that I had come to Bambi and asked, "Why did they not do\_\_\_\_?, Why did they do \_\_\_\_?, Are they ever going to \_\_\_\_\_?" I was guilty of the very thing that I was worried that people were going to say!!

I went back to thinking and painting. We, as members of Southern Baptist churches in Michigan, own Bambi Lake. We have a vested interest in the success of Bambi Lake. So, shouldn't the pronoun be changed from **they** to **we** when asking those questions?

What if church members who attend Bambi Lake begin asking, "Why do we not do \_\_\_\_\_?, Why don't we do \_\_\_\_\_?, Are we going to do \_\_\_\_\_?" What difference would that switch in attitude and thinking make in the future of Bambi Lake. Wow!

I believe this switch in perspective will take time and intentionality. The very next day, as my granddaughter and I were going to the campground, she said, "Are they ever going to do something about \_\_\_\_\_?" Then we laughed as we said, "Are *we* ever going to do something about \_\_\_\_\_?"

A couple of days later, she caught me using the *they* pronoun when talking about Bambi Lake. We have decided to hold ourselves and others accountable by asking what *we* can do to make improvements at Bambi Lake. We have also committed to being active volunteers to make things happen.

We wish to see our up-north place of peace thrive in the years ahead. We wish to see Bambi Lake continue to be a place of refuge and spiritual growth for others.

Thankfully many people have stepped up to volunteer and are working to make Bambi Lake a success. For it to thrive, we need many more people to take time to come and work at Bambi. As we all work together, let's see what we can do at Bambi Lake!

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Sharon is mother of three grown children and grandmother to eleven beautiful grandchildren. A retired IMB missionary, she served with her husband, Warren, over 25 years in two West African nations. In retirement, she runs a pie-baking business out of her home. Since December, Sharon has been volunteering for Bambi Lake as the volunteer coordinator.

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# Balancing being dad

**MONROE** – Being a dad is hard. It's one of the greatest privileges we can have, but it's hard. It's hard because no two kids are alike. What specific strategy worked perfectly for your firstborn is all but guaranteed to fail for your second. And once you think you've started to figure out your child, they enter another stage of growth and development, and you wonder when your baby became a young adult.

This is on top of all your other responsibilities. In the life of the godly father, we must work to find balance and place a priority on what matters. Here are some principles that fathers everywhere can apply that will help you navigate the challenges of modern life while modeling discipleship for those growing up in your care.

## Walk with God

I know you know this, but my desire is that you will be stirred up by way of this reminder. It can be easy to relegate our relationship with God to a checklist, or even to neglect it altogether for the business and stress of the immediate. Don't give in to this temptation. How has God been speaking to you through His word? What prayer have you been begging God to answer? How have you been refreshed in godly community? Being a godly dad requires being godly.

## Spend Time with Your Family

Husbands are called to love their wives like Jesus loved His church—sacrificially. In part, this means saying "no" to other things so you can say yes to your wife. Moses told the people of Israel to teach their children diligently including when they were sitting at home, taking a walk, going to bed at night, and getting up in the morning. This requires you to be there for these everyday moments, dad. There will be times for all of us that we miss these events on occasion, but is that the rule or exception in your home? Your family needs you more than your church or your job. Your church will call another pastor after you. Your children only have one dad.

## Prioritize Open Communication

Your children will learn a lot from you, but they will also learn a lot without you. Recently our dinner table turned into a discussion of all the inappropriate words my elementary-aged children know. After discussing why some words are appropriate and good while others aren't words that we want to use, my wife and I were grateful that our children were willing to ask us about things they were unsure about without fear of judgment. This can obviously be more difficult at different stages of life and growth, but even (and maybe especially) moms and dads should be quick to hear and slow to speak. Learn to listen to your children. If they don't believe they can speak openly at home, they'll find somewhere else that they can.

