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ONE magazine

DECEMBER-JANUARY • 2024

Turning the TIDE



God Will Deliver

*Who Is Influencing Whom:
Church or Sports?*



**A Necessity When
Navigating Transitions**

Feeding the Hungry... to Learn

Ordinary Means of Grace

The Drive

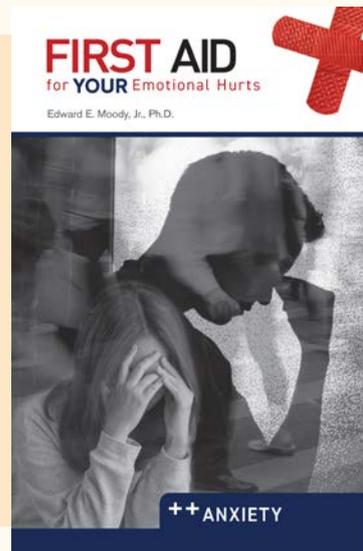
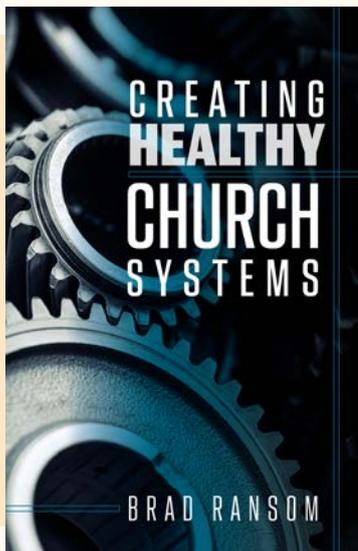
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*To communicate to Free Will Baptists a unifying vision
of our role in the extension of God's Kingdom*

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Missing

BY ERIC K. THOMSEN

The ornate nativity set stood out among the knickknacks, dishes, and other odds and ends on the thrift store shelf. Fine ivory porcelain, jeweled edges, and delicate hand painting drew my eye as a nativity collector, but I wasn't the only one.

I waited patiently as the young mom in front of me picked up the pieces, tracing the jeweled edges with her finger while she oohed and ahhed. At her side, her young son, with perfectly round face and jet-black hair shooting in all directions, looked up intently, big dark eyes troubled. I could understand his concerned question despite my limited Spanish: "¿No bebe Jesús, Mamá?"

"No bebé, Mijo," she replied softly, and somewhat sadly, I thought.

Surprised, I returned my attention to the nativity set, and sure enough, despite its ornate beauty and quality, the collection was missing its most important figure.

I smiled as the boy pulled his hand free from his mother and scampered over to the next row of shelves cluttered

with brightly colored toys of unimaginable variety. He fell to his knees, and I heard the clatter as he began pulling toys off the shelf, looking at them closely.

My mind wandered back to the nativity and paused. Such a vivid analogy of what Christmas has become in our American culture. All the beauty and decoration and finery, but too often without the central figure of the season. Baby Jesus is missing. We get so caught up in the lights and decorations, work and family gatherings, cantatas and candle-light services—all good things, mind you—that we sometimes take the focus from the tiny figure in the manger.

Suddenly, I heard the patter of small feet as the boy dashed back up to his mother with chubby hand outstretched. "¡El bebé, Mamá! ¡el bebé!"

My heart melted as she took a plastic Fisher-Price Little People™ figure from his fingers. She looked down at her son tenderly for a moment, then ruffled his hair and carefully placed the plastic figure at the center of the beautiful porcelain collection. He beamed up at her and offered a single word: "Bueno."

Good, indeed, to find an unexpected (and less than expected) figure lying at the center of the nativity. Sounds biblical to me. **ONE**

*He came unto his own,
and his own received
him not. But as many
as received him,
to them gave he power
to become the sons of
God, even to them that
believe on his name.
John 1:11-12*



About the Columnist:

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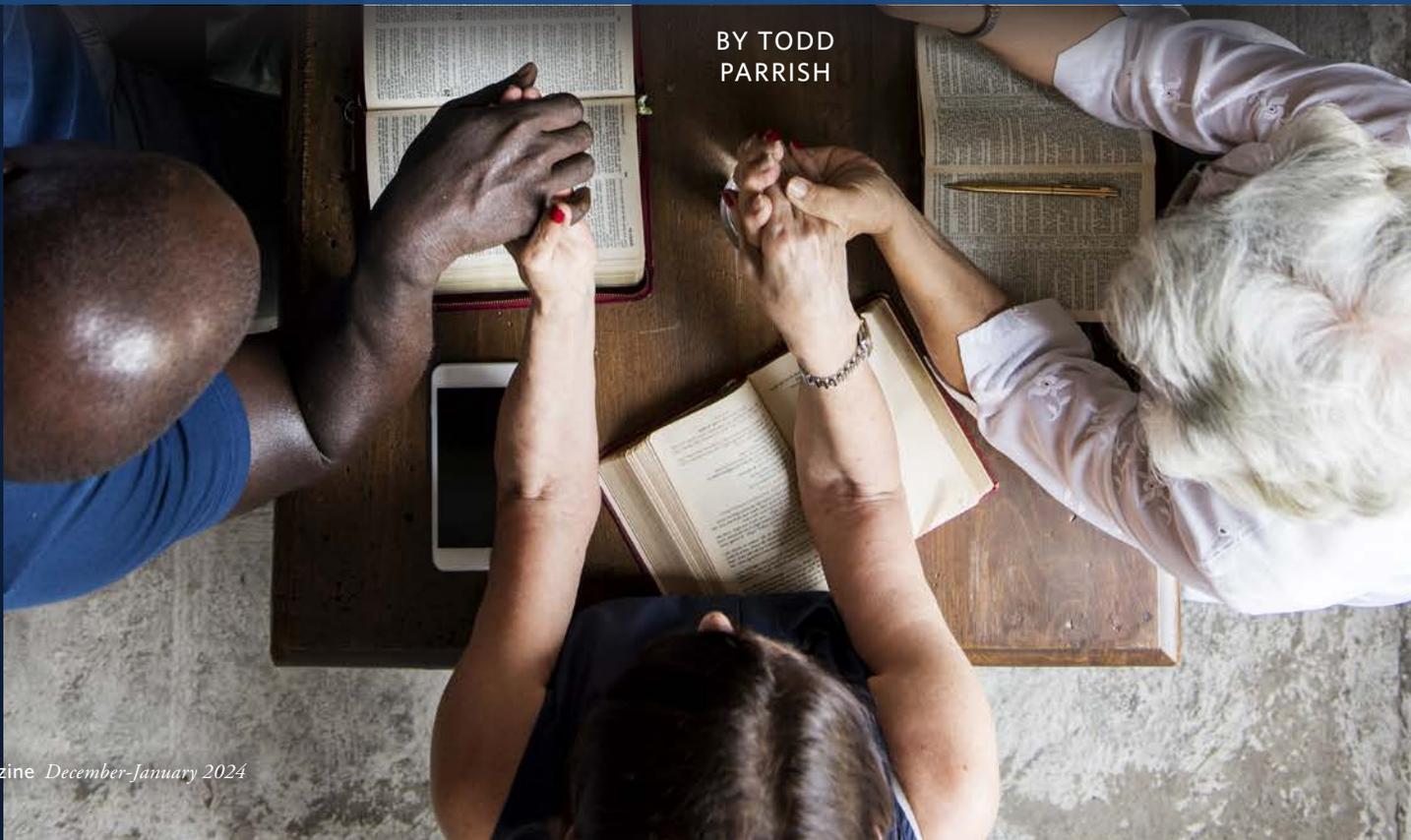
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A Necessity When
NAVIGATING
TRANSITIONS



BY TODD
PARRISH

Benjamin Franklin once said, “In this world, nothing is certain but death and taxes.”

Though not one to argue with a great man like Franklin, I would make one addition to the statesman’s list of certainties: *change*. We live in a world of change. Seasons change, people move, and young people leave high school and attend college. The church isn’t immune to change, either. Pastors come and go. Church members move away. Sadly, disgruntled members find another congregation. But there is a difference between change and transition in the life of a local church.

William Bridges, author of *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, said, “Change is situational...transition

is psychological.” In other words, we cannot keep change from taking place, but how we manage the transition is up to us. A church experiences multiple seasons of change. Pastors leave, deacons serve their terms, and new members join the church roll. The question is, “As leaders, how do we manage the transition when change occurs?” Church leaders

must have a clear, foundational focus to manage transitions well. They need to remind themselves of the biblical description of the church.

In Romans 12:4-5, the Apostle Paul reminded the church at Rome it was a *body, not a building*. The church is a living *organism, not an organization*. Paul admonished the church at Corinth to conduct themselves decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). While we may borrow organizational principles from secular business practices, we must be mindful the church isn’t, as Dr. Bob Jones, Sr., once said, “a country club with a steeple on the roof.”

Peter described Christ’s Church “as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5). Let us be warned by the words of David F. Wells in his book *The Courage to Be Protestant*: “What happens in the corporate world has not been lost on many of our church leaders today. ...Increasingly they are thinking like corporate CEOs who pursue market share and market domination, with a kind of cold,

calculating, ruthless, and steely zeal.” Wells denounces what he describes as the *Walmartization* of today’s church.

We must remember Christ’s Church is called His *bride... not a building*. Ephesian husbands were reminded to love their wives “as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it. ...That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25, 27). Understanding the biblical imagery in Scripture to describe the church, we understand leaders must incorporate the correct mentality and focus when navigating transition. Remember, *transition is psychological*.

What are helpful ideas to help a congregation journey through a pastoral change, building program, or congregational crisis like losing members due to division or disagreement? First, leaders should direct the church to enter a season of focused and fervent *prayer*. Leaders should weave prayer into the fabric of local church life. Engaging the church in *public prayer* will prove helpful. Mention the specific manner of church transition in public prayer from the pulpit, during mid-week prayer service, or in Sunday School or small group meetings. “Let’s be mindful to pray for our pulpit committee and prospective pastors during this time of transition” would be a wonderful reminder to offer in all phases of corporate worship if the church is looking for a new shepherd to lead them.

Second, leaders should encourage members to incorporate prayer for the transition during private prayer times. Deacons and other leaders should promote and exemplify prayer in the homes of church members. When we pray over our meal or lead our children during family devotions, we provide excellent opportunities to pray for the church during transitions. Leaders, allow your children to hear you pray for your church when it is journeying through transitions.

Third, leaders should not only concentrate on *public prayer* and *private prayer* during times of church transition but should engage in *planned prayer* opportunities. During one of my previous pastorates, our church entered a building program to renovate and expand the facilities. We engaged in a capital campaign to raise over \$750,000...a colossal task for the congregation.

We cannot keep change from taking place, but how we manage the transition is up to us.

Before soliciting the first pledge or raising the first dollar, we planned opportunities to call the church to prayer. The congregation enlisted a volunteer prayer team who developed a 31-day prayer calendar including various needs within the church, not only the building program. The congregation prayed every day of the month for their pastor and his family, for other leaders, for spiritual needs, and for great opportunities to impact Christ's Kingdom the enlarged facilities would provide.

Our congregation set aside a daily prayer time. We encouraged people to set an alarm on their phones or create some other reminder to pray for the church and its mission during the specified time. The prayer team visited every home in the church membership during our season of planned prayer, asking church members to put personal and family needs on the prayer cards provided. Later, the prayer team collected the prayer cards. After all requests had been collected, the church held a 24-hour prayer vigil at the church beginning on a Friday evening and continuing through the next evening. Church members signed up for 30-minute slots of time. When the church family arrived for their assigned time, prayer

team members met them at the altar where the compiled prayer requests were waiting.

The results were staggering. People began coming to Christ in the weeks following the vigil. Many prayer requests were answered in the following days. And almost as an afterthought, the capital campaign was a huge success, with church members freely pledging to help. The campaign consultant later told me it was the most successful campaign he had ever witnessed. Most capital campaigns are considered successful if they reach 75-80% of their goal. Through the faithfulness of God and His people, we realized nearly 100% of the goal set by the congregation.

As leaders, we often cannot manage *why* or *when* change occurs. But we can manage *how* we navigate the transition. Renewing our minds regarding what the Scriptures teach about the nature of the church and realizing the congregation's need for intense and intentional prayer will allow leaders to guide the congregation safely through times of transition. 

About the Writer: Todd Parrish is vice president for Institutional Advancement at Welch College. Learn more: welch.edu.

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80	7.6%	80/80	6.5%
85	8.7%	85/85	7.7%
90	9.7%	90/90	9.4%

The Legacy of Two Georges

BY RON HUNTER JR., PH.D.

On July 4, 1776, two pivotal Georges stood on opposite ends of the leadership spectrum. George Washington, soon-to-be leader of the emerging United States, championed unity, while across the ocean, King George III of Britain overlooked monumental shifts in the world around him.

Washington, even before his 1789 election, commanded the Continental Army. Meanwhile, King George III began his rule in 1760 and remained Britain's monarch until 1820. In 1774, Virginia voters elected Washington to be their representative to Congress. Washington and other fervent and brilliant leaders from the 13 colonies faced the formidable task of constructing a nation. While revolutions often glorify lone rangers and renegades, real strength lies in collaboration. Congressional members clashed but also collaborated. Each understood the dire consequences of disunity.



BIBLE VERSES

Proverbs 27:17

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Philippians 2:3-4

1 Corinthians 12:12

1 Corinthians 12:14-17

1 Corinthians 12:18-19

1 Corinthians 12:20-25

1 Corinthians 12:26-27

LEADERSHIP QUOTE

"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

—African Proverb

Washington's ability to unify in the face of adversity stood out as a character quality. Rather than asserting his voice in drafting new policies, he allowed others to draft language policies defining a new nation. After countless debates, the leaders inked their commitment to the Declaration of Independence, officially parting from Britain.

Yet, on that same pivotal day, July 4, 1776, King George III penned in his journal: "Nothing happened." His obliviousness starkly contrasted with the fiery passion of Washington and other colonial leaders. The monarch overlooked the birth of a nation while allowing his own to splinter.



Interestingly, we say, "The United States *is*" a mighty nation. Grammatically, the verb should be the plural "are," but the singular verb embodies unity. The United States stands as one, not a ragtag collection of states. It is this unity we must cherish and defend, especially today as a denomination.

Learn from the two Georges: embrace the spirit of collaboration, even amidst disagreements. Understand the power of being part of something bigger rather than standing distant, missing the tide of what could be significant, collective change. One George led while the other withdrew. Choose to be part of greatness, not aloof from it. 

About the Columnist: Ron Hunter Jr. has a Ph.D. in leadership and is CEO of D6 Family Ministry. You may contact him at ron.hunter@randallhouse.com.



Who Is Influencing Whom:

CHURCH OR SPORTS?

BY GREG
FAWBUSH

The church and sports have battled for supremacy in society since the days of the early church. The early church opposed sports because of its focus on idolatry, immorality, and dualism, which negatively influenced society. Subsequent eras brought new questions regarding Christian engagement with sport. When Christianity became the official religion in Rome in the early 4th century, a renewed priority on virtuous living emerged. This meant considering daily activities, like sports, and asking, “If I engage in this, either as a spectator or as a participant, over time, will it make me more or less godly?”

The years following the Protestant Reformation brought the most tension between church and sports. The influence of the Puritans after the Protestant Reformation forced the church to reevaluate Christian involvement in sports activities. Roman Catholics and Protestants had differences of opinion regarding playing sports on Sundays. For the Catholics, sports following the Sunday service was not only accepted but celebrated. Puritans, on the other hand, viewed Sunday as a day set aside for devotion. Sporting activities were viewed as unacceptable on the Lord’s Day. (This remains a contentious debate in the church today.)

Arguments could be made for or against Christian involvement in sports. Each perspective has validity and often results in passionate debate on the topic. However, even those in favor of sports have a hard time denying the negative influence sports has on church attendance.

In recent decades, youth sports have become a dominant force in America. The rise of year-round “travel ball” creates a tenuous relationship between families and the church. For many pastors, confrontation over sports is an ongoing battle with their congregations. Scripture is clear: faithful church attendance is expected. The writer of Hebrews teaches us attending church should be the normal behavior of every Christian (Hebrews 10:24-25). Sadly, this biblical command often fails to take root in hearts.

Today, many parents and pastors alike feel as though church is in competition with sports. And, at a practical level, it is. Remember several important factors when considering this competition. First, the love of sports will never go away. Sporting competitions can be traced to early accounts of human activity. (For instance, the sport of grappling or wrestling is described in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, written in 2000 BC, describing a character who lived between 2800 and 3000 BC.) Second, with the growth of technological connectivity and social media, the focus on sports will only increase, not decrease. Finally, by their very nature, sports are structured to win, because everything about sports is built around competition. If a church is going to compete successfully for the hearts and souls of sports enthusiasts, these three factors must be considered.

Successful sports teams spend time developing a gameplan. They study their opponents, develop specific plans of action, and provide tools and training to carry out the plan. The church does not have to lose in this competition with

sports. With the correct strategies, a proper balance can be achieved in the lives of those for whom we are competing.

Perhaps the most effective way to address the sports “elephant in the room” is to have the hard conversation. Too often, the subject of church attendance is only addressed from the pulpit. That can be counterproductive, when those missing church (whether for sporting events or some other reason) are not there to hear it. Even if they are in attendance, they feel targeted. Perhaps a better approach is a straightforward, personal conversation.

Sports is one of the few places left in our society where hard conversations are still commonplace. If a player is not meeting expectations, a coach or teammate is likely to share some “straight talk” regarding the lackluster performance. With this mindset, sporting parents and players may be more open to a private conversation where their “performance” as church members is addressed. Be sure to cover several important topics. First, ask why this family needs to miss church for sporting events, especially youth sports. Often, the parent will steer the conversation towards the lessons sports teaches, such as quality friendship and self-discipline. What a great opportunity to explain how a healthy local church is also built around these important areas of life.

Often, families honestly do not understand how missing church negatively affects them. They see sports as a place where their child takes part in a community with common goals, develops a strong work ethic, and learns the importance of self-sacrifice for the common good of others. All of these are true, but they do not

outweigh long-term consequences of sporadic church attendance. Although children may see physical and relational growth through sports, their lack of spiritual growth will be a far greater loss.

Just like in sports, several “stat lines” are directly linked to spiritual maturity. Church attendance is one of those stats. Growing in faith is directly linked to faithful church attendance. Just as a player can never be successful in sports without being faithful to practices, training, and games, the same is true of spiritual growth.

This hard conversation will make it possible for the family to see your real motives, to know they are not just “a number on a board” but a real priority to their pastor. Hard conversations lead to real results. It is important to remember this type of conversation means you are asking them to go against the norm. You may be asking them to give up close friendships or the sport they love and in which they excel.

However, if church is going to compete successfully for the hearts of its families, we must be willing to tackle this conversation! Too often, the church simply forfeits the game because they are unwilling to compete.

Yes, church can influence sports. So, let’s get started—one hard conversation at a time. **ONE**

About the Writer: Greg Fawbush is athletic director and men’s basketball coach at Welch College. Learn more about athletics at Welch College: www.welch.edu/athletics.





ELLIE

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

AND ELI

BY TODD PARRISH

Ellie Simpson and **Eli Williams** don't share much in common. Ellie grew up in the shadow of a major city in the Midwest. Eli was raised in the valley of the Buttahatchee River in northwest Alabama. While both are juniors at Welch, Eli came to Welch from pastoring a small church, while Ellie's dad continues to pastor a growing church in Fenton, Missouri. Ellie is pursuing a degree in business administration; Eli is studying theology and pastoral ministry as a part of Welch's B.A.-to-M.Div. program.



Though these two students come from different backgrounds and have various academic pursuits, they share one thing in common: they wish to become leaders for Christ wherever He may ask them to go and whatever He may ask them to do. I recently had an opportunity to hear the hearts of these young leaders.

Why Welch?

Ellie: I always wanted to attend Welch. I went to a larger public high school where students are quickly forgotten, and morality is more a suggestion than a way of life. I felt very lonely in high school. While I participated in many activities (cheerleading, student council, DECA club), high school was just a stepping stone to Welch, where I found the close Christian community I craved.

Eli: I was pastoring a small church in Hamilton when President Pinson visited the area. A good friend knew I was pastoring that little church in the woods and was in the service where Dr. Pinson was preaching. My friend knew more Bible and theological training would help me, and he connected me with the president. Welch reached out immediately when they found out about me. I remember thinking, “Wow, these guys really want me! I wonder why?” I soon discovered it was because training young preachers was what they are all about. Even though I didn’t attend Welch for two more years due to the pandemic, God made it abundantly clear Welch was the place for me. And I haven’t been happier.

Welch College’s mission is to educate leaders to serve Christ, His Church, and His world through biblical thought and life. What about Welch’s mission appealed to you?

Eli: I was attracted by Welch’s mission because it’s my mission, too. Ever since I was a young teen, I wanted to teach and preach, which called for study. The more I learned, the more I discovered how little I knew. Imagine my surprise when I read how Welch College was dedicated to training young men and women in godly living and finding God’s call for life, whether in vocational ministry or secular occupations.

Ellie: Again, coming from a public school background, the idea of learning about theology from an academic standpoint, to study the Bible in class, was attractive to me. I wanted a smaller community where I would be surrounded by other students who held the same views as I did and grew up similarly to me.

How has Welch prepared you for service?

Ellie: I have had the opportunity to serve in many areas of student leadership during my time at Welch. Currently,

I am the student body vice-president. These opportunities force me to be mindful of my free time and learn the aspects of time management. I love being a part of each position and the benefits that come along with them. I’ve had to balance my social life, academics, and work. I have learned much about workforce expectations and prioritizing the important things.

Eli: I am observant and think critically about what I see. Being at Welch College, where the Scriptures are lived out vividly, has informed me deeply of God’s expectations for His servants and provided practical examples of those standards and convictions when pursued with excellence. I am currently the student body chaplain. I have the joy and responsibility of preaching to fellow students and caring for their spiritual health and well-being.

What is the best part of being a student at Welch College?

Eli: The best part of Welch life is the community. If anybody tells you something different, they’re wrong! The students at this school, especially the faculty and staff, are committed to godliness. When you collect so many sincere believers in one place and nurture them with prayer and sound doctrine, there is a radiation of peace and love for those willing to receive it.

Ellie: Being around others searching for God’s calling in their lives has been an enormous blessing. I am often reminded how I represent Christ in my everyday life. The example I set for those around me makes me aware of my actions and words. Welch’s mission to train leaders to serve Christ is so engrained in me as I go about my studies that it shapes how I see everything I do.

What would you tell a high school student considering Welch College?

Ellie: Welch will give you the opportunity and space to grow into a godly, mature, healthy young adult with a solid understanding of faith in Christ. The Christian faith and the world of academics are not separate worlds that co-exist at Welch; they complement one another and are brought together and taught through a biblical lens. And some of the most incredible friends you will ever make will be found at Welch College. You will learn so much about yourself and what it looks like to mature in your walk with Christ.

Eli: Some of the best advice I've been given is, "Take action like your life depends upon it, because it will." When we enter the real world, we become responsible for many real-world decisions previously beyond our control. When Christian teenagers attend college, they begin to make adult decisions that shape the rest of their lives. This takes discipline and discipleship. Welch College is dedicated to discipling young Christian leaders, so they can honor God and pursue Christlikeness no matter their calling. Welch College—the students, faculty, and staff—will help you grow in your walk with Christ while you are preparing to serve in His Kingdom. Trust your college years to Welch if you want to grow with excellence in a Christian community.

What would you say to a parent whose student is considering Welch?

Eli: For the sake of releasing more bright lights into the secular world, let your students be trained in the Scriptures, with the means of grace, and in an incredible Christian community, so they will be more effective salt and light.

Ellie: Be open-minded to the opportunities open to your students at Welch. Do not be deterred by the stigma sometimes attached to smaller Christian colleges. At Welch, your students will get a solid, accredited degree worth your investment. At the same time, they will be safe, well cared for, and trained appropriately for what and who the Lord wants them to be.

Abraham Lincoln commented that if given one hour to chop down a tree, he would spend 45 minutes sharpening his axe. Ellie and Eli know the value of spending the time necessary to sharpen themselves at Welch College to be more effective in Christ's Kingdom. These young leaders are just a small example of the dedicated young men and women who make up Welch College's Christian community of faith and learning. For more information about Welch, visit www.welch.edu. **ONE**

About the Writer: Todd Parrish is vice president for institutional advancement at Welch College. Learn more about Welch College: www.welch.edu.

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Welch College Ranked Second in Social Mobility by *U.S. News & World Report*

Welch College recently received notification it has been ranked second in social mobility and 17th overall among Best Regional Colleges–South in the 2024 edition of *U.S. News and World Report’s Best Colleges*, according to President Matt Pinson.

The social mobility ranking measures the percentage of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who graduate. The Regional Colleges–South category comprises 98 other colleges and universities in the South.

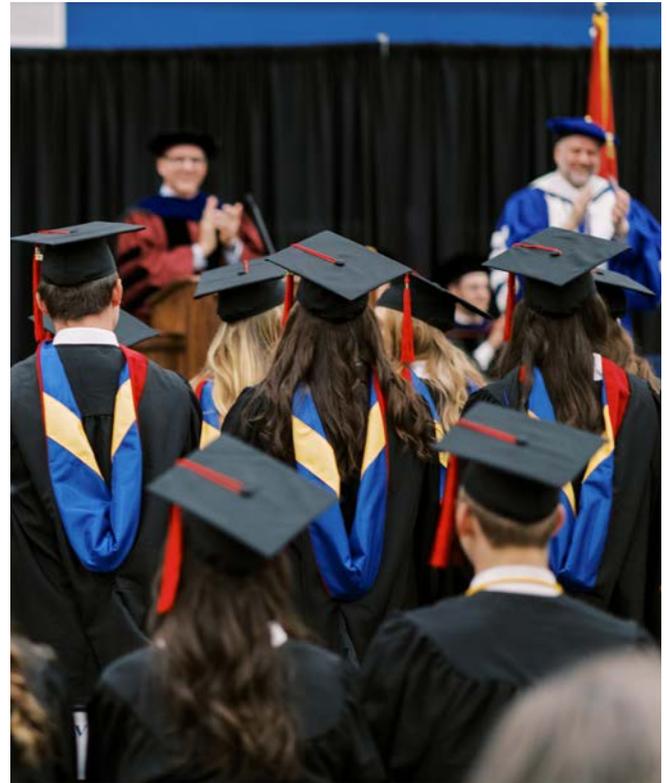
“We’re delighted Welch remains highly ranked by *U.S. News Best Colleges*,” President Pinson said. “This communicates to prospective students, parents, and alumni alike that we value excellence, that the education students receive at Welch is competitive, solid, and recognized in the academic community.”

The Best Regional Colleges category includes institutions focused on teaching undergraduate students. These schools offer a range of degree programs in the liberal arts and in professional fields.

“Colleges go up and down in these rankings each year,” Pinson said. “When we first entered the rankings 13 years ago, we were ranked 52nd. Then five years ago we increased to 26th, after which we’ve consistently been in the top 20. Our ranking at 17th is exciting.”

“We are thankful to be ranked in the top 17% of our category,” Provost Matthew McAfee said. “Our faculty and staff work hard to offer students excellence in Christian higher education. This ranking is evidence of their commitment.”

U.S. News rankings judge the relative quality of institutions based on widely accepted indicators of excellence in higher education: what peer institutions think of the institution, how many freshmen return their sophomore year, how many later graduate, student-faculty ratio, faculty quality, financial resources, how many economically challenged students graduate, and more.



“To put our ranking in perspective,” Pinson concluded, “the ten institutions ranked directly above us have an average enrollment about three times higher than Welch’s and an average endowment about nine times higher than Welch’s. We’re striving to be good stewards of the resources God has given us.”

Out of 99 institutions in the category, Welch received especially high marks in four strategic areas, ranking as follows:

- 1st in student-faculty ratio (tied)
- 2nd in graduation rate for economically challenged students
- 3rd in ACT/SAT scores
- 5th in freshman retention

For more information about Welch, email gotowelch@welch.edu or visit www.welch.edu. **ONE**

Giving Gen Z a New Perspective

BY NATE ALTOM

I started preaching when I was 14 years old, pastoring at 18, and church planting at 24. While I don't think I have done any of those *right* yet, at least I have a little experience and understanding of what "doing them right" looks like. Raised in church in Arkansas, I spent my teen years at church in the Midwest, attended Bible college in Nashville, and have planted two churches near Pittsburgh. My point? I have seen the American church from almost every angle.

Many times, in my church experience, churches reach a crossroads where culture intersects tradition. In the past, I have sometimes chosen a "side," fought loudly for "my team," and then watched the other team break away to start their own church. I am not referring to issues where the Bible speaks clearly. Quite frankly, those are easy to deal with. I am describing those difficult generational transitions when old traditions and preferences get pushed out and replaced with new ones. Often, during those (admittedly difficult) transitions, people leave the church.

Right now, however, an entire generation is leaving the church. What can we do about it?

I do better when I can see what I am learning, not just *hear* it. This has informed how and what I teach each week. For instance, in Ezekiel 34, we find the parable of the scattered sheep. Although this parable is not directly about church disagreements, it informs my understanding of this issue. I see the connection between Ezekiel's sheep and our congregations. Like sheep, if people are not getting what they need from the shepherds assigned to care for them, they will scatter and leave the flock.

This is especially true of Gen Z. Statistics show, like the biblical sheep, this generation has grown increasingly discontented and disconnected from the church, scattering to seek truth elsewhere. Truthfully, I have learned more from Ezekiel's sheep analogy than from a three-year dissertation study. Ezekiel went beyond the problem and provided a solution.

As pastors, teachers, and church leaders, we need to rethink *who* we are trying to reach and *how* we are trying to reach them. We may be tempted to conclude Gen Z is just "missing it" and needs to get with the program. Or we can ask, "How can I change to reach those who need to be reached?"

Give Gen Z a new perspective.

What do people see when you teach? Jesus washed His disciples' feet, told stories to illustrate important points, and used meals as object lessons. The Old Testament Tabernacle (and later the Temple) was an unforgettable spectacle because the stories of God's faithfulness came to life through artistic imagery, gardens, furniture, and decorations all pointing to God's might and sovereignty. I'm sure those who worshiped in those places saw, smelled, and heard things they never forgot. Even today, if you talk to individuals from a tradition where incense was burned in their church, they will tell you the moment they smell it they still think of that church.

How can we help Gen Z "see" and not just hear Jesus? If you don't know how to aim a camera, edit a video, or (at the least) clean the camera lens on your phone before you take that blurry selfie, please be encouraged by my words. Not all "seeing" is visual. But ask yourself, what do people see when you teach or preach?



Maybe any talk about technology makes you instantly anxious. How can you learn what you need to know about reaching this tech-savvy generation? Growing up as an artist and visual person, I felt left out at church. I never found a place for my perspective. Therefore, I never used that part of me to serve the church, thinking it wasn't needed. But every gift is important to God.

In Exodus 31, during the construction of the Tabernacle, the creative gifts of artisans were celebrated, and these craftsmen were described as "filled...with the Spirit of God (Exodus 31:3)." Fast-forward to Ephesians 4:11-13, where the roles of the pastor and church leaders were described as equipping the saints for the work of ministry.

How can we engage Gen Z? Show them—even those with unusual gifts and talents—they are a part of the Body of Christ, with beautiful gifts to reach others. Put them to

How can we engage Gen Z? Show them—even those with unusual gifts and talents—they are a part of the Body of Christ, with beautiful gifts to reach others. Put them to work! Jesus didn't just tell His followers "Know this" or "Understand this." He also said, "Do this with me."

work! Jesus didn't just tell His followers "Know this" or "Understand this." He also said, "Do this with me."

I have attended many church growth conferences that taught me how to "do things better" on Sunday mornings. But at this stage in life, after decades of complaining people treat the church like a show rather than the team to which they belong, I think we must learn from Jesus' example. In the Gospels, we see Jesus not only preached and taught with excellence, He also engaged people. Meeting them where they were, addressing their felt needs, and putting them to work for the Kingdom using their unique gifts and talents.

What's the conclusion? It's time to reconnect with the disconnected, scattered sheep—people who have left the church. Like Jesus, meet them at the point of their need, give them a place to belong in the sheepfold, and invite them to join you in the work of the Kingdom.

Why is it so important to find new ways to reach Gen Z? First, because this generation needs Jesus. But we must also remember the terrifying conclusion to the parable of the scattered sheep in Ezekiel 34. God offered a chilling ultimatum (in my own words): "Fine! If you won't be the shepherds you are supposed to be, I will do it myself" (Ezekiel 34:11-16).