## Seek Community

Don't try to do it alone. Surround yourself with other dads doing their best to be godly examples for their families. Be involved in the men's ministry of your church as much as you're able. If there isn't one, talk to your pastor about how you can help get one off the ground. After all, two are better than one because they have a good reward for their labor. Lean into the opportunity for growth that is only possible as iron sharpens iron and friends sharpen friends.

### **Embrace Grace**

Be quick to extend grace to your children. There will be days that they won't listen. There will be times when they hear exactly what you're saying and choose to do the opposite. Don't grow weary in doing good, dad. But embrace the grace that God has shown to you and pass that along to your children. And while we're at it, give yourself grace. In the moments that you respond in ways that you regret, acknowledge it, and repent of it knowing that the grace of God is what gives us the ability to be a godly dad anyway.

### **Give Them Jesus**

You can be what many would consider a good parent without being a godly parent, but you will do your kids a disservice by doing so. Instead, all the other principles ought to serve to strengthen the relationship that you have with your children to help them lay this foundation for themselves. If they choose what our culture calls good without embracing Jesus, they are building their life on sand while a rock is ready to give them stability and salvation. You are the primary tool for discipleship in the life of your children. Give them Jesus.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Nate Click has served as the Senior Pastor at Heritage Baptist Church in Monroe, MI, since 2021. He also serves as a member of the Southeastern Baptist Association Leadership Team.

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## **Olympic digital responders needed**

In front of an Olympic venue, her phone camera hovers over the Olympic pin. The link appears and she selects her language, scans the landing page, and then decides she'd like to chat live with someone. Hesitatingly, she types "Hello" and waits.

Three gray dots bounce up and down, indicating someone is responding. The answer comes from a digital responder who's sitting on their couch, nursing a coffee as they wait anxiously for this moment. From there, a conversation starts, diving into the "Who am I" question she and so



many people grapple with today. Jesus says He is the way, the truth, and the life, the volunteer shares, and then they talk about who we are in Christ.

This is the kind of interaction IMB missionaries are hoping and praying for.

Thousands of people from across the globe will descend on the city that's home to the Eiffel Tower for the Olympics. The IMB has ministered at many Olympics, and volunteers who've traveled to the global cities have long been crucial to their ministry strategy. While ministry has been successful, interactions are often fleeting as visitors scatter.

That's where digital engagement strategies come in. While volunteers are traveling to Paris to serve, people can also minister from their living rooms.

How?

The IMB is using a digital engagement strategy that will extend the on-the-ground evangelism. Brant Bauman serves with the IMB as a digital engagement strategist in Europe. He said pin trading is a favorite Olympic pastime, and for many years, Southern Baptists have used custom-designed pins in their outreach.

Bauman and other missionaries created three pins, each available at a different location, so pin traders have multiple opportunities for gospel conversations with on-the-ground volunteers.

The Olympic pins have an NFC tag (near-field communication), which, with just a tap of one device to another, takes you to a website with questions and information about who Jesus is. It has a YouVersion Bible reading plan, and there's the option to chat live with a biblical responder who speaks one of the 16 languages the team chose.

Messages from interested people will also be coming in from online social media ads, that will run both in Paris and around the world.

What this strategy relies on is people who are willing to be responders to these "chat now" requests.

Bauman said without responders who speak different languages, gospel conversations with people asking about Jesus can't happen. This approach expanded on the [digital engagement strategy used in Ukraine](#) and with Ukrainian refugees. QR codes connected Ukrainians with Ukrainian speakers who were available to chat.

Potential Olympic responders may have wanted to travel to Paris to serve physically but couldn't for varying reasons like finances, health or the timing, Bauman said. Signing up to serve as a responder is a crucial need. He noted the incredible diversity and language skillsets in the U.S. could serve. IMB alumni also make for ideal responders, he continued.

“Alumni have cultural knowledge. They’ve spent time on the field. They have language because they lived there,” Bauman said.

The Olympics and Paralympics start in mid-July and run through the beginning of September. Digital responders can sign up for a week-long virtual mission trip where they’ll be on call to answer chat requests. Volunteers will go through onboarding training that will expand on the strategy and give talking points.