Then Jesus came. **ONE**

About the Columnist: Nate Altom is the lead pastor of Keystone FWB Church in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Nate was part of the church planting team that started Keystone Church. He and his wife Jenna have two children. Learn more: fwbnam.com.





FEEDING THE HUNGRY...

TO LEARN

BY ANNA FOX

Imagine going to sleep after arriving in America, knowing your children will be safe for the first time when they go to school tomorrow. You rest easy, realizing the likelihood of your home being burglarized while you're at work is slim. You left everything you knew to offer your family a better life.

However, new challenges soon arise.

You don't speak the language. Communicating with your employer and your child's teacher is almost impossible. Grocery shopping is a challenge. Most everyone you encounter is unaware of your situation. They avoid you because they can't communicate with you (which makes them uncomfortable), or they are rude because you don't speak the language. You long for a friend, someone to help and love you so life isn't so hard and lonely. You start to attend English classes to make the best of this new life.

This is the background of many of the students who attend English as a Second Language (ESL) at our church. They live hard lives with demanding jobs and are trying their best. They are hungry to learn and even hungrier for someone to love on them. The first few weeks of class are frightening for both students and teachers. You start building a bond one word or one phrase at a time. The students begin to feel more comfortable and ask more questions. We help our students succeed in living in America by helping with everything from job applications to school information packets. This is a tangible way of being the hands and feet of Jesus.

For instance, one unit taught the names of rooms, and students learned the words kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, and living room. Then, we came to rooms in the workplace. When I mentioned the word *breakroom*, I saw a puzzled look on one student's face. She asked, "What room is this?"

I explained the *breakroom* is where employees eat lunch together. Tears filled her eyes, and through broken English, she explained she thought the breakroom was the bathroom. For months, she thought her employer was asking her to eat lunch in the bathroom. That evening, due to ESL classes, she left feeling more valued and appreciated than when she entered. Another student, with tears from laughter at my botched pronunciation of an Arabic word, said, "I need you in my life; you bring laughter!"

Most Wednesday evenings, The Grove Church is filled with diligent, laughing students. Of course, the laughter is mainly at me as I navigate learning Arabic and Spanish during our breaks. It is rewarding to watch students learn new skills that will help them at home, at work, or with their children. Our class runs from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m., with one break. We take 15 minutes to rest and then 15 minutes for Bible time. The Bible time is also in English, but we plant seeds as they practice English words. We recently finished the ABCs of God. How wonderful to hear students repeating phrases like, "God is all-knowing, beautiful, creative..." We meet physical needs. Hopefully, we also meet spiritual needs.

ESL classes are easy to start. Our church had been praying about ways to reach our community. After participating in Know Your Community, a resource the Executive Office offers in partnership with Church Answers, the demographics around us revealed English classes were needed in our area.

GETTING STARTED

Once you make the decision to start ESL classes, let your church know you need volunteers. *Anyone* can be a volunteer. Volunteers can teach, be assistant teachers, bring snacks, befriend students during break time, and help them practice English. If you do not have enough volunteers from the church,



open it up to the community. Post on community Facebook pages you are seeking ESL teachers.

Next, assess the space of your facility and how many students you can accept. Our church can host 20 students. Childcare is another consideration. Unfortunately, we cannot offer childcare, and we let our students know that upfront.

ASSESSING THE COST

The budget for ESL can be adjusted according to the financial ability of the church. The initial expenses come from purchasing curriculum and classroom materials. However, it is also important to charge the students for the class. It does not have to be much, but it needs to be something. The reason is twofold: first, it gives the students investment in the class, and second, it lets the students know the costs involved, and they want to avoid taking advantage of the host.

FINDING THE TIME THAT WORKS FOR YOU

ESL classes should meet once a week at a minimum. Offering multiple classes each week is better but not always

possible. Due to the other ministries at The Grove, we only offer classes on Wednesday evenings. Since we only offer classes weekly, we make the class time two hours.

ESL is such a rewarding ministry! It is exciting to watch a mother learn to communicate effectively with her child's teacher or a new citizen learn how to be a more efficient employee. ESL involves far more than speaking and understanding English; it teaches American culture, proper etiquette, and...the gospel.

Matthew 28:19 commands Christians to go and make disciples of all nations. What a privilege to live in a place where the nations have been brought to us. Obey the command. Rise, go, and reach all nations. ESL is a great tool available to you. 

About the Writer: Anna Fox works in the Executive Office where she maintains a database of all pastors and churches and serves as registration coordinator for the National Convention. Anna works alongside her husband Levi at The Grove Church in Smyrna, Tennessee. She is a mom to Hallie Jo and Baby Fox, who is in Heaven. In addition to ESL, Anna also directs the nursery and preschool ministry.



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Praying Through

BY BRADLEY MERCER

Sitting over lunch with my family and fiancé Madison at our local Cracker Barrel, I received a text from Aaron Pontius. As the waitress circled the table that day in July 2022, I read, “Hey man, do you have a few minutes to talk? I have something to run by you.”

Aaron, a cherished friend, had recently transitioned from his role as a student pastor in Nashville, Tennessee, to pastoring the Rejoice Church in Columbia, Missouri. I’d served alongside Aaron in student ministry at The Donelson Fellowship in Nashville and learned under his leadership. We have a great relationship, but his text was unexpected. I immediately thought, “Oh boy, Aaron wants me to move up there and become his youth pastor.”

What he wanted was far from anything I would have guessed.

Something to Pray Through

Later that night, Aaron and I spoke over the phone. His church is near Mizzou (University of Missouri). Learning how culturally diverse the school is, Aaron had an idea, nothing more. He knew my experience among other cultures and my heart for the unreached. He invited me to “pray through” what it would look like for me to move to Columbia to minister to the diverse Mizzou community. He offered the potential use of Rejoice Church to host events for the international students studying in Columbia.

I immediately began to cry. Little did Aaron know I had already begun a prayer journey. I wondered how the Lord wanted me to use my diverse cultural experiences. I’ve served in Japan and Cuba, ministered across two American Indian reservations, and led ministries in the local church. “Father, here I am. Send me wherever you want me to go,” I prayed. Then questioned, “What do you want me to do?”

Aaron’s invitation presented the opportunity to influence a college campus where more than 50 countries are represented. What a testament to how God hears and answers our prayers according to His perfect plan! Needless to say, I responded, “Yes! Let’s pray through it together.”

Our shared prayers soon led to a conversation about how to make it happen. I opened discussions with IM, Inc. about requirements to serve through them. I met with their leadership team and met with the board. After board approval, I began raising support early in 2023. Finally, I transitioned to Columbia, Missouri, September 13 to begin field work as a missionary to international students. I launched The Axis and currently work with IM through a ministry partnership.

Fields White With Harvest (John 4:35)

Over a million international students call U.S. colleges and universities home for several critical years of their lives. The good news? This number is rapidly increasing. However, international student presence across the United States is growing faster than the number of disciple-makers for these students is growing across our denomination. Students travel from all over the world. They travel from countries closed to Christianity. They emigrate from the countries we send missionaries and countries where we have not yet sent missionaries.

These students bring expectations. Obviously, they expect to reach their desired level of education for future jobs. They also want to practice English-speaking skills. They hope to learn American tradition and culture. They anticipate making American friends. Many envisage a variety of other expectations. Could it be, within these students' expectations, the church has an opportunity to instill the truth of the gospel into the hearts and minds of these who are already searching for so much? Absolutely.

Unfortunately, their expectations are only partly met. Yes, they will gain their education and acquire jobs if they remain diligent in their studies. They may experience a freedom never enjoyed in their country of origin. Yet, 80% of international students never feel welcomed into an American home.

I often share this glaring statistic with fellow laborers, then ask, "How does this make you feel as a disciple-maker?" The most common responses are "sad" or "ashamed." I agree. As Christ's Church, we sometimes seem blind to the opportunities around us. The opportunity to minister to the uttermost parts of the earth in our very own backyards may never have been on our radars. After reading this article, it should be.

My plea to every reader is to step up to the plate and



 **The Axis, Columbia**

 **@theaxis573**

 **bmercer@iminc.org**

respond. Many people across our denomination seek opportunities to minister from their own homes. According to a 3 for 30 survey completed in May 2023, 32 Free Will Baptist churches are located within a 10-minute drive of a residential college. This offers a prime opportunity to not only have an impact on an individual, but also to play a part in a revival across the nations.

The Axis' Mission and Vision

Our mission with The Axis is to make disciples of international students attending culturally diverse colleges and universities nationwide. When the time comes for these students to return home, we want them to have a relationship with Christ and possess the beautiful conviction of continuing the disciple-making process—reaching those of their native tribes and tongues. This represents discipleship multiplication on a global scale. Our vision is to mobilize international student missionaries from these multi-cultural college communities all over the United States, partnering with a local church for ministry operation.

An Invitation

We are praying God will open the door for a second Axis missionary by 2025. I invite you to **pray through this** with me! Ask God if you should work full-time in international student ministry. Not everyone will be called to work in full-time ministry. However, anyone who lives near a college campus can minister.

Ask God to show you how He can use you to impact the nations at your local college or university. Find out if your nearby college has international students. Volunteer with student organizations serving international students. Engage in English conversation partnerships. Offer your home as a home-away-from-home. Ask God how He wants to use you, and He will answer. **ONE**

About the Writer: Bradley Mercer received board approval in 2022 as a missionary to international students at the University of Missouri.


Mizzou University
(2023 STATISTICS)

31,318 Students
Represents **100+**
countries



“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

Romans 8:28

The Long and Winding Road (Back) **to SAINT SÉBASTIEN**



BY JONATHAN CHEREAU

The verse above summarizes our calling to ministry. My wife Michelle is from Ecuador. She, her mother, and her two siblings immigrated to Spain for a better life. I am French and grew up in a Christian family. We had different ways of seeing life as we grew up.

Though worlds apart, God brought the two of us together in 2006 in Madrid, Spain. At the time, I worked with Operation Mobilization (OM; a mission organization) in Nantes, France. OM organized a mission trip to Spain with the Saint Sébastien Church youth group to visit IM missionaries in the Madrid area. I was not planning to go on the trip, but at the last moment, a seat became available. OM asked me to participate as one of the leaders of the trip as part of my



ongoing training. Michelle and I encountered one another several times during our visit and activities in Spain. We exchanged emails and kept in touch after the trip.

Before long, I decided to move to Spain to be close to her. The Lord let me find a job in Spain. We dated then married in 2012, starting our life together. A year later, our first daughter Zoe arrived. The next year, Michelle graduated from college. However, we barely survived on my one small salary. We decided to move to France to seek better opportunities for our family.

I really struggled with this idea; I loved life in Spain. But we moved forward with the plan. I found a job quickly as a restaurant manager. We began attending Saint Sébastien FWB Church. Missionaries Robert and Judy Bryan were helping the church after it had experienced many problems. Then, in 2017, Robert began to prepare for retirement, looking for a team to lead the church because we didn't have a pastor to take over. In the beginning, four couples formed a leadership team. During a church business meeting, some members began to discuss the future of the church. Some people felt strongly that it was time to close the church.

I remember sitting in the back because I arrived late from work. The atmosphere was charged with tension. Some people wanted to continue the church; others didn't. After listening for a time, I felt moved to lift my hand and ask to speak. I told the congregation we needed to step up as church members and put maximum effort into continuing the church, to shoulder our responsibility.

At the end of the meeting, we voted to keep the church functioning. This moment marked a shift in our focus. The four couples on the leadership team worked together to carry out responsibilities. Time passed, and we felt the need to have a full-time missionary in the church. Initially, Michele and I didn't feel it was our place, our calling, to lead. Since arriving at Saint Sébastien, we had struggled to determine why God wanted us in France. I didn't like my job; Michelle couldn't find work.

Michelle and I began talking at length about the idea of being missionaries. We started praying about it. We also began turning to other people for advice. We felt the need to have someone full-time at the church and wondered if maybe God just wanted us to step up. The need was cer-

tainly obvious. Robert shared three prayers with us to help decide if God really was calling us. First, ask God to show us His plan for us. Second, pray if this decision was His will we would have peace and wisdom in the situation. And third, pray for God to open doors to make it clear it was His will.

In October 2018, I sat in my apartment with Robert Bryan, Dennis Teague, and Douglas Randlett, talking about the future. Douglas looked at Michelle and me and said, "I see you in the U.S. this summer." However, nothing was settled or approved. We didn't even have a glimpse of being missionaries. However, in April 2019 we met with the IM board and received approval as interns to come to the U.S. in July. Once again, we were reminded when you follow God's will, He opens doors. God accomplishes everything according to His purpose.

So, we started our journey as missionaries. It wasn't easy. I had to resign from my job. We gave up our apartment and put everything in the church garage during the time we were in the U.S. We spent three exciting months traveling, speaking in churches, and meeting people.

We returned to France ready to conquer the world for Christ! We had so many ideas, but COVID arrived right after our return. It was a difficult start to our ministry. Or, as Dennis Teague told us many times, "Welcome to ministry!"

Our own enthusiasm for ministry was not at the same level as the other leaders in the church. If you know me, I get a little too excited when I have big ideas. We prayed for guidance, but all of us felt we were not on the same page. Our leadership team dissolved right in the middle of the pandemic, and we suddenly found ourselves in charge of the church.

I remember looking around and asking myself if this really was what God wanted for us. This moment in our internship was the hardest time we have had. We lost friends. We shed tears. We felt powerless. For the first time as a family, we wandered in the wilderness. Although everything looked hopeless, we thanked God for great leaders like Dennis and Carol Teague and coworkers like Joel and Lydie Teague, who helped us find our path and motivation to continue the work in France.

After this long and winding road, today, we work at the church in Saint Sébastien—a small, multicultural church. Our members share the desire to serve God together. We have couples from Africa, South America, and France. It's amazing how people with such diverse backgrounds enjoy being together to worship God and grow spiritually.

During training, we were told, "Find something you are good at, that your community likes, and you have a bridge to your community." We wanted to build that bridge to our community. Something God could use to reach people for Christ. Michelle has a major in English, and she has a passion for kids. So, we started outreach through "Connexion Kidz" (translated Kids Connection).

At the beginning, around ten kids attended with their mothers. This outreach provided a great opportunity for us to show how a church operates and share a testimony to our community. Everything is done in English, and we offer this for free. The kids learn a story. They enjoy games, activities, and a craft. At the end, we share a snack and good conversations around homemade pies prepared by the moms.

In 2022, when churches returned to normal after the pandemic, we began to see people turning to the church for answers. Young people read the Bible during lockdown and were seeking a church. Last year, we baptized three people, and ten new people began coming to church. Even though the pandemic was a major struggle for us, we see God's hand in every step.

Day by day, through each curve in this winding road, we see Romans 8:28 being fulfilled in our lives and ministry. God has been faithful. We trust Him and His plan for us, even though it did not happen as we planned.

We pray our church continues to grow in number, but we also pray we will be stronger in our testimony to those around us. May God give us more opportunities to build more bridges to our community. 

About the Writer: Jonathan and Michelle Chereau are currently in the States raising support for their next term of ministry at the Saint Sébastien church in the greater Nantes area of France. The couple has three daughters.



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Eagletons Transition to the States

Antioch, TN—Kenneth and Rejane Eagleton arrived in Nashville, TN, September 26, as they transition once again. Appointed as associate missionaries in 1984, the Eagletons’ ministry has spanned continents and roles.

Initially, they served in Doropo, Côte d’Ivoire, where Dr. Eagleton saw the medical clinic become a hospital with surgical capabilities led by African Christians. Kenneth taught and preached in and around Doropo during his time at the hospital. In 1998, they transitioned into leadership training and moved to Bouna, home to the Bible institute. The couple evacuated Ivory Coast in October 2002 with other missionaries because of the September coup d’état attempt and civil war.

In April 2003, the Eagletons transferred to Brazil. Rejane focused on literature translation and Kenneth on leadership training. In addition to serving as a field missionary, Kenneth served as regional director of Latin America and Africa until 2017. He then became director of global partnerships while still serving as a missionary in Brazil.

“I have worked myself out of a job as a missionary in Brazil,” Kenneth recently rejoiced. “We now have enough pastors continuing the task of leadership training, and the Bible college in Campinas has a full-time director. I am free to focus on our global partnerships.” Currently, Kenneth



supervises 12 partnerships in nine countries. Several other partnerships are in development.

IM encourages continued support of the Eagletons as missionaries through the end of 2023, as they transition to full-time office staff in 2024. **ONE**

Argentinian Church Attains Partnership Status

Antioch, TN— On October 1, 2023, IM announced a partnership with Iglesia Bautista Libre Familia de Gracia (IBLFG) in Rosario, Argentina. The goal is to empower them in their evangelism, discipleship, church planting, and leadership training efforts.

Argentina is the second largest country in South America and the third most populous. Bible-believing and teaching churches are rare. IBLFG is networking with like-minded churches in the area and doing church planting of their own. Strategically, their doctrine aligns perfectly with

Free Will Baptists, and their reach extends throughout the Spanish-speaking world as they translate FWB doctrinal books and other materials.

Kenneth Eagleton, director of field partnerships, says, “I have been impressed by the leadership of this church and the vision they have for multiplication and starting a movement of Free Will Baptists in their country. I am excited by the multiple doors of opportunity opening to them right now and glad we can come alongside them to facilitate this growth.” **ONE**



Bulgaria—The elevator in the New Life Church in Varna, Bulgaria, began operation in September. The main meeting space is on the third floor of the four-story church building. The elevator allows access without climbing three steep flights of stairs. Trif Trifonov stated, “Thank you to all who contributed to this project. It took more than a year for the company to complete it. Now moms with small kids and elderly people can finally use it. Praise God!”

India—Christians in the Uttar Pradesh region of India face extreme persecution. Several have been imprisoned. A government leader has threatened to bulldoze the meeting places, even house churches. An IM partner pled, “Pray for boldness and wisdom of the Holy Spirit to advance and at the same time...fight legally in light of our constitution.”

Hokkaido, Japan—New Life Church kicked off bi-weekly services on June 4 in a soft launch that included kids club and a weekly conversational English class. During the summer months nine guests visited.



Cuba—September 2, the churches in Mayabeque and Matanzas held a marriage retreat to build strong, lasting, and biblically-based marriages.

Uruguay—The Cristo es el Camino Church celebrated Uruguay’s “Day of the Child” on August 12 by taking their children on an outing and with a celebration at the camp property.

Panama—August 27, Pastor Cirilo baptized four men at the Buenas Nuevas FWB Church in Chitré, Panama.

Bulgaria—Attendees from all Bulgarian churches participated in the annual FWB national conference September 22-24. Gathering in Tryavna, more than 130 church members and guests hiked, played games, ate, and fellowshipped. Missionary Ken Cash challenged attendees to say “yes” to God in every aspect of their lives. One of the highlights was the baptism of seven people.

Cuba—Cuban youth enjoyed a special even called “Debaté” during their annual youth camp in September. Seminars included: Comfortable and Conforming, Transformational Leadership, and The Fear of Success.



Brazil—October 1, the Jaboticabal FWB Church celebrated the baptism of seven people.

Ivory Coast—Bouaké churches held a youth conference celebrating and honoring their young people. Teaching was followed by a prayer service lasting until 2 a.m.

Brazil—August 26, the Third FWB Church of Araras, Brazil, hosted a women’s conference and celebrated its fifth anniversary.

Ivory Coast—Three men were ordained to the pastorate during the Ivorian FWB national convention held August 21-26 in Agnibilekrou. The convention also honored Pastor Kouassi Donso who retired at the age of 83.

Ecuador—Adam and Carol Duncan celebrated the baptism of Paul in early September. They requested, “Pray for his discipleship and walk in the faith. Reaching men in the area is difficult.”

Spain—September 24, the Alpedrete congregation gathered to witness the baptism of a 16-year-old girl. “J” worked hard on her testimony and even prepared a song to play and sing. Her parents invited many unsaved friends and family. Thirty-nine of them, along with 62 church family, heard a clear presentation of the gospel from both J’s testimony and Anthony Edgmon’s sermon.



Deadly Visitation

BY PAUL V. HARRISON

“I was sick, and ye visited me” (Matthew 25:36b).

When sick rats crawled off a ship in Sicily in 1347, the infection they carried triggered the most fatal pandemic in recorded history, eventually killing an estimated 200 million people. Spread not only by vermin but also person-to-person, the Black Death struck cities with varying force. A 40% loss in population was not uncommon. Someone from Siena, Italy, wrote: “No one wept for the dead because everyone expected death himself.” For several centuries, the disease in its varied forms ravaged Europe.

Pastors faced the question of whether to risk their lives by visiting their sick and dying members. Joining many from the population at large, some ministers left their homes and posts for safer locales. In 1527, when the plague swept through Wittenberg, Martin Luther instructed ministers: “Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry such as preachers and pastors must likewise remain steadfast before the peril of death. We have a plain command from Christ, A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, but the hireling sees the wolf coming and flees (John 10:11). For when people are dying, they most need a spiritual ministry.”

Luther meant what he said, turning his own home into a hospital, even while his wife Katie was pregnant. In one letter he wrote, “There are battles without and terrors within.”

Geneva faced its own struggles as the plague periodically devastated the city. John Calvin, the famed theologian there, strongly emphasized God’s sovereignty. Commenting on Jonah’s gourd, he wrote: “It is yet ever true that the gnawings even of worms are directed

by the counsel of God, so that neither a herb nor a tree withers independently of his purpose.”

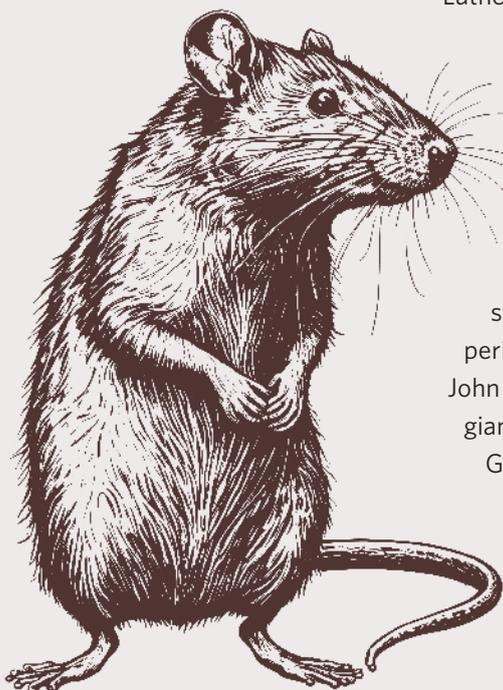
But how did such beliefs shape behavior when confronted with disease? Since sovereignty doesn’t preclude the use of reasonable means, officials strategically located their hospital several hundred yards outside the city walls.

That didn’t solve the issue of pastoral visitation of the sick. In fall 1542, in a ministerial meeting of perhaps 25, Pierre Blanchet, one of Geneva’s pastors, volunteered to make all hospital calls. No one objected. Blanchet survived the winter, but by the end of May, the plague had killed him. Finding a replacement proved nearly impossible. All felt accepting the task of visitation was accepting a death sentence.

The Geneva ministers resorted to drawing lots. Deemed irreplaceable, Calvin was ordered not to participate in the selection process. For some reason, they drew more than one name, but each of those chosen refused the task. Though such visitation “belongs to their office” as ministers, the record states, “God has still not given them the grace of strength and constancy needed to go to the said hospital.”

I believe in sovereignty, too, but sometimes my belief doesn’t carry the day either.

The impasse was broken when young Mathieu de Geneston, who had pastored only three years, volunteered to shoulder the responsibility. Sadly, the Black Death quickly took his life. Eventually, the Geneva pastors abandoned drawing lots, and each minister was asked to visit those directly under his pastoral care. Who knows how faithful they were in this? **ONE**



About the Columnist: Paul V. Harrison has pastored Madison FWB Church in Madison, Alabama, since 2015. Previously, he pastored Cross Timbers FWB church in Nashville, Tennessee, for 22 years. He was an adjunct professor at Welch College for 17 years, teaching church history and Greek. Paul is the creator of Classic Sermon Index, a subscription-based online index of over 66,000 sermons, with clients including Harvard, Baylor, and Vanderbilt, among others: classicsermonindex.com.

Rejoice Evermore!

BY BARRY RAPER

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16

Rejoice evermore. This two-word sentence is included within a series of short commands to the congregation in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 5:16-22). These are corporate commands, intended for the entire church at Thessalonica. However, these commands hold true for individual Christians, as well.

Rejoice evermore. This is a command. It is not optional. However, it also is important to note what this verse does *not* mean. It does not mean Paul commanded us to be, pardon the phrase, “happy, happy, happy” all the time, in a way that ignores or downplays the hard realities of life. Just two issues ago, while examining 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, we found a valid place for grief in the Christian life, ultimately because we are human and living in a sin-cursed world.

A quick way to get booted from a funeral home, either by the owners or the family, would be to suggest a party atmosphere, because, after all, “We are commanded to rejoice.” How silly! Ecclesiastes makes it clear human existence includes a season for everything, including a time to mourn.

Still, joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians. It comes from Him, yet this passage and others emphasize we, too, have a responsibility in rejoicing. This command is stated in imperative form and present tense. In other words, both as individuals and as a congregation we are to *keep on rejoicing*.

You may respond, “Well, some people are happy; others are grumpy, and I fall into the latter category.” No! We are all called to be joyful. This command is for all of us. This was illustrated vividly by Paul and his traveling companion Silas in the Philippian jail. The pair had every reason to complain, to focus on their mistreatment and pain. Instead, we read about them rejoicing in chains and singing praises at midnight. I can’t imagine they were muttering the words at half-volume like we sometimes do after a hectic Sunday morning. Instead, the account seems filled

with “joy unspeakable and full of glory,” in the words of hymn writer Barney E. Warren.

How do we practice joy evermore? In another passage, Paul suggested we can be *sorrowful, yet always rejoicing* (2 Corinthians 6:10). You cannot deny the tension, the two extremes possible at the same time: we experience sorrow—over the passing of a loved one, over a friend abandoning the faith, over the loss of a job—yet, at the same time, we rejoice in faith. Our rejoicing doesn’t stem from the pain and grief but supernaturally from the Holy Spirit, who works within us to help us understand what we have in Christ. While we suffer loss and disappointment in our humanity, through our suffering, we still hold everything we need in Jesus. He is the ultimate reason for joy.

The greatest example of joy in suffering is provided by Jesus as recorded by Hebrews 12:2: “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross...” Jesus is the “pioneer” of our faith. He blazed this difficult trail for us, walking in perfect faith and obedience before us, showing us how to live with joy by faith in Him.

How did Jesus reach the point where He could cry out from the cross in victory: “It is finished”? The author of Hebrews says Jesus endured “for the joy that was set before him.” Of course, this joy didn’t stem from the pain of the cross or being rejected and scorned. It did not come from taking upon Himself the sin of the world. The joy set before Jesus was knowing what His death would accomplish, knowing He would soon be seated once again at His Father’s right hand. Joy through suffering. Victory through suffering.

Paul returned to this imperative to rejoice time and again:

- “Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord” (Philippians 3:1a).
- “Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4:4).



Faith enables us to see what the world cannot, to grasp the invisible yet very real.

- “We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience” (Romans 5:3).

We humans are prone to seek joy and happiness in the wrong places. Inevitably, seeking joy in this world only leads to disappointment and frustration. Instead, we must choose to rejoice in the Lord; that is, we choose to focus on who we are in Christ and all that is given to us in Him. The phrase *in Him* or similar phrases like *in Christ Jesus* are used more than a hundred times in the New Testament to describe the Christian. *In Him* we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sin. *In Him* we are no longer under condemnation. *In Him* we stand justified by faith. *In Him* we have access to God. *In Him* we have an inheritance that never fades. *In Him* we have been brought into a spiritual family. *In Him* we have reason to rejoice on the worst of days!

How do we practice this awareness that leads to joy in our lives? Consider two simple suggestions:

Make the choice to rejoice. Don't leave your joy at the whims of circumstances or feelings. Both are subject to change and wholly unreliable. Instead, remember joy is listed as a fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. As such, joy can be cultivated, grown, and developed by our attitudes and choices.

Find the right focus: the lens of faith. As Jesus demonstrated, we must keep joy before us, especially when times are hard. Faith enables us to see what the world cannot, to grasp the invisible yet very real. If we cannot learn to see beyond the trouble, trials, and blessings of this life, our

rejoicing will be weak, inconsistent, and minimal.

Scientists have produced eyeglasses that enable color-blind people to see shades and colors they previously could not see. Satisfied customers say things like: “These glasses gave me a new view of the world,” or “I now see colors that were always there, but I didn't know it.”

This second testimonial captures what I mean about faith. Of course, the colors existed! They were real and vibrant, but without the glasses, these individuals could not see them. The same is true with faith. Looking through the lens of faith enables us to see what we *already have* in Christ, and when we truly grasp what we have in Christ, we will find the ability to rejoice...no matter what life throws our way. **ONE**

About the Columnist: Dr. Barry Raper is associate dean of Welch Divinity School and pastor of Bethel FWB Church near Ashland City, Tennessee.

Ordinary Means of Grace

*Practicing Ordinary Christianity
to Serve an Extraordinary God*

BY ED GOODE

Have you ever been bored in church? Of course you have! Have you ever gone home and scrolled through Facebook wishing the preacher at your church was a bit more engaging, the band a bit more rockin', and the kids program a bit more entertaining? Probably so, but that's okay, too. Church services are like meals. Just like we don't experience one thrilling meal after another, we shouldn't expect one thrilling spiritual experience after another. Life just isn't like that, and that's okay. Ordinary is a feature, not a failure of both our daily and spiritual lives.

God is the greatest giver, and He has given us ways of sustaining ordinary, daily spirituality. He's given us ways to grow and to measure growth. We call these gifts *ordinary means of grace*—the Bible, both faithfully preached and systematically read; communion; baptism; gathered worship; and prayer. These means of grace are the ordinary ways in which the Lord Jesus gives Himself to His Church.

We need to remember these ordinary means of grace are great gifts from God, recover their role in our daily Christian lives, and rest in God's way of doing God's work.



The Bible

We must prioritize personal Bible study and biblical preaching, because to leave the Bible out is to leave God out. Paul made it clear in 1 Corinthians 1:21 that the preached Word saves people. Preaching isn't, "This is what the Bible tells you to do later," but rather, "This is who Jesus is for you now." That's why we should be careful about always pushing people to take notes during a sermon. Preaching isn't a lecture but an offer of life. Preaching isn't an information download but presenting the glory of God to feed people who are starving.



Gathered Worship

Hebrews 13:14 reminds us "the city to come" is pre-viewed every Sunday at your local church. The local church is an embassy of the heavenly city on earth. Before I moved from England to North Carolina in 2008, I visited the U.S. embassy to obtain a visa. The U.S. embassy in west London is U.S. territory, governed by American laws and officials, even though the building is physically in the U.K. The church is an embassy of the city of Heaven regardless of where it meets physically.

A robust understanding of the ordinary means of grace reminds us God does things at church He has not chosen to do anywhere else. Jesus died for the Church, and Jesus will return for the Church. As the Sons of Korah sang in Psalm 87:2, “The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.”



Communion

We are often forgetful people, so the Lord in His kindness gave us a physical reminder of the gospel: communion. The first command God gave Adam was to eat freely, and the last thing the Lord Jesus shared with His disciples before His arrest, trial, and death was a meal. Though Jesus did far too much to write in a single book, John found space to record the risen Lord’s invitation to “come and dine” (John 21:12). In John 6, Jesus told the crowds He is the bread of God.

The children of Israel were given manna; we’ve been given Jesus, satisfying sustenance for our wilderness wanderings. So, it’s no surprise we find a meal at the center of our faith and worship. In Luke 22:30, Jesus said that, after the judgment, we will eat and drink at His table. As we practice communion, Jesus reveals Himself and His grace to us through the broken bread, just as He did to Simon and the other disciple during breakfast after the resurrection.



Baptism

The Free Will Baptist *Treatise* reads, “This is the immersion of believers in water, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in which are represented the burial and resurrection of Christ, the death of Christians to the world, the washing of their souls from the pollution of sin, their rising to newness of life, their engagement to serve God, and their resurrection at the last day.”

Martin Luther wrote “I am baptized” on his desk—not because he confused water baptism with salvation but to remind himself he was dead to sin, identified with Jesus,

and given new life. Just as the children of Israel went out of Egypt through the water, and through the water into Canaan, so we go through the water into a new life.