People who chat with a responder during the Olympics can be connected to a missionary serving in their country so that communication can continue long-term. That’s the beauty of this digital engagement strategy. Bauman gave the example of a South African spectator who comes to the Olympics and talks with a volunteer on the ground who gives them a pin. They scan the pin and talk with a digital responder about who they can be in Christ, and then, when they return to South Africa, they are connected to a missionary who continues the gospel sharing.

“This is where the IMB shines. We are well-connected people,” Bauman said.

For those interested in being a digital responder, [click here](#). People can also [sign up to pray](#) at certain times. Prayer prompts will be sent daily.

If this summer isn’t convenient, Bauman said this strategy will live on past the 2024 Olympics. His team is looking to use it at World Cups, future Olympics and other large-scale sporting events. Stay tuned for future opportunities to serve as a digital responder.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Tessa Sanchez writes for the IMB.

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## **5 Questions for Churches Helping Other Churches**

As my good friend Mark Hallock says: “We can’t do this alone, which is why a replanting movement must be made up of churches, pastors and denominational leaders who practice humble, radical cooperation.”

Churches help renew, revitalize and replant other churches by sending people and resources and sharing expertise. Increasingly we are seeing more formal and official partnerships like

fostering, adoption and “campusing,” which are aiding churches to experience new seasons of vitality and growth.

Even if you are not ready for a formal step, a congregation of any size can find opportunities to help a sister congregation.

Before jumping in, answer these five questions:

### **1. Have you checked your motives?**

This step may seem less than necessary and unimportant but it is one of the most important first steps. I have seen partnership conversations breakdown because motives aren't clearly evaluated. Are you engaging to help or rescue? Do you want to extend your church's name or brand more widely? If you want to help a sister church out of a genuine desire to enable kingdom advance (read God's Kingdom, not your church's kingdom and influence), then you're likely ready to take a step toward partnership.

### **2. What types of partnership are you offering?**

I love baseball, and one of the truisms is that every pitcher has to know his pitch. He can't throw everything; he likely specializes in one or two. Do you know what kind of partnership God has equipped and called your church to provide? Some of the best partnerships are short term: church fostering, coaching and resourcing. These are great ways to “test” out partnership before jumping into more permanent models like adoption and campusing.

### **3. Are you ready to go slow?**

Declining and struggling churches often are fearful. They know they need to change but fear the potential impact any change could have on the few remaining attenders and members. This means they'll likely have a zillion questions that they will need answered more than once. They'll want time to think and pray, rethink and pray again, which means helping churches have to hold loosely to timelines. Patience is key here, and slow ends up being faster than you think.

### **4. Do you need the credit?**

The simple reality is this: When a church is renewed, revitalized or replanted, the one who deserves all the credit is God. Sure, you may have been invited to play a part in the work of renewal, but you didn't renew a cold and callus heart. God did that. You didn't cause someone to cross the line between spiritual death and life. God did that. You didn't breakdown preferences, prejudices and traditions. God did that. If you're ready to give all glory to God, you might be ready to help a struggling or declining church.

### **5. Can you walk away?**

On average, it seems that 3 out of 10 churches that engage in some sort of conversation or renewal process actually end up experiencing renewal. That's not great, but it's also not bad. Sometimes a church has to make several runs at renewal before finally hitting the breakthrough point. If you aren't ready to engage and experience resistance, pushback and rejection – if you're not ready to disengage and walk away and allow a church to season and warm to the Gospel and change – you might not be fully ready to help.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Bob Bickford is a Replant Pastor in suburban St. Louis, serves as the Associate Director of Replant for the North American Mission Board and is the co-author of *Am I a Replanter*, *Pathways to Partnership* and the *Associational Replanting Guide*. Follow Bob on twitter @bobick.

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## **Southern Baptist Church Attendance Gains Potentially Larger Than Reported**

**According to data analysis, a decline in reporting among Southern Baptist congregations may be leading to an undercounting of attendance.**

Officially, attendance at Southern Baptist congregations grew 6% in 2023, but it's likely the actual gains are even higher.

According to Lifeway Research analysis of the Annual Church Profile (ACP) data collected by Southern Baptist state conventions, a decline in reporting among churches is likely leading to an undercounting of attendance numbers.

In 2013, 80% of Southern Baptist-affiliated congregations reported at least one number for the ACP. That percentage has steadily declined, falling to 69% in recent years. The 11-point decline in reporting in the past decade impacts the current numbers.

The [2023 ACP](#) reported the total weekly worship service attendance at Southern Baptist-affiliated congregations to be more than 4 million. Better reporting from churches could lead to a corrected number closer to 4.6 million.

**Southern Baptist-affiliated congregations reported a total weekly worship service attendance average of more than 4 million. Better reporting from churches could lead to a number closer to 4.6 million.**

“By any estimate, average worship attendance totals combined for all Southern Baptist congregations is still below pre-pandemic levels,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. “However, looking at the reported totals in 2019 and 2023 alone gives the erroneous impression that 23% of attendees have not returned. That is not the case.”

### **Declining reporting**

Around 7 in 10 Southern Baptist congregations (69%) reported at least one item for the ACP in 2023. When you remove those who only reported a financial item, however, only 61% of congregations reported any other statistics in 2023. In 2019, 75% provided at least one item, and 71% reported at least one non-financial number.

Reporting percentages also vary dramatically by state convention. More than 9 in 10 Southern Baptist-affiliated congregations in New England (98%), Illinois (97%) and Montana (93%) reported at least one non-financial item in the 2023 ACP. Fewer than 3 in 10 congregations did the same in California (22%) and both the state conventions in Texas—Baptist General Convention of Texas (25%) and Southern Baptists of Texas Convention (SBTC) (27%).

Among the state conventions, 30 saw a decline in reporting non-financial information since 2019, including Colorado (a 40-point drop), New York (28-point), Arizona (25-point) and SBTC (23-point). Only seven saw an increase in reporting percentages. Those include Minnesota-Wisconsin (a 33-point jump), Nevada (12-point), Utah-Idaho (11-point), Iowa (7-point) and Hawaii-Pacific (7-point).

“We want to include each congregation every year in the statistical picture of what is happening in the Southern Baptist Convention,” said McConnell. “However, each year is a brand-new effort to invite congregations to participate and for a leader in a church to take the time to gather the statistics. Each year’s report is a beautiful picture of cooperation, but unfortunately, the picture doesn’t include everyone.”

The drop in reporting is not the only issue complicating current in-person worship attendance numbers. Not only are fewer churches reporting, but this under-reporting causes pandemic-era attendance statistics to influence current numbers.

### **Missing attendance numbers**

To account for churches that are still affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) but do not always report their attendance or other data through the ACP, Lifeway Research attempts to compensate for the missing data by using previous years’ information for some statistics. Without this, statistics would depend entirely on every church reporting every year and cause potentially wild fluctuations in the attendance numbers, according to McConnell.

To prevent the current attendance statistics from being influenced by out-of-date reporting, Lifeway Research statisticians only include numbers from up to two years ago from churches that did not report attendance in the current year. Any numbers from 2021 and 2022 used in 2023 do not reflect the in-person rebound churches have experienced since COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted. However, total SBC membership numbers are not as dependent on specific church reporting because adjustments to membership are not limited by time. The last number the congregation reported is used.

A [Lifeway Research study](#) of U.S. Protestant churches in August 2023 found the average church had reached 89% of their pre-COVID in-person worship service attendance, up from 60% in January 2021. According to the ACP data, Southern Baptist congregations were significantly lower than the average, rebounding to 77% of their previous attendance average.

However further analysis found Southern Baptists are likely to be much closer to the national Protestant average in 2023. Comparing Southern Baptist-affiliated congregations that reported in both 2019 and 2023, the average congregation is at 88% of their pre-pandemic attendance.