Prayer

Through prayer, we take what the Bible tells us and apply it to our own situations, temptations, and sins. We pray in Jesus’ name, receiving promised answers from Him. His name is the pristine signature on the crumpled check of our distracted prayers. As we pray God’s own Word back to Him, we are reminded God loves us too much to give us everything we want the moment we want it.

Maybe, at this point you have a couple of objections.

Doesn’t all this put God in a box? In a sermon from the 1650s, John Owen taught we should wait on Jesus and let Him appear as He pleases. In other words, Christ is promised in the ordinary means of grace, but not bound by them. If He doesn’t appear to us in them, He can appear to us out of them, but only to those who honor Him by seeking Him in the way He has chosen.

But isn’t this all a bit Roman Catholic? No! It is Jesus we’re seeking, not a ritual. Remember, the means of grace are the way Jesus chose to give Himself to His people. The ordinary means of grace remind us what we call grace is really the power and presence of Jesus in our churches and in our lives.

If we are not content with the ordinary means of grace, we always will be looking for a new experience, a new shock, a new attention-grabbing, social-media-post moment. If we are not content with the ordinary means of grace, we are not content with Jesus’ plan for His Church, our churches, and the Christian life. **ONE**

About the Writer: Ed Goode is the lead church planter at The Bridge FWB Church in Champaign, Illinois. Born in the United Kingdom, Ed holds a history degree from Reading University. Before becoming church planters, Ed and his wife Rachel ministered in Richmond, Virginia.

Chaplain Mark McCraney Promoted to Lieutenant Commander

Jacksonville, NC—Congratulations are in order for Chaplain Mark McCraney and his family. On September 1, McCraney was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Commander in the U.S. Navy during a ceremony held at Lejeune Memorial Gardens in Jacksonville, North Carolina. McCraney, surrounded by fellow sailors, marines, friends, and loved ones, stood at attention while his family pinned the new rank on his uniform. Chaplain McCraney's long-time friend (from Air Force Academy days) Colonel Jason Lamont officiated the ceremony.

The McCraney family undertook an exciting journey as they faithfully answered God's calling to various roles in Free Will Baptist ministry. Mark served as the pastor of First FWB Church in Fayette, Alabama; pastor of Red Bay FWB Church in Red Bay, Alabama; and as a church planter in Colorado. He reentered military service as a Navy chaplain in 2015. Now, after wearing the rank of Captain/Lieutenant for 23 years, he accepts the responsibility of Lieutenant Commander.

Congratulations to Chaplain McCraney and his family for this important milestone in their steadfast service to our Lord, our nation, and our denomination. **ONE**



Pastor's Boot Camps on the Road Set for 2024

Antioch, TN—Have you ever wanted to participate in a North American Ministries Boot Camp but couldn't make the trip to Nashville? In 2024, North American Ministries and the Executive Office are bringing the boot camps to you. Make plans to join us at Boot Camp on the Road for free, practical ministry training for pastors and church leaders across the country.

To learn more about any of the following Boot Camps on the Road, email nam@nafwb.org.

West Virginia: March 15-16

Kansas: April 12-13

North Carolina, Blue Ridge Association: August 2-3

Michigan: August 23-24

Florida (Hispanic Boot Camp): November 1-2 **ONE**

Yorks Resign as FWB-NAM Church Planters

Buffalo, NY—Tim and Amanda York, who have faithfully served as church planters to the greater Buffalo, New York, area since April 2010, announced their resignation in August. We



thank God for their successful ministry to the Deaf community and to NorthPoint FWB Church, and we pray He will continue to bless them and their children as they lead Southside FWB Church in Paintsville, Kentucky.

Though the Yorks will no longer be in New York, the work of Team Buffalo will continue as NorthPoint DePew launches a second church in the West Seneca area led by Dawn and Danny Elliott. **ONE**

Cultivate Church Moves Into New Building

Athens, AL—After an extensive renovation process, Cultivate Church in Athens, Alabama, recently moved into a new, permanent church building and began holding services. Thank God for this incredible step forward in this church planting journey. As we move into a new year of ministry, please pray for Cultivate’s members and leadership team: the Franks, Eatons, and Castros. Ask God to continue providing opportunities to share the gospel, opening doors for community outreach, and growing the faith and passion of existing believers in the church. **ONE**



Landmark Celebrates Self-Supporting Status as Equip FWB Church Officially Launches

To everything there is a season! On Sunday, September 18, North American Ministries celebrated the end of one church planting journey and the beginning of another.

New York—Landmark Free Will Baptist Church in Clifton Springs, New York, celebrated self-supporting status with a special organizational service September 18. Pastor Jim Martin and his wife Sylvia became associate church planters to the Rochester, New York, area in July 2006. After the team’s lead pastor resigned, Jim answered God’s calling and accepted the lead pastorate role. He has since shepherded Landmark faithfully.

Congratulations to Jim, Sylvia, and the entire congregation of Landmark FWB Church! Please continue to pray God will raise up more workers to plant churches in this

region to advance the gospel in the Northeast.

North Carolina—The same week the Landmark Church became self-supporting, Equip Free Will Baptist Church in Hickory, North Carolina, officially launched. Equip is led by Brandon and Shelly Smith and associates Jonathan and Heather Huff. Since becoming church planters in 2021, the two couples have tirelessly worked to build gospel-driven relationships and serve the Hickory community. They launched regular, weekly services September 18, with more than a hundred friends, family, guests, and team members attending.

Please pray for Equip Church and its leadership. Ask God to grow the church, open new doors for community outreach, and make His name great in Hickory! **ONE**



For Such a Time as This

BY MIKE WADE



When reading the story of Esther, it is clear God purposely placed Esther in her position as queen of Assyria during a vital time in Jewish history. Her presence resulted in saving the lives of untold numbers of Jewish people. Her realm of influence was instrumental in making a difference in the time and place in which she lived.

Recently, I learned one of our own Oklahoma Free Will Baptists received a promotion holding great potential to impact his realm of influence. Many across the denomination know Brad and Sherri Hanna. Brad, the son of Billy and Beverly Hanna, left Georgia to attend Randall University in 1990.

I was privileged to be Brad's pastor while he attended college. Brad was a talented young man and faithfully served the Lord and our church, Calvary Free Will Baptist in Norman, Oklahoma, as the youth pastor throughout his college years. During that time, he married Sherri (Ellis), and they began their ministry in Texas. From Texas, they moved to Edmond, Oklahoma, and planted a church under the Oklahoma State Missions Board. The Oak Hills FWB Church remains a vibrant church today.

Influenced by Ernest Harrison Jr., the Oklahoma Free Will Baptist executive director who was also an Oklahoma National Guard chaplain, Brad joined the Oklahoma National Guard in 2001. He accepted a full-time position in 2005 after his first deployment to Afghanistan. In 2011, he was deployed to Afghanistan again. Chaplain Hanna has served our nation and his calling to the chaplaincy faithfully, steadily moving up in rank and culminating with his most recent promotion to colonel.

While all this is praiseworthy, Chaplain Hanna recently accepted an assignment worthy of recognition among all Free Will Baptists. In August, he reported to Arlington, Virginia, to assume new duties as chief of Army National Guard Religious Affairs at the National Guard Bureau. In this role, he will serve as the senior chaplain for the director of the Army National Guard (a 3-star general), serving all the chaplains in our 50 states and four territories. He will be the sole National Guard representative to the chief of chaplains at the Pentagon.

All I can say is wow!

Knowing Brad through all these years and having witnessed him boldly present his faith in Christ to military personnel, I am very excited God has placed him in this strategic position of influence at this critical time in American history. **Just as He did with Esther, could it be God has placed Chaplain Hanna in this influential position for such a time as this?**

I tease Brad by telling him I sure didn't see this potential when he came to college. The truth is, I absolutely did see God had His hand upon Chaplain Hanna and felt in my heart—even back then—God would use him in great ways.

May God's richest blessings be upon the Hanna family as they continue to faithfully serve wherever God leads. Thank you for your service, Colonel Hanna! 

About the Writer: Mike Wade served 16 years as executive director for Oklahoma Free Will Baptists and as the editor of the Oklahoma *Promoter* magazine. Learn more about the ministry of Free Will Baptist chaplains: fwbnam.com/chaplaincy.

Sweet Tea on a Sunny Day

THE POWER OF REFRESHMENT

BY ALICIA BUNCH VARGAS

Sweet tea on a sunny day. Dipping toes in a cool creek on a hot afternoon. Crisp fall air. A beautiful melody. Watching children play. A meaningful conversation with a friend. Reading the Psalms. All these things refresh me in different ways. The word *refresh* means to reinvigorate, energize, or strengthen—all necessary for living a faithful and thriving life. Unfortunately, to experience refreshment, one must first encounter exhaustion and fatigue.

Some activities I do in solitude to refresh my soul. Others I enjoy in the company of others to experience refreshment.

We need both community and solitude to fully experience giving and receiving God's refreshing love. It is essential to develop rhythms and routines in our lives to make it possible to serve the Lord faithfully and sustainably. We have a consistent need to be refreshed in our journey of following Jesus. In Exodus 23:12, we find rest mandated as part of the Sabbath. Paul described the Christian life as a race (2 Timothy 4:7).

Maintaining a pace and prolonged endurance are both important for running a race. Human bodies have specific needs such as water and nourishment for stamina and health. Likewise, in our spiritual journey,



we need nourishment and renewal. Scripture alludes to refreshment and growth in Psalm 23:3 and Proverbs 11:25. Christians also derive nourishment by reading Scripture, meditating on it, and encouraging each other in love through words and prayer.

David pointed to God as his source of refreshment (Psalm 23:3), but Paul also described refreshment from other people (1 Corinthians 16:18). And, in 1 Samuel 16:23, David's harp playing refreshed Saul. We also find examples of refreshment stemming from Jesus' interactions with others, such as the "living water" he offered the woman at the well in John 4:10. At the heart of all these instances is a personal relationship, whether with God or with others. These relationships allow one person to speak to another and offer words or actions bringing healing and refreshment—sometimes physically, sometimes spiritually.

Discernment is needed when providing refreshment to others. In the Gospel of Luke, we find numerous examples of Jesus offering spiritual and physical healing. In every interaction, He was discerning in His approach. Addressing the physical and spiritual needs of others demonstrates God's own concern for our spiritual and physical needs.

In Philemon, Paul described how Philemon had refreshed the hearts of the saints (verse 7). This short letter offers insight into how Christians might provide refreshment or relief to those from different social strata or those who have unique needs. Philemon, a slave owner, and Onesimus, his slave, came from different social positions. Philemon's example illustrates how we, too, can be a refreshing aroma of Christ to those around us (2 Corinthians 2:15-17).

Paul wrote this epistle while imprisoned in Rome or Ephesus. He wrote to Philemon, who might have been a church leader in Colossae. Paul offered Philemon admonishment regarding his slave, Onesimus, who presumably had escaped, encountered Paul, and was later converted. However, because the book does not explicitly describe Onesimus as a runaway, we must acknowledge the possibility Philemon sent Onesimus to Paul for an intended purpose. In any case, Paul requested reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus and sent Onesimus back to his master. Paul addressed Philemon as the slave owner, recognizing the power dynamics at play and Philemon's responsibility for Onesimus, not only as a slave master, but also as a brother in Christ (Galatians 3:28). Paul could have written a letter to Onesimus and encouraged him to return to

Philemon. Instead, he put the responsibility on Philemon, the slave owner in a position of power, urging him to accept Onesimus and treat him as more than a slave, to treat him as a brother. He had heard of Philemon's love and faithfulness toward his brothers and sisters in Christ, and Paul commended him for the refreshment he brought to those around him.

We do not hear Onesimus' voice in this letter. We don't know if he asked Paul to write on his behalf, or if Onesimus was returning to Philemon against his will. However, we know Onesimus had a relationship with both Paul and Philemon, and we know the best interest of Onesimus (and ultimately Philemon) lies at the heart of this message. Paul made it clear he was interceding for Onesimus.

Paul expressed himself boldly in his request to Philemon, telling Philemon he was sending his very heart (verse 12). In verse 16, Paul asked Philemon to view Onesimus as a brother through the gospel lens of love. Philemon and Onesimus might have been in different social positions, but Paul urged Philemon to put aside those differences. In verse 20, the Apostle asked Philemon to continue to refresh Paul through the way he treated Onesimus.

In her book *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*, Diane Langberg observes: "In Zechariah 8:4-5, we read, 'Old men and old women will sit in the streets of Jerusalem....and the city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.'"

The most vulnerable—the elderly and the young—will be safe in the streets.

God will restore a place of safety and laughter and blessing for all.

No exceptions.

Bearing God's image means responding

Biblical refreshment, both for ourselves and for others, should be a part of our daily walk with Christ.



For whom can you intercede as Paul did for Onesimus?

Who in your life provides you with spiritual refreshment?

How are you demonstrating love and refreshment to those around you?

What rhythms or routines in your life bring refreshment to your soul?

Who, outside of your current sphere of influence, could you refresh through a friendship (widows, orphans, imprisoned, homeless, abuse survivors)?

to ruin where we find it and pouring our blessing in that place to transform it.”

Yes, the Kingdom of God will refresh those who have suffered immeasurably, but as members of that Kingdom, we have the responsibility to refresh others ourselves, offering safety, joy, and blessing. When working with survivors of trauma, safety is a foundational part of the healing process. Many individuals lose their sense of safety after long-term trauma. Building a refuge of emotional and physical safety is crucial when interacting with trauma survivors. Diane Langberg reminds us of our role in bringing refreshment to those suffering or those who simply need encouragement.

I have been trained as a clinical social worker and work at a non-profit agency providing therapy and advocacy services to survivors of sexual assault. We are encouraged to practice self-care to mitigate burn-out. I constantly examine my heart, asking how much

I can give. I ponder, “Am I being refreshed so I can offer that same refreshment to my clients?”

Sometimes, I must remember the things that nourish my own soul and seek out ways to build those into my daily rhythm. This requires time and space to reflect on how my soul is doing. If I do not take intentional time

to reflect, I risk losing sight of how I am both giving *and* receiving refreshment.

Because we do not have the same forms of slavery that existed in the Roman Empire, it can be challenging to relate to Paul’s intercession for Onesimus. However, we still face many modern forms of slavery, such as human trafficking. I spent four years in Bolivia working for an organization assisting women in the sex trade. We partnered with International Justice Mission (IJM) to bring these women freedom from sexual slavery. However, at times, I also experienced incredibly refreshing hospitality from the women I was helping through the work of IJM. The foundation of this relational refreshment was a shared desire to serve one another. They knew I was far from home and wanted to offer hospitality. I knew these women needed true freedom and God’s refreshing love.

Biblical refreshment, both for ourselves and for others, should be a part of our daily walk with Christ. As we consider Philemon as an example of how this refreshment looks, we must remember that, as Christians, we are also called to bring refreshment to the world. May we advocate for others, even those different from us. May we encourage our Christian brothers and sisters who crave refreshment. May we find new, deliberate, and creative ways to refresh everyone around us with God’s love. **ONE**

About the Writer: Alicia Bunch Vargas is a licensed clinical social worker. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee, and enjoys reading, gardening, and spending time with friends and family. Find more resources: wnac.org.





BY JOHN GORRELL

Last December, during the holiday season, I felt very unsettled. I lost my sister Julie in November, following a long illness, and the holidays proved difficult. Though it was hard for me to pinpoint my feelings at the time, I knew I was hurting. I felt anxious and stuck. I prayed desperately, but it didn't feel as though my prayers were going anywhere. I went to church, sat through Sunday School, played the piano for the choir, and listened to the sermons, but I left each service feeling unsettled and empty.

After Christmas, I felt compelled to take an additional vacation day to spend some time alone with God. I have done this many times throughout my Christian walk, but this time felt different. I felt a deep urgency to be alone with God, and I became very deliberate in making preparations to take a drive. I bought a new journal specifically for the trip, wanting to capture every thought. I selected several sermons and songs to listen to along the way.

I did not sleep well the night before the drive, the norm during those unsettled months, so I got up early and headed out. It was a typical late December day in the West Virginia mountains. The air was cold, with an occasional snow flurry, and it seemed the sun was reluctant to break the horizon. But the car finally warmed up, the windows defrosted, and I backed slowly out of our driveway.