This indicates that if reporting returned to pre-pandemic levels, the attendance numbers in Southern Baptist congregations and conventions could potentially lead to a worship service attendance number closer to 4,600,000 than the current 4,050,668.

“An estimate of this type never replaces actual reporting from churches,” said McConnell. “More than 4 million worship attendees in a typical week were accurately reported for 2023. But the higher number that is estimated keeps us from concluding that the attendance rebound is progressing worse than it really is.”

*For more information, view the [2023 ACP State Convention Reporting Comparison report](#).*

*Lifeway Research studies can be used and referenced in news articles freely. This news release can also be republished in its entirety on other websites and in other publications without obtaining permission.*

## **Methodology**

The Annual Church Profile (ACP) is an annual statistical census of Southern Baptist congregations conducted cooperatively by local associations, state conventions and Lifeway Christian Resources. Around 7 in 10 Southern Baptist churches (69%) reported at least one item on the 2023 ACP. Projections are made using the attendance numbers of congregations that reported in 2019 and 2023 and applying those changes across the Southern Baptist Convention.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Aaron Earls is the senior writer at Lifeway Research.

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## **‘Accepting the other.’ Arab Christian paramedic in Nazareth promotes unity**

**NAZARETH, ISRAEL (BP)** – As a 15-year-old high school student in Nazareth, Arab Christian Yasmeen Mazzawi wanted to learn the history of the Jews she met volunteering as a paramedic with Magen David Adom (MDA), Israel’s national emergency medical services.

Her decision to visit Auschwitz with a team of MDA volunteers challenged her friendships with Muslim and Christian classmates at Nazareth Baptist School, founded by Southern Baptist missionaries in 1935.

As her classmates and even teachers ostracized her, Mazzawi responded by embarking on a successful campaign to spread cross-cultural understanding among Israel’s diverse population of Jews, Christians, Arabs, Muslims and others. She spoke at nongovernmental organizations, schools and youth camps across Israel, and utilized social media.

“To bridge between Arabs and Jews, to me that was a huge success. They understood that after they met the people, the Jewish people, they are just like us,” Mazzawi said of her classmates.

“What connects us at the end of the day is values. Christians by themselves are different. I think this is the beauty of the world, that we are different. It’s like this mosaic and each one brings his added value and his own beauty to this world.”

Her Christian faith and love of humanity drive her continued commitment to cross-cultural understanding during the Israel-Hamas War. Volunteering with MDA, she treats soldiers and civilians injured on Israel’s northern border with Lebanon, combat overshadowed by the center of the war in Gaza.

“Arabs and Jews, all of us work together to save lives,” Mazzawi said, describing MDA forces composed of Arabs, Christians, Jews, Muslims and Bedouins from very diverse backgrounds. “We are very dedicated and we love what we do.”

She believes rising antisemitism since the Oct. 7 attack on Southern Israel stems from a lack of understanding. Particularly on U.S. college campuses, where students called for divestiture from Israel and freedom for Palestine, she believes scholarly conversations could have eased tensions.

“I grew up on values. We grew up loving the other, accepting the other,” Mazzawi said. “If you try maybe to talk to one another, I’m pretty sure a huge percentage of these people will maybe not change their minds, but they can step back and maybe understand from the beginning.”

On Oct. 7, Mazzawi had planned to travel to Mannheim Business School in Germany, where she completed her studies in November, but the attack changed her plans.

“I stayed here in Israel in case there was anything I could help with. I stayed with my Jewish friends, and Arab friends were in the South,” she said. “We have to be here together, especially these days. We have to be united. We have to show that we are different here in Israel. We are diverse, but at the end of the day, we’re together, and we have to put politics away.”

Many of her friends in Southern Israel were killed in the attack, and others were taken hostage.

“What happened here in Israel was horrible. We found ourselves for two weeks going from home to home, to friends, staying with them and strengthening them,” she said of her family. “It was a really hard time.”