As I journeyed north toward the Ohio border, Christian music played softly in the background, and I prayed. I began by asking God if anything in my life was hindering me spiritually. I asked Him to search me, to see if there was any unclean thing in me. I wanted to hear from Him, and I wanted to be sure nothing in my life would inhibit what I wanted to accomplish during the drive.

In those still moments, the Holy Spirit began to reveal areas in my life that needed attention. I found myself repenting and asking forgiveness for shortcomings, failures, and weaknesses that seemed so easily to beset me.

The cadence of my prayer consisted of moments of crying out to God, followed by long periods of driving quietly, allowing my mind time to process what was happening in my heart. Peace began to settle my anxious mind, a peace

I had not experienced in a very long time. I was encouraged by the thought the drive was just getting started, and I already knew God was going to work in me that day.

I did not put many miles on my car that day. The drive was broken up by stops at scenic overlooks and rest areas, where I listened to podcasts or sermons and feverishly took notes in my new journal. Then I would drive a while longer, sitting quietly with my thoughts, so I could really digest what the Lord was trying to say.

The recurring theme that day revolved around the phrase “abiding in Him.” Those words echoed in my mind as I found myself praying about my faith, my family, my finances, and my future. Every sermon and every podcast urged me to abide in Him, to maintain a close relationship with my Heavenly Father. I felt compelled to create a daily plan to reach where I needed to be spiritually. I made notes and set reminders on ways I could strengthen my faith and keep a close relationship with the Lord. I asked God to place me in the center of His will and give me guidance for my life and my future. I felt the need to reassess my ministry motives and make sure I was operating under His agenda, not my own.

It was a wonderful drive.

As I made my way home, I felt a great sense of relief. I felt at peace, revived in my spirit, and I could not wait to get back to church, hear the next sermon, play the next song for the choir, and study for the next Sunday School lesson. For the first time in a long, long time, I craved Him, and I wanted to abide in Him.

While I still did not understand why I had to go through the season of anxiety, I understood God was using that season to draw me closer to Him. To teach me to abide.

Looking back, I also know God was preparing me. He saw the road ahead and knew that less than a month after the drive, my world would change forever. My family and I would endure a sequence of devastating events to stretch our faith like it had never been stretched before.

On January 26, my mother—quite healthy to this point—experienced an episode of confusion. After several tests ruled out infection and stroke, the physicians found a brain tumor. My independent mother suddenly needed 24-hour care. My two remaining sisters and I scrambled to find the best options for surgery and treatment.

Sadly, the health issues continued to increase. During

those difficult weeks, other close family members also found themselves dealing with difficult illnesses as well. We found ourselves stretched thin, taking our loved ones to and from doctors’ appointments, tests, and procedures. Our family pet, a Great Pyrenees named Duke, suddenly became ill and died. My first grandchild was born weeks early, causing grave concerns about the health of this new baby girl and her mother.

Smaller frustrating things, such as our washing machine and dishwasher going out in the same week, added to the turmoil. Major changes also occurred in my secular job, and I was dealt a devastating blow at my workplace. My mother was called home to be with the Lord in early April, three short months after being diagnosed with the brain tumor. I was faced with the difficult task of finding the right words to say at her funeral.

Those months were stressful, but God constantly brought to mind the things I had learned on the drive. Though our days were difficult, I deliberately made time to abide in Him. As the difficulties grew, I only craved Him more, rather than pushing Him away. I made new entries in my journal every day, as I wanted to document everything God was doing in our lives.

I learned the Greek word for abide is *meno*, literally “to stay or embrace.” I learned the definition of the word “abide” during the drive, but I didn’t understand the treasure of abiding until God’s plan took me down difficult and unfamiliar roads. I took a different journey, one where I *had* to abide in Him. I encountered detours and obstacles and roadblocks I did not see coming. Many times, I didn’t know which way to turn. I found myself on a road I did not choose and without a map. But God knew what He was doing when He sent me on that drive. I also learned that, sometimes, God’s preparation is packaged in pain. God saw down the road, knew what was coming, and put me in a place where I needed one drive so I would be ready for the next.

Dear reader, I do not know what your future holds, but please do not ignore the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Abide in Him. Take the drive and listen to what He has for you. **ONE**

About the Writer: John Gorrell is the senior manager for eastern region projects at MRC Global. He and his wife Dianna live in Scott’s Depot, West Virginia.

You Good, Bro?

BY WILL THORNTON

Chances are, at some point, you've had a "friend" named anxiety, depression, or addiction. Maybe you have self-esteem issues. Maybe you're divorced and having a hard time with single life, or maybe you've just lost a loved one. Maybe you're experiencing some form of all of that. Life is hard, with ups and downs. Seasons of good times and seasons of times where it seems you just can't catch a break.

I struggle with anxiety. For instance, just today, I had an answer to prayer regarding an issue I've struggled with and prayed about for more than a year. An issue that brought severe anxiety, and even a possible ulcer. This struggle is nothing new. Back in college, I endured a four-month period where I was simply unhappy. I have since learned I was severely depressed.

During the pandemic, although I never had COVID (as far as I know), what I did experience was panic, first at home and then, eventually, even at work. I would suddenly think, "Man, my chest really hurts!" My breathing would become shallow, and soon I felt ill. While these difficult days were rough for everyone, I eventually reached the place that I thought I was dying one night, and I simply didn't care.

Thankfully, I had sense enough to leave work early the next day to visit a doctor. A COVID test and a few simple medical tests told me I had no underlying, serious medical cause for my symptoms—only panic and stress. After that diagnosis, I slowly got better, and the symptoms of panic eventually went away.

I have come to realize I carry a "bag" around with me, one I have carried for years. Early on, I didn't notice it, but it has gotten heavier and heavier over the years, as I've filled it more and more. The bag goes with me everywhere—

work, church, out with friends, and I even sleep with it. It's filled with things from my past, all the ways I feel about myself: the insecurities, fears, worries, failures, and other junk I've acquired along the way. I'm not really sure how I've kept this bag for so long, but I'm not sure I would know how to act without it. It's me, my identity, and I no longer remember myself without the bag.

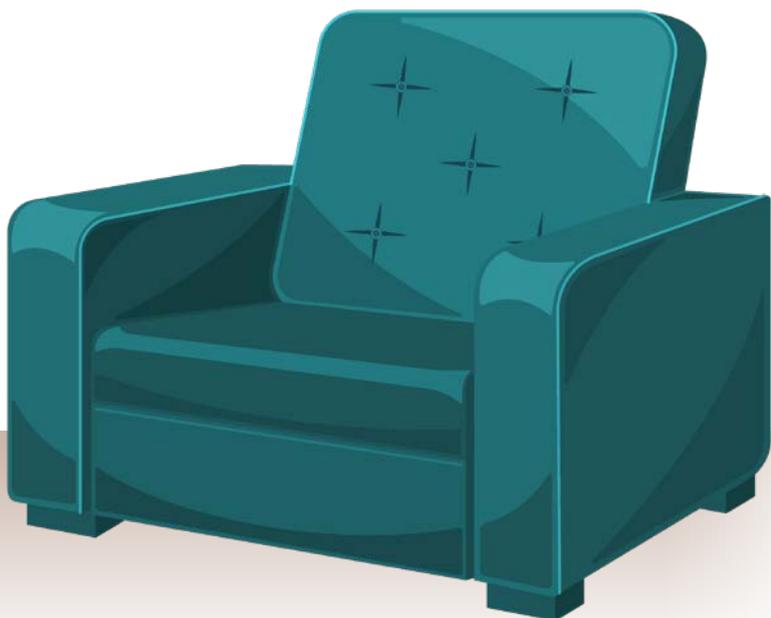
Thankfully, as I write this article, the bag has shrunk! I have gotten rid of some things, and have come to realize



other things in the bag aren't my identity after all. The bag is much lighter, and it's a great feeling. Sure, some of the old issues make their way back into the bag, and I find myself clinging to stuff in there, but overall, the bag isn't what it used to be. My identity is no longer bound to the bag. Even my greatest struggle in life no longer defines who I am. I experienced healing from that. Today, that struggle is not even on my radar!

What changed? I found a counselor. New Year's Eve 2022, I decided I was tired of dealing with the weight of my struggles. I was approaching my 30th birthday, and I wanted my 30s to be better than my 20s. I had read books, listened to podcasts, watched YouTube videos, talked and prayed with friends. But I knew it was time to open up and tell someone my whole story, being as vulnerable as I could.

When you're sick, you go to a doctor. When you tear an ACL or break a bone, you go to an orthopedic doctor. You visit the dentist for your teeth, an optometrist for your eyes. Why do we not go talk to someone for struggles in the brain? The stigma of talking to a therapist or counselor needs to end! You don't have to shout, "I'm going for counseling" (like I feel I'm doing with this article), but you need help. Don't let pride or the "mental health" stigma stand in your way. And, please understand, even the most faithful Christians sometimes need a counselor.



I get it. Getting counseling seems a little weird and scary, but it's been really helpful. And, don't expect a miracle on the first visit. Results and healing from things that have bogged you down for decades will take time. It may take time just to get your story out, trust your counselor, and develop a relationship. Like cuts and broken bones, it also takes time for internal scars and wounds to heal.

Do your homework. Therapy and counseling can be expensive. Some accept insurance. Some offer less-expensive sessions than others. Some specialize in particular areas. Often, the higher the education, the more the provider costs. Personally, I prefer in-person, but you can also take advantage of online platforms and video counseling. And Free Will Baptist pastors and their families can take advantage of free online counseling available through the Executive Office (nafwb.org).

Finally, remember the importance of community. In our nation today, our sense of community is slowly dwindling. But God designed us for community—all the way back to "It's not good for man to be alone." If you are unwilling to find a counselor, please find a friend or group of people to do life with. Someone to be vulnerable with. Engage in real conversations. Grow together. Be accountable. Live in community, just as God intended for us. Far too often, when we ask people how they're doing, it's just this superficial greeting. It's time to get past "You good, Bro?" and go deeper. Listen. Share. Find a friend other than your spouse and family and build that relationship. One of my Sunday School teachers talks often about occasionally going to dinner with a good friend. They simply talk about what's going on in their lives, refreshing one another and building one another up. Now, that's community.

Let's work together to build better communities that will lead to stronger churches and families. Let's work on healing from past trauma and ongoing struggles. And, as we find help ourselves, we will discover opportunities to serve others with a new perspective on their struggles. **ONE**

About the Writer: Will Thornton is an elementary school physical education teacher and personal trainer. He attends Bethel FWB Church near Ashland City, Tennessee.



Brown Thumb DISEASE

BY BRENDA EVANS

I have Brown Thumb Disease. I don't just lack skill at growing houseplants; I kill them. As one acquaintance said, I'm a houseplant assassin. First, it was African violets. I was a 30-something-year-old with the duties of a pastor's wife, three young sons, college classes in English with reams of reading and writing, Sunday School teacher, church pianist, leader of a small women's singing group, and Ruby's neighbor, a woman with African violets running out of her ears.

As I look back, I could blame Ruby for launching my 50-year-career as a houseplant killer. She was a forceful campaigner for African violets, had six or seven colors and some shades between. She insisted I take some. I resisted, but Ruby persisted.

"Easy to raise," she said, "and perpetual bloomers."

So, I accepted six small pots of pinks and lavenders. An immediate problem arose. "African violets prefer indirect sunlight," Ruby said. "North and east windows are best."

My two east windows were open to "inquiring" neighbors, so I kept those curtains closed tight. North windows were in my boisterous sons' bedrooms—no place for blooming flowers. I had a small west window over the kitchen sink with a so-so view that I didn't want to obstruct, so I settled on a south window in our tiny breakfast room. Not a good idea, but the best I could do.

"What do I do now?" I asked Ruby. "Never over-water," she said, "just once a week if soil is completely dry. Fertilize every two weeks in spring and summer, but nothing in fall and winter. That's it," she said. "Low maintenance. Easy, easy, easy."

Neighbors in big Midwestern cities with too many African violets sometimes lie, I discovered, even good Christian ones.

All went well for a few weeks; then, one day, several bottom leaves were mushy.

A magazine from the grocery store (this was long before Google) said it might be root rot from too *much* water. So, I watered less. Next came brown and brittle leaves—too *little* water the magazine said. Later, leaves curled under—too much sunlight. *Too much, too little, too bright.* Those violets hounded and harassed me for months.

When I finally showed Ruby my suffering plants, she grinned, patted me on the arm, and said, "That's okay, dearie; not everyone



can raise African violets.” Ruby was a good soul, but I wish she had told me earlier I looked like an African violet assassin. I moved the six little pots out of the window and into our dark pantry. No sunlight, no food, no water quickly led to their complete demise and burial in the trash can.

There have been many other houseplant deaths over these 50 years—figus tree, dieffenbachia, philodendron, asparagus fern, even peace lilies and mother-in-law tongues, which most people say are un-killable. They are wrong. Two Christmas cactuses from my mother—who never killed a houseplant in her life—would never bloom at Christmas or any other holiday. They shriveled up and met their Maker.

My longest survivor was a very large Areca palm (bamboo palm) that grew to five feet tall and lived 12 years. I loved that Areca. It stuck with me through thick and thin, including three moves,

one of which was north for 350 miles. The Areca asked so little of me, just an occasional good watering when it began to droop, a word of praise for its faithfulness, and my human touch now and then to trim off an errant stem or a brown frond or two.

But after the third move, the Areca grew weary and faltered. Many brown fronds and stems showed up and no new green ones. By then I had Google and the Web. One plant expert said the average houseplant lives from two to five years. My Areca was above average. Another said, depending on the type of plant and the care they receive, some plants could live upwards of 20 years. I had never been a doting caregiver, so I knew the end was near.

In the fall, three months after our move, I emptied my declining Areca onto the creek bank 50 yards behind our house. It came out of the big pot easily. I set it in an upright position on the creek bank and walked away. For weeks, from our breakfast room window, I could see Areca’s puny fronds turn brown, wave gently in the breeze, and grow punier and punier. During winter rains, it lost its footing, tilted toward the creek, and washed away in brown water.

Now I have no living houseplants. Just two weeks ago I bought fresh flowers for a brunch we hosted, and my husband Bill often brings home a small mix of yellow, red, and white blossoms from a store where he buys his apples. We like live plants, but I can’t grow them, so cut flowers must do.

Back in February, a neighbor offered Bill her thriving Christmas poinsettia leftover, and he declined. “Brenda kills houseplants,” he told her. He is right; I do. So, I have a fake snake plant in my office that looks forever and a day like a live one. And in our family room, a pot of fake paperwhite narcissus fooled my friend. Their immortality heartens me because I know I can’t kill them.

Strangely, my outdoor plants thrive. We have knock-out roses along the front of our house, a limelight hydrangea, six golden mops, a Japanese willow, a Himalayan cedar, two burning bushes, and a few small leaf holly bushes. Bill and I prune the roses, the hydrangea, and



the round Japanese willow and nip the extra growth from a few of the others. In late spring, Bill rakes and mulches. And they live, even though I touch them, breathe on them, and tend them: water them in drought, deadhead their withered blossoms in the summer and fall, and prune them in late winter.

I love my outdoor plants. Genesis reminds me they are a gift from the Lord. The Lord God, Creator of all things, saw the bareness of Eden, so He instructed the earth to sprout vegetation. I like the sequence: He made plants, then He made humans to love and tend plants for both beauty and food (Genesis 1:11-12, 29). That was good, He said. Sequoia trees and almost invisible turnip seeds. Mangroves and artichokes. *Methuselah*, the bristlecone pine in eastern California that is 4,853 years old according to ring data. My short-lived African violets.

It interests me that the Lord mentions grass, grain, trees, plants, and seeds five or six hundred times in the Bible. Sometimes, it's about plants to eat. But, most often, He uses plants metaphorically or symbolically to teach us truths about ourselves as humans and about Himself.

Remember the vine the Lord grew (and then withered) to chastise Jonah for his lack of compassion for the pagan Ninevites. Job spoke of hope and resurrection using a dead stump that can sprout, bud, and put out new branches at only the scent of water (14:7-14). Job meant that mankind dies, but the Water of Life makes him live again. Paul often used plant metaphors, as in the nine fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23.

Jesus used three plant parables in Matthew 13: the sower, the weeds, and the mustard seeds. And who can forget His graphic analogy in John 15, where Jesus is described as the vine and we are the branches, alive and growing in vital and life-giving relationship to Him. But cut off from Him, we “can do nothing.” Peter, James, and the Psalmist used plants to teach spiritual truths. Isaiah called us the Lord’s “planting...his oaks of righteousness.”