She relies on her faith and fellow MDA volunteers for strength and resilience in war, leading paramedic teams into danger as others run for cover. Teams of paramedics systemically treat the most severe cases first, whether soldiers or civilians.

“There’s always this fear. When we go to the borders, it’s dangerous, and I have to make sure everyone’s safe,” Mazzawi said. “We have to separate our minds from our hearts. We have to do everything we can to save lives. It’s not easy, but we know how to do it well. We are very dedicated and we love what we do.

“Military teams are ready. We know how to deal with these situations. It’s very amazing if I zoom out and look at the scene, it’s just amazing how you see everyone working together.” She encourages others to look beyond politics and learn Israel’s history and contemporary culture.

“Many people have lack of knowledge about Jews and Israel. They are talking about politics, but many in Israel don’t agree with politics,” she said. “Many Jews and Arabs don’t agree with current situation in Israel.

“At the end of the day, Israel is an amazing country. People here want to live in peace. People here love one another.”

She finds comfort in her belief that God is in control, and her hope for a brighter future.

“My faith, it helps me with the fear,” she said. “I have this belief that our Heavenly Father is with us, and I believe He brought me here to make a difference. Things happen for a reason at the end of the day.”

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press’ senior writer.

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## When silence is deafening

As a Baptist who pastored in Catholic New Orleans for a decade, I came away with an appreciation for Lent. I have never given up chocolate. But some years I have shortened my screen time. Most years I add a devotional practice—a special Bible study or focused prayer topic.

This year God shut all that down.

The first day of the 50 preceding Easter coincided with Valentine's Day this year. That day I had a relatively minor outpatient procedure that promised a couple of weeks off my feet, out of the pulpit in my interim pastorate, and working from home. That short break soon turned into several weeks of complications and nasty reactions that eventually put me in the hospital, as too many doctors tried to deduce the cause and staged a series of scientific experiments.

On a spiritual level, my world shrank to silence.

I haven't experienced that often, but it has happened before. As a pastor seeking direction for a congregation, and most notably during my wife's cancer journey, there were times when God's answers on a particular need seemed a long time coming. But, I may say, this was my first encounter with total silence.

Maybe it was the drugs. From Ash Wednesday to Good Friday, I felt God had dropped a small dome over me. No sound coming in, and as best I could tell, no prayer making it out. Huddled in this zone of silence, my vision was too blurry to read and I couldn't form a cogent string of thoughts to direct Godward. I remember several days where my only movement was to sit by the window in the early hours, waiting for the nurse to dispense my next eligible dose and hoping the black sky would assume a tinge of gray. And whispering, "Lord, help me."

I don't want to expand this beyond proportion. I was only in the hospital a week. Concerned people visited, the medical community was diligent, and friends in several churches assured me of their prayers. But for a long while, God seemed distant. I was missing the usual sense of his engagement. As my "help me's" settled back from the brass ceiling, the silence was deafening.

Some have called this the "heavens as brass" phenomenon. The term comes from God's warning to the Hebrews that disobedience would disrupt their communication with him. "And thy heaven that is over thy head shall be brass, and the earth that is under thee shall be iron," Yahweh said through Moses before the nation was to enter the promise land (Deut. 23:28 KJV).

Since then, the term has expanded to any period when God seems silent. Disobedience is not the only cause, more recent observers would point out.

There's illness or some other impediment. I was keen enough to realize that the good friends who visited, the nurses who dropped by from other floors, and Christian caregivers who shared meds and faith were his way of speaking in the season when I couldn't hear. Even in the zone of silence, the love of God is never in doubt.

A silent season will cultivate in us the desire to listen more carefully. In rattle and bang of earthquake and storm, Elijah did not hear from God. Not until the prophet himself grew quiet did God utter a still, small voice at the mouth of cave. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" takes deeper meaning when it's the first thing you hear after an extended period of hearing nothing.

Silence has the effect of focusing our listening. Silence whets hunger in the heart for a fresh word from God. Silence stirs willingness to receive a word we might not have received before.

"You're sick. Hush up and get well. Take better care of yourself."

"You're disobedient. Stop it and behave."

"You're running. Turn around and go back."

"You're impatient. Give me time. I'm working on it."

These are all words from God we might not seek, but we need to hear.

On Good Friday, the season of silence ended. God lifted the brass dome. Back at church revisiting the words of Jesus from the Cross, I was reminded of the Son's endurance of the Father's silence—until Resurrection Morning, when all communication was restored.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Eric Reed is IBSA media editor.

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## **Travel Sports Create Issues and Opportunities for Families and Churches**

**Based on their perspective on missing services for travel sports, many churchgoers see the potential impact differently than their pastors.**

Growing up, Aaron Bryant may have dreamed of playing in the NFL, but his family would've never dreamed of skipping church.

Bryant was part of the Tennessee Titans when they made the Super Bowl in 1999. Despite playing multiple sports in high school, he says he rarely missed church services because of it. "Primarily, my parents prioritized corporate worship for our family and established a precedent that our time with our church family on Sunday mornings was more important than anything else," he said.

Today Bryant is the teaching pastor at the Church at Avenue South in Nashville, and like many pastors, sees some families missing because of sports.

A Lifeway Research study of both U.S. Protestant pastors and churchgoers found most in both groups believe it's OK to miss church occasionally for a kid's game or travel sporting event, but those in the pews are laxer on the issue than those behind the pulpit.

"Our culture no longer expects large numbers of people to be in church each week, so increasingly other events are also scheduled on Sundays," said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. "Families whose kids play sports often have to choose between attending church or being with their team."

### **Pastoral perspective**

More than 1 in 3 U.S. Protestant pastors (36%) say it's never OK to skip a weekly worship service for kid's games or travel sporting events, but almost 3 in 5 (58%) see at least some allowance for missing in those circumstances. Around 3 in 10 (29%) believe it's acceptable once or twice a year. A quarter (26%) say a few times a year, while 3% say many times a year. Another 6% say they aren't sure.

Pastors 65 and older (43%) are among the most likely to say it's never acceptable. Evangelical pastors are more likely than mainline pastors to say never (40% v. 28%). Those at the smallest churches, less than 50 in attendance, are also more likely than pastors at the largest churches, 250 or more, to believe skipping for sports is never OK (38% v. 24%).

Regardless of how accepting their pastor may be, Bryant said families often feel overwhelmed by all their tasks and events and feel as if they need to make a choice. "Unfortunately, for the children, when they choose to eliminate something from their schedules, it's often corporate worship involvement so they can continue to remain involved with team sports," he said.

Nate Walter, pastor at Goshen Christian Church in Goshen, Indiana, says the impact of travel sports on his congregation grew after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted. "There are many families with kids that we won't see for the entire summer because they are constantly traveling to a different tournament," he said.

Recent research agrees. A [report published by the Aspen Institute](#) found children ages 6-18 spent an average of 13.6 hours per week playing sports, including 4.6 hours of practice and 3.7 hours of competition, before COVID-19. While those all dropped during the pandemic, by September 2022, children were involved in sports for 16.6 hours per week, with 8.1 hours of practice and 3.7 hours of competition. According to [Wintergreen Research](#), travel sports has grown into a \$39 billion-a-year industry and is projected to reach \$72 billion by 2029.

Walter also noted school sports and activities have crept into Sundays. “As many schools are limited to one gymnasium, they have to find time for all the athletic programs to practice, and Sunday evening is becoming a very common time,” he said. “This drastically affected our Sunday evening youth activities.”

Still, Bryant said he and his wife encourage their children to be involved in sports and extra-curricular activities, but they discuss together how it might affect their family. When advising other parents, Bryant said he encourages them to affirm their child’s desire to be involved in sports even if it involves some travel. “Sports mirror the game of life, and our kids can learn perseverance, accountability, hard work, humility, teamwork and much more from sports,” he said. “However, I would caution all parents to count the cost and the impact sports will have on their child’s spiritual development, the impact it will have on their marriage, finances, etc.”