Jeremiah said it best: the one who trusts the Lord is like a tree planted by water, that spreads its roots...has green leaves...and always bears fruit (17:7-8). I want to be that tree, the Lord’s tree that stays always green and bears fruit. **ONE**

About the Writer: Brenda Evans lives and writes in Ashland, Kentucky. You may reach her at beejayevans@windstream.net.



PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

UPDATE ON INVESTING WITH THE FOUNDATION

We are in the process of registering in various states. Some states allow a limited number of investors while in the process. Many states allow ministries to invest in our program without registration. You can invest in many places with good interest rates, but only one place allows you to fund multiple FWB ministries. Our programs have helped the Foundation establish a grant program that has produced \$4.4 million in gifts to FWB ministries and an estate program that has produced \$35 million in future estate gifts. As of January 1, 2024, all our rates will be above 4%. **We encourage individuals and ministries to give us a call.**

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Open for Business

BY DAVID BROWN, CPA

Much of what Free Will Baptist Foundation does is manage money. We manage endowments that produce income for ministries. We manage planned gifts that generate income for individuals during their lifetimes and are converted to endowments or outright gifts upon their death. We also manage money for individuals and ministries. We offer a Charitable Investment Fund for ministries and an Individual Demand Note for individuals.

These last two areas are currently being registered in states across the country, but we have exemptions in some states allowing us to have a limited number of investors while finishing the registration process. Many other states allow ministries to invest in CIF investments without registration. We encourage interested individuals and ministries to give us a call.

Starting January 1, all our rates of return will be above 4%. The Foundation has always offered a competitive rate of return on these types of accounts. Until recent interest rate increases, we offered a better rate than any bank in the country.

It is always great to get a good rate of return, but investing in the Foundation offers other advantages as well. Both funds are designed to offer a net (interest and dividends) income rate, and over the last six years, the Foundation has strategically captured realized capital gains to fund our grant ministry. Since 2017, the Foundation has delivered more than \$4.4 million in grants to various Free Will Baptist ministries. Consider these cumulative grant amounts. IM, Inc. has received almost \$900,000; Welch College has received \$600,000; Randall House has received \$360,000; various youth camps have received over \$300,000; local churches and state ministries have received more than \$200,000 each; North Amer-



ican Ministries has received more than \$180,000; and other Free Will Baptist colleges have received more than \$150,000.

We have also been able to partially fund our estate planning ministry. Since 2013, we have helped more than 2,500 Free Will Baptist families set up estate plans, and many are leaving estate gifts to various FWB ministries. So far, we estimate more than \$35 million in gifts to ministries because of estate planning.

You can invest in many places today and get good rates of return, but there is only one place you can invest while helping fund gifts to multiple FWB ministries. Investing with the Foundation provides a competitive interest rate, and at the same time, allows the Foundation to fund the grant program and the estate planning ministry that has blessed and will continue to bless ministries in the future.

We are sharing our income to reach the world for Christ. Why don't you join us today? Call 877-336-7575 for more information. **ONE**

About the Columnist: David Brown is director of Free Will Baptist Foundation. To learn more about the grants program, visit www.fwbgifts.com.

The Heart of a GIVER



BY CHRIS COMPTON

It is more blessed to give than to receive.

This statement from Acts 20:35 is true. I have experienced it. You have, too. Giving is an integral thread in the fabric of our Christian faith. God Himself is a giver. He has given us the greatest gift in all the world: His Son. In response to that gift, we give ourselves to God. Part of giving back to Him is returning our money to God. It is important for us to give. It's more important *how we give*.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is one of the most sobering narratives in the Bible. In contrast to the positive example of giving Barnabas set and the overall generosity of the Christian community, we witness the great deception of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11.

The story goes as follows: married couple Ananias and Sapphira were part of the early Christian community in Jerusalem. Inspired by the generosity of other believers in the community, Ananias and Sapphira decided to sell their property but chose to retain some of the money for themselves, presenting only a portion of it to the Apostles.

They pretended it was the full amount. They deceitfully claimed to give the entire proceeds of the sale.

Peter confronted Ananias and Sapphira about their deceit. Both fell dead because of God's punishment. The event struck fear deep in the hearts of all who witnessed it. But what does this story teach us about giving? Let me share two principles we learn from this terrifying tale:

1. God sees and knows everything. I have never understood why Christians sometimes care more about what others see and know about them than what God knows. I have been guilty of this. Maybe you have, too. We can't trick or outsmart God. He sees and knows *everything*, all our thoughts, words, and deeds.

This is also true about money. He knows what we give, what we keep, and even how we think about the money He has given us. This knowledge should humble us and motivate us to honesty and generosity with ourselves, others, and ultimately, God. Giving is good. Giving from a loving and honest heart is better.



2. It's not about the size of the gift. Ananias and Sapphira did not sin when they did not give the full amount made in their sale. They sinned with deception and hypocrisy when pretending to be more generous than they were. They did not have to sell their property. They were under no obligation to give all the proceeds from the sale to the church. It was okay to keep part of the money for themselves. The problem was not with the size of the gift but with the heart behind it.

Giving is both an act of worship and a declaration of trust in God. God doesn't care about the size of the gift, but He cares deeply about the heart of the giver. He cares more about us than our money. He desires our hearts and trust in Him. He is worthy of both.

God doesn't need our money. He owns everything already. No, God wants our hearts, desires, and worship. Giving is simply an opportunity to demonstrate our trust to God and to join Him in what He is doing in the world. [ONE](#)

About the Writer: Chris Compton is accounting administrator for the Free Will Baptist Board of Retirement. He graduated in 2007 with an M.A. in Bible exposition from Columbia International University. A 1998 graduate of East Tennessee State University, Chris has many years of administrative/financial experience in varied fields, as well as seven years in pastoral ministry.

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God Will DELIVER

BY JOHN BRUMMITT

God will deliver, but that doesn't mean you should be lax in your own preparation for the future.

I watched the 1974 movie *Where the Red Fern Grows* over and over as a kid. The film was based on the 1961 children's novel by Wilson Rawls. The plot centers around a young boy named Billy, who first saves his money and then buys and trains two Redbone Coonhounds. During an early scene in the movie, Billy complains to his grandfather that he doesn't think God wants him to have any hound dogs because he has prayed and prayed for them but still doesn't have them. The grandfather wisely replies, "Could be you ain't doing your fair share."

We know God has the power to bless and deliver anything to us, but God often wants us to do "our fair share." Through the struggles involved, we grow and learn to be more like Him.

Preparation is essential even when you know the Lord ultimately will deliver you. God created us to work

through preparation and process, so we are not lazy in our approach to ministry. He designed us to have the drive for and rewards of our work. We appreciate the things we work for more than the things handed to us.

What image comes to mind when someone says, "That child is spoiled"? The term *spoiled* is often associated with an unruly child who has been overindulged by parents or others. The individual who has never worked hard toward a goal cannot appreciate the satisfaction of positive results after hard work and focused effort.

I should be clear: this line of thought is *not* a nod to that old maxim, "God helps those who help themselves," made famous by Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard* in 1736. (Many find it surprising this catchy saying is not in the Bible). However, we do see biblical characters preparing themselves for the future, while at the same time trusting God for the outcome. For example, in 2 Chronicles 32:2-8, when King Hezekiah saw the Assyrian king Sennacherib bringing the fight to Jerusalem, he organized his people to

Yes, God will deliver, but it may not always be the delivery we prefer.

dam up the springs, rebuild the walls, raise towers, and produce weapons and shields to fight Assyria. After all those things had been accomplished, Hezekiah also assured the people by reminding them the Lord was with them to fight their battles.

We must prepare for many things in our futures, from kids and school to vacations and retirement. Proverbs 6:6 instructs us to look to the ant, consider her ways (including food storage, community building, and ever-present hard work), and be wise. Too often, we fall into the “bailout” mentality prevalent in today’s culture. We want benefits and blessings without the effort and exhaustion that accompany hard work. As Billy’s grandfather told him, “God giving you the dogs won’t build you any character.”

Too often, we are more like young Billy, who replied, “I don’t want character; I want dogs!”

Yes, God will deliver, but it may not always be the delivery we prefer. God is continually working in our lives, and He wants us to plan, prepare, and participate in what He has for us. We know generally what will come in the future. Kids grow up. We age and retire from full-time work. Preparing for these things now puts us in a position to be used by God in the future. Because He has blessed our preparation, we can, in turn, be a blessing to others.

Preparing for the future is not easy. It requires thought, discipline, and hard work, but the Lord provides wisdom and strength to those who ask for it. What is our “fair share”? Set aside resources for the future and maintain our health daily, so we can enjoy and share the Lord’s blessings during the next stage of our walk here on earth. **ONE**

About the Writer: John Brummitt became director of the Board of Retirement in January 2016. He graduated in 2011 with an MBA from Tennessee Tech University. A 2004 graduate of Welch College, he has been with the Board of Retirement since spring 2006.



Curriculum Discipleship Plan

JANUARY 2024

January 7 • God Sees Our Pain • 1 Kings 19:1-21; Psalm 46; 1 Peter 5:7

January 14 • Job • Job 1; 38:1-3; 40:3-5; 42:1-17

January 21 • Sanctity of Life • Psalm 139:13-16

January 28 • Jesus Displays His Power • Matthew 8:1-34

FEBRUARY 2024

February 4 • Jesus Is Our Healer • Matthew 9:1-8, 18-34

February 11 • Jesus Sends His Disciples •
Matthew 9:35-38; 10:1-42

February 18 • Receiving God's Word • Matthew 13:1-23

February 25 • The Kingdom of Heaven • Matthew 13:24-52



To order, call 800-877-7030
or visit www.d6curriculum.com



Randall House Publications Now D6 Family Ministry

Randall House Publications recently received overwhelming support from Free Will Baptists to officially change its name to D6 Family Ministry. Many thought such a move happened years ago, recognizing the new name truly describes the best essence of the organization.

D6 Family Ministry (singular) represents one organization carrying out many aspects of ministry: curriculum, books, conferences, training, youth, children, adults, resources, and more. Dr. Ron Hunter stated, “We are not a publisher

that does ministry; we are a ministry that also publishes. Our new name, D6 Family Ministry, comes from

the biblical foundation of Deuteronomy 6, teaching generational discipleship. While our name has changed, our mission has not: *Helping You Build Believers Through Church and Home.* **ONE**



Monumental Progress for D6 Global in 2023

In an unparalleled display of resilience, 2023 witnessed a momentous gathering of all host nations of D6. Despite the lingering shadows of the pandemic and some countries just emerging from COVID restrictions, nations like Singapore, Malaysia, and France gathered for the first time since 2019. These countries and the United States are mirroring the promising recovery trajectory. A significant shoutout goes to D6 Korea, which reignited its mission back in 2022 and has been on an inspiring growth trajectory.



D6 Korea Director Paul Kim’s foresight and commitment to the D6 philosophy were evident. He extended a golden opportunity for pastors, offering an immersive, two-day, post-conference experience. This deep dive into the D6 philosophy and curriculum workshops illuminated the path for many into deeper, long-term discipleship. **ONE**

D6 Family Ministry Leads the Curriculum Industry Again



Known for setting standards for other publishers to follow, D6 Family Ministry was recognized once again for setting trends. At the spring meeting of the Protestant Church Publishers Association, CEO Ron Hunter shared compelling reasons for the new frequency of the curriculum cycle consisting of six releases a year instead of four.

Other publishers have copied trends set by D6 Family Ministry over the last 15 years: releasing a family-aligned curriculum, using marketing language that emphasizes church and home, and moving to devotional student pieces instead of abbreviated lesson summaries. The new

six-block cycle releases new books every two months, coinciding with the start of the school year and allowing people to start fresh at the beginning of the calendar year.

The new books released every two months offer the excitement and anticipation of beginning with a new devotional study guide. *Bible Scholar* also changed to match the same ordering and shipping schedule to make it easier on churches. D6 Family Ministry also announced a new opportunity to lock in pricing for the entire three-year scope and sequence for every church that sets up auto-order, level-billing, or bank draft payments. **ONE**

D6 Conference Expands Footprint: Now in Two U.S. Locations

D6 Family Ministry proudly announced the recent acquisition of the esteemed Northwest Ministry Conference, based in Seattle. The conference, a longstanding and prominent event, has been rebranded D6 Northwest and will continue its legacy meeting place in Seattle. This expansion means attendees now have two strategic locations to choose from: Southeast and Northwest.

This dual-location approach aims to minimize travel for participants and offer the same enriching experience regardless of the venue. Both conferences will share the

annual theme, feature common speakers, provide access to the latest resources from trusted exhibitors, and boast a diverse range of breakout-seminar sessions.

If you are contemplating which event to attend, D6 suggests opting for the nearest meeting. While D6 Northwest offers a lower registration fee, attendees should consider hotel and travel expenses may be higher, especially for those from the eastern United States.

Visit D6Conference.com for more information and to register. **ONE**





A Piece of Cake

BY RUTH MCDONALD

Julia Childs is credited with saying, “A party without cake is just a meeting.” If you’ve ever experienced a birthday without cake, you probably agree.

It’s hard to believe, but most humans throughout history didn’t share our birthday cake obsession. As a matter of fact, most historians agree birthdays were not commemorated with cake until the Germans came up with the idea in the 1500s. They began celebrating children’s birthdays by baking a cake and adorning it with a candle for each year they had lived—plus an extra for good health in the coming year. (Guys, a note of advice: your wife will not appreciate *extra* candles on her next special day.)

On December 25, most of the world pauses each year to celebrate the birth of the greatest figure in human history: Jesus, the Son of God. While we don’t know the actual month and date of His birth, the day has become a sacred and treasured part of the Christian calendar.

“It’s Christmas All Over the World” we sing each year as we learn to say “Merry Christmas” in multiple languages. But it’s not actually true in many non-Christian countries. Most Westerners have never thought about it, but why would adherents of other religions celebrate a holiday to mark the birthday of the Christian Savior? Many do not.

Japan, with only a half-percent of its population being Christian, meets the criteria as a non-Christian country. Yet they are big on all things Christmas. Department stores decorate with elaborate displays. Christmas music plays in malls and retail shops. Mickey and Goofy sing “Jingle Bells” at Tokyo Disneyland. When asked about the meaning of Christmas, most mention Santa and love. On Christmas Eve, each child receives “a gift from Santa Claus.” Also on Christmas Eve, many dating couples rent a hotel room and spend a “romantic” night together.

Most families eat a special Christmas cake on the Christ-

mas Eve night after successful marketing by Japanese Confectioner Fujiya, Inc. Fujiya began making and promoting beautiful white Christmas cakes topped with strawberries as early as 1910. The custom exploded after World War II when sugar became available after long war years of deprivation and hunger. The Christmas cake came to symbolize luxury and financial prosperity.

Santa, romance, and financial prosperity—that’s Christmas in Japan.

Imagine for a moment that your birthday becomes a national holiday. Everyone you know gathers to celebrate by decorating lavishly, exchanging gifts, baking and eating an elaborate cake, singing, dancing, even feasting on your special day. But no one invites *you* to the party.

Do you ever wonder if that is how Jesus feels on Christmas? It’s easy to understand why a nation like Japan, where only a tiny fraction of the population know Christ, celebrate without Him. But what about us? As we celebrate this holy day, do we make a big to-do over the actual guest of honor? Or has our holiday become more like the one celebrated by unbelievers? Do we make it a day of gluttony, materialism, and gratification or a day of worship, service, and gratitude?

My mother-in-law Katherine McDonald was ahead of her time. She used to bake a birthday cake each Christmas, decorate it, and gather her grandchildren to sing happy birthday to Jesus.

Whether we bake Him a cake or not, let’s make sure this year (and every year) we make Jesus the guest of honor at His birthday party. **ONE**

About the Writer: Ruth McDonald is director of WNAC. She and her husband Donnie spent three decades as missionaries in Hokkaido, Japan. Learn more: wnac.org.



CRANBERRY CHRISTMAS CAKE

INGREDIENTS

FILLING

12-oz. cherry preserves
¾ cup granulated sugar
¼ cup orange juice
3 ½ cups cranberries
(thawed, if frozen)

WHITE CAKE

1 cup unsalted butter, softened
2 cups sugar
1 tablespoon orange zest
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
3 ½ cups all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon baking powder
¼ teaspoon table salt
1 cup milk
8 large egg whites
Shortening

BUTTERCREAM

1 cup unsalted butter, softened
1 (8-oz.) package cream
cheese, softened
¼ teaspoon salt
1 (32-oz.) package powdered
sugar
2 tablespoons fresh orange
juice
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 to 2 tablespoons milk (opt.)