### **View from the pews**

Based on their perspective on missing services, many churchgoers see the potential impact differently than their pastors. Fewer than 1 in 5 U.S. Protestant churchgoers (18%) say it is never OK to skip church for kid’s sports. Around 3 in 4 (74%) believe it’s acceptable at least occasionally, including 22% who say once or twice a year, 39% a few times a year and 13% many times a year. Another 9% say they aren’t sure.

**More than 1 in 3 U.S. Protestant pastors (36%) say it’s never OK to skip a weekly worship service for kid’s games or travel sporting events compared to fewer than 1 in 5 churchgoers (18%).**

As with pastors, age is a factor for how likely a churchgoer is to see missing church for sports as OK. Those 50 and older are more likely than adults under 35 to say it’s never acceptable (20% v. 12%). Churchgoers 65 and older (7%) are the least likely to believe it’s OK to skip many times a year, while those under 35 (26%) are the most likely.

Additionally, churchgoers who attend more frequently are less accepting of skipping because of sporting events. Those who attend one to three times a month (45%) are more likely than those who attend four or more times (35%) to say missing a few times a year is OK. Meanwhile, those less frequent attenders (12%) are less likely than those who attend more often (22%) to say it’s never acceptable to miss because of a child’s game.

For churchgoers who do decide to miss because of sports, Bryant encourages the whole family to capitalize on the opportunity. “Perhaps you will be able to share the gospel with someone on the team, or another parent, who would otherwise never attend a worship service,” he said. “But those gospel engagements won’t happen accidentally, so you’ll have to be proactive and intentional.”

When he’s coaching sports, Frankie Creel says this is his mindset. Creel, an elder at CrossLife Church in Spartanburg, South Carolina, coaches high school sports and used to coach a travel softball team. His daughter is still part of a travel team. “If I am coaching, I use it as an opportunity to talk to the ladies about their identity in Christ and use it as a time of study and discipleship,” he said.

They try to avoid Sunday games but there are occasional major tournaments that lead to them missing four to five Sundays during the summer. “As long as it is not an absurd amount of time, I am OK,” he said.

Creel encouraged parents to ask themselves why they want to be involved in sports before committing. He said for younger players, he would avoid travel as much as possible. Camps and one-day tournaments can help those athletes continue to develop. Once the child reaches 10th grade and wants to play beyond high school, he said those larger tournaments become more necessary.

For Creel, churches can serve parents of travel sports athletes by creating “resources that encourage parents to have Christ-centered conversations with their kids, whether its online sermons, books or just tools to help disciple the child.”

Bryant says they are working to equip and encourage parents at the Church at Avenue South, and they’ve seen some results. “Some parents are now embracing more than ever that all 168 hours in a week are important for reinforcing biblical truths, not just taking their children to church for one hour of corporate worship on Sundays,” he said. “Some are repurposing the time they have with their children, whether in the car during the trip or around the team hotel to invest the gospel in their children.”

*Lifeway Research studies can be used and referenced in news articles freely. This news release can also be republished in its entirety on other websites and in other publications without obtaining permission.*

## **Methodology**

The phone survey of 1,004 Protestant pastors was conducted Aug. 29, 2023 – Sept. 20, 2023. The calling list was a stratified random sample, drawn from a list of all Protestant churches. Quotas were used for church size. Each interview was conducted with the senior pastor, minister or priest at the church. Responses were weighted by region and church size to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,004 surveys. The sample provides

95% confidence that the sampling error 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.

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.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Aaron Earls is the senior writer at Lifeway Research.

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Editor: Tim Patterson - [tim@bscm.org](mailto:tim@bscm.org)

Managing Editor: Jamie Lynn – [jamie@bscm.org](mailto:jamie@bscm.org)

Webmaster: OneMissionTV, LLC