DIRECTIONS

FILLING: Bring ingredients and 3 cups cranberries to a boil over medium-high heat. Boil, stirring often, until cranberries begin to pop. Transfer 1 cup cranberry mixture to a small bowl, and stir in remaining ½ cup whole cranberries for the topping. Set aside remaining cranberry filling mixture to another small bowl. Cool both completely (1 hour) then cover and chill 8 hours.

CAKE: Preheat oven to 325°F. Beat butter in stand mixer until creamy. Gradually add sugar, beating until fluffy. Add orange zest and vanilla and beat until blended. Combine flour, baking soda, and salt; add to butter mixture alternately with milk, beginning and ending with flour mixture. Beat at low speed until blended after each addition. Beat egg whites at high speed until peaks form. Stir one-third of egg whites into the batter then fold in remaining egg whites in 2 batches. Spoon into 3 greased and floured 9-inch round cake pans. Bake at 325°F

for 25 minutes or until baked to center. Cool pans on wire racks 10 minutes then remove to wire racks and cool completely.

ICING: Beat butter, cream cheese, and salt at medium speed 1 to 2 minutes or until creamy. Add powdered sugar gradually, alternating with orange juice. Beat at low speed until blended and smooth after each addition. Stir in vanilla.

When all filling, cake, and icing are ready, put a cake layer on a cake plate. Spoon 1 ½ cups buttercream into a plastic freezer bag. Cut the corner of the bag and edge a ring of frosting around cake layer. Next, spread the layer with half of chilled cranberry filling (without whole berries) to edge of piped frosting. Top with second layer. Repeat. Top with third layer and ice with buttercream on top and sides. Edge a ring of frosting inside the top edge then spread cranberry topping (whole berries) to the edged frosting.



From the
COLD WAR of **WINTER**
to the **GENUINE HOPE** of
CHRISTMAS

BY MATTHEW STEVEN BRACEY

Aslan

In the C. S. Lewis children's classic *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the Narnians live in a world caught in the relentless grip of the White Witch, a world where it is always winter but never Christmas. Although bleak, brave individuals hold out hope for the fulfillment of the Golden Age Prophecy:

*Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.*

One of the first signs the White Witch is losing her tyrannical hold occurs when Father Christmas makes a long-anticipated appearance, announcing the imminent arrival of the Great Lion. Christmas signifies the end of winter and the arrival of spring—the hope of life and the healing of relationships.

Upon hearing about this prophecy from Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, Edmund Pevensie does not react with expectation but rather joins the White Witch, betraying his brother (Peter) and sisters (Susan and Lucy) to her. However, Edmund soon discovers her wickedness, escapes her clutches, and, by the mediation of Aslan, reconciles with his siblings.

Make no mistake, that reconciliation comes at great cost: the sacrifice of the Great Lion, Aslan himself. The White Witch murders Aslan, believing she has won, believing she has secured eternal winter. But, in Aslan, death begins to work backward, and Aslan returns to life, demonstrating power over death itself and giving hope within the depths of despair.

Jesus

The story of Aslan and Narnia is an allegory of the story of Jesus Christ and the world. The Son of God entered the world an innocent babe and died as an innocent sacrifice. In Ephesians 2:1-10, Paul considered the alienation that exists between holy God and sinful men and women, brought about by the sin of Adam and Eve. But God, in His great mercy, sought and achieved reconciliation between God and man in the person of Jesus Christ. God has made us alive with Christ (verse 5).

Paul then moved from the vertical dimension to the horizontal dimension: because God in Christ has established reconciliation between God and man, He calls

His “saints” (Ephesians 1:1) to seek reconciliation among one another. Specifically, Paul discussed the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians (2:11–22). Then, several chapters later, Paul also discusses the relationships between husbands and wives (5:22–33), parents and children (6:1–4), and employers and employees (6:5–9).

Where there is alienation, there can be reconciliation; where there is hostility, there can be peace. But, as Lewis made clear with Aslan, Paul made clear with Jesus: true reconciliation comes at great cost: “For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity . . . for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby” (2:14–16).

The Christmas Babe became the Easter Lamb, sacrificed for our sins. But death could not keep Him; the grave could not hold Him. He rose from the dead, and His resurrection became a symbol of life, hope, and healing.

You and Me

Just as the Pevensies found reconciliation, we likewise may seek the same for our broken relationships. In our own lives, we sometimes find certain relationships trapped in the long, cold war of winter. Perhaps we find ourselves in relationships with the traitor Edmunds of the world. Or perhaps we discover we are the traitor Edmund to someone else's Peter, Susan, or Lucy. Sadly, some of our relationships are always winter but never Christmas.

Yet, in Christ, we can be reconciled. So, ask for forgiveness, give grace, and seek restoration. It is true restoration will not always occur in this life, sometimes because of impossible circumstances, sometimes because of impossible people. But in Christ, who already achieved reconciliation between God and man, we, too, can seek peace within our relationships.

The cold war of winter can end. The genuine hope of Christmas awaits. **ONE**

About the Writer: Matthew Bracey serves as vice provost and faculty member at Welch College, teaching courses in history, law, theology, and interdisciplinary studies. He holds degrees from Cumberland School of Law (J.D.), Beeson Divinity School (M.T.S.), and Welch College (B.A., History, Biblical Studies). He is currently completing a Ph.D. in Christian Ethics Public Policy at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Adapted from the article published at HelwysSocietyForum.com



TURNING TO TAMPA



FREE WILL BAPTISTS VISIT THE SUN COAST IN 2024



BY TORI MATLOCK

Maybe you should buy sunscreen! July 21-24, 2024, the National Association of Free Will Baptists will host its 88th National Convention in Tampa, Florida, returning to the city for the first time since 2013. This year, convention attendees will take a closer look at what it means to be “Doers of the Word,” while the Vertical 3 Conference theme is “Follow Me.”

I’m not sure we could pick a more beautiful destination for the convention. The historic city of Tampa sprawls along the Sun Coast on the Gulf of Mexico side of Florida. In 2023, the Tampa Riverwalk, located beside the convention center, was numbered among the top ten riverside walks/trails in the nation. Riverwalk attractions include restaurants, parks, an aquarium, museums, and even a



bowling alley. In addition, you can tour the American Victory Ship, one of only four fully operational WWII ships in the country.

The population of the Greater Tampa Bay region has exploded during the decade since the convention last met in the city, expected to top 5 million residents during the next three years. Visitors may find it hard to recognize the vastly changed downtown Tampa skyline. Growth in the area has brought a wide variety of new businesses, flavors, and cultures. However, at least when it comes to eating, it is an old favorite that draws the most attention.

THE TASTE OF TAMPA

Tampa claims to be the birthplace of the Cuban sandwich, first served by restaurants in Ybor City. According to the menu at The Columbia Restaurant, a Ybor City landmark, the sandwich started as a snack for Cuban cigar factory workers in the 1890s and represents five “waves” of immigrants: “The Spanish brought the ham, the Sicilians the Genoa salami, the Cubans the mojo-marinated roast pork, and the Germans and Jews the Swiss cheese, pickle, and mustard.”

The sandwich and the city have become so inseparable that in 2012, the Tampa City Council approved a resolution establishing the “Historic Cuban Sandwich” as the city’s official sandwich (including a detailed recipe in the resolution). You will find numerous places to sample this savory sandwich made with ham, (mojo) roasted pork, Swiss cheese, pickles, mustard—and sometimes salami—on grilled Cuban bread. (Although expect each shop, stand, and restaurant to have its own “twist” on the traditional favorite.)

TRANSPORTATION

Worried about transportation in this bustling metropolis? Take heart! Tampa International Airport is only a

15-minute drive from the convention center. And for a memorable way to explore the city, check out the TECO Line Streetcars. The historic trolleys run past the Tampa Convention Center and ten other key sites every 15 minutes. The best part? The trolleys are free! Find more info: tecolinestreetcar.org.

You can also hit the waterways without getting your feet wet with Pirate Water Taxi, a fleet of six pirate-themed vessels along the downtown Tampa riverway. The covered boats offer daily tours of Tampa, with stops all along the route near attractions, museums, restaurants, and parks. Purchase tickets online or at the home dock at the convention center. Once purchased, you will receive a wristband allowing you to hop on and off the taxi at any stop the entire day. Visit piratewatertaxi.com.

TOURIST TIPS

If you love nature and the outdoors, Tampa is a great place for you! Find these (and many other) beautiful Gulf Coast and Tampa Bay options within a 20-minute drive:

- Bayshore Fitness Trail (1 min)
- Palmetto Beach (7 min)
- Davis Island (7 min)
- Desoto Park (8 min)
- McKay Bay Nature Park (8 min)
- Ben T. Davis Beach (14 min)
- Gardenville Beach (17 min)
- Picnic Island Beach (19 min)
- Gandy Beach Mangroves (20 min)

Like I said, buy that sunscreen, and let’s start counting the days until we gather in Tampa! **ONE**

About the Writer: Tori Matlock and her husband Cody are members of the church revitalization team at Hilltop Church in Ardmore, Oklahoma.



DESTINATION

DATES

ROOMS & GUESTS

How to Survive Convention Housing

(AND ACTUALLY GET A ROOM)

BY RYAN LEWIS

What day of each year do you dread most? Spring cleaning? First day of school? Your birthday? Tax Day?

For some Free Will Baptists, it may be the opening day of convention housing. From website crashes to reservation mix-ups to hotels selling out of rooms in five minutes, it cannot be denied the housing process has its challenges. Many attendees have endured these frustrations at one time or another. For that reason, as convention planners, we continually strive to improve the process.

One frequent complaint is how quickly the room block sells out. This is due in part to overbooking, as attendees reserve more rooms than needed to ensure places for their group. That is the reason—after our last visit to Tampa, no less—the convention implemented a policy anyone canceling convention hotel rooms is charged a non-refundable fee of the first night's room and tax for any canceled reservation.

However, while the cancellation fee is non-refundable, the room is transferable between individuals. Attendees transferring reservations must call the hotel to switch the name on the reservation. The nafwb.org website makes it possible for individuals to post their available rooms for other attendees (and for attendees without a room to find one in the block).

Overbooking by attendees in years past also led to the convention paying attrition penalties for empty rooms. For that reason, the room block in convention cities has been

adjusted to reflect a more accurate number of “needed” hotel rooms, making it more likely the convention fulfills its contractual obligations.

On the opening day of registration, hotels only accept reservations online. Links become live at 9:00 a.m. CDT on opening day. In 2023, after several years with limited challenges, the sheer number of visitors to the site (more than 30,000 clicks in only a few minutes) took the site down. The Executive Office has once again upgraded Internet capabilities to prepare the site to handle all reservations without delays or crashes.

Groups making eight or more reservations can contact the Executive Office (convention@nafwb.org) before April 1 for more information regarding group reservations.

This year, four hotels are available for convention attendees: the Tampa Marriott Waterside, adjacent to Tampa Convention Center; The Embassy Suites, connected by sky-bridge to the center; The Westin Tampa Harbour Island, a block from the center, right on Tampa Bay; and the Hotel Tampa Riverwalk.

Be alert for more updates in the February-March issue of *ONE Magazine*. 

About the Writer: Ryan Lewis is convention manager for the National Association of Free Will Baptists. For additional information, visit www.nafwb.org.

VIEW RATES

BOOK NOW

2023 Symposium Meets at Randall University

Moore, OK—The theological symposium sponsored by the Free Will Baptist Commission for Theological Integrity met October 2-3 on the campus of Randall University. Approximately 80 attendees from five states gathered for the annual event. For many, this was their first experience at a symposium. For others, it was the first time they had attended in years. They were not disappointed.

The following presenters and topics were included in this year's program:

- Denny Kuhn, *The Evilness of Evil: Reassessing the Problem of Evil in Contemporary Philosophical Dialogue*. Kuhn explored how the existence of evil is a type of moral argument for God's existence.
- Josh Phillips, *Jesus and the Synagogue in Matthew's Gospel*. Phillips explained the significance of the synagogue during the life and ministry of Jesus.
- Jacob Jones, *The Pericope Adulterae: John 7:53-8:11*. Jones discussed the canonicity of this disputed passage, as well as a parallel in the Apocrypha.
- Adam Blehm, *Defining "Man" and "Woman:" A Comparative Account of Gender*. Blehm showed how the Bible doesn't define gender per se. Instead, it defines man and woman in relation to one another as image-bearers.
- Alejandro Johnson, *The Spiritual Interpretation of Scripture: Antiochene Theōria as a Viable Hermeneutic for Today*. Johnson explained an ancient school of interpretation which broke free of the dominant allegorical approach.
- Matthew Bracey, *Robert E. Picirilli's Contribution to Philosophical Worldview Thinking*. Bracey surveyed Picirilli's contributions to the subject of philosophy by way of his long-used, unpublished manuscript.
- Joshua Hunter, *Maimonides and Arminianism: The Great Rabbi's Views on Free Will and Baptism*. Hunter showed how a revered medieval rabbi proves to be an unlikely but interesting conversation partner for Free Will Baptists.



- Eddie Moody, *Is Moon's MINCE Approach a Viable and Biblical Model to Help with Church Revitalization and Church Planting Efforts?* Moody outlined a proposal by Jay Moon for how churches can maintain financial viability and serve their communities in creative ways.
- Jason Myers, *A Theology of the Body and Its Interpersonal Implications*. Myers concluded the symposium with a provocative account of the body, explaining how a careful reading of Genesis 1-2 and marital relations confirm the beauty of God's plan for human embodiment.

The wide range of topics garnered much discussion during the Q & A portion of the program, as well as meals and breaks. Many Randall University students attended, as well as church leaders and laymen.

The Commission for Theological Integrity also held its annual meeting, which included plans for events and resources in 2024 and for a new publication, *De Doctrina*.

Next year's symposium will convene October 7-8 on the campus of Welch College in Gallatin, Tennessee. Paper proposals or abstracts can be sent to Symposium Coordinator Cory Thompson at fwbtheology@gmail.com. (Submissions should be made no later than June 1.)

Papers on various topics will be considered, but special preference will be given to papers on topics related to theological anthropology. Visit www.fwbtheology.com for more about this year's event, including the purchase of a digital digest. **ONE**

Getting First Aid Ready

BY EDDIE MOODY

It appears there are more hurting people in America than ever before. In May, Pew Research reported depression rates reached an all-time high, with 17.8% of Americans saying they are currently being treated for depression. Another 29% said they have been diagnosed with depression at some point in their lifetime. Our children are impacted, as well. The Annie Cassie Foundation released a report in September 2022 indicating major increases in the prevalence of children with anxiety and depression. For example, North Carolina experienced a 48.7% increase from 2016 to 2020. Another example is Ohio, which saw a 42.4% increase during the same period.

Substance abuse problems have also resulted in higher death rates. In November 2022, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported one in eight deaths among adults 20 to 64 were attributable to alcohol abuse. Across the nation, 300 people die of drug overdoses every day. Further, suicide has become a major problem, the 11th leading cause of death in the U.S., with an average of 132 a day.

Does the church have a role in helping these people? In May 2022, George Barna released a study where non-Christians indicated they would like to see churches provide practical help for people in the community. Interestingly, pastors did not share this opinion. Is it possible they felt unprepared? One study revealed 74% of pastors were reluctant to get involved with mental health issues because they did not know what to do.

Sometimes, people who have never thought of attending church or expressed any interest in Christianity become interested when they are hurting. In one study of parents who had lost a child to homicide or suicide, their top coping response was prayer, followed by going to church. People turn to God and His people when they struggle with emotional hurts.

We know our church communities are hurting. Results from Know Your Community reports for the areas

around Free Will Baptist churches indicate an average of 8,411 widows in their communities. Further, the top demographic group for 24% of our church communities is females ages 60-64. One component of The Hope Initiative is simply to spend time walking or driving through our communities, becoming aware of the needs. But are we ready to minister to them?

We have many tools to help the hurting: prayer, the Word, our own words, the church, and our relationships. We also find specific techniques throughout the Scriptures that enable us to be the hands and feet of Christ. We must be ready with these tools and techniques when we encounter someone hurting.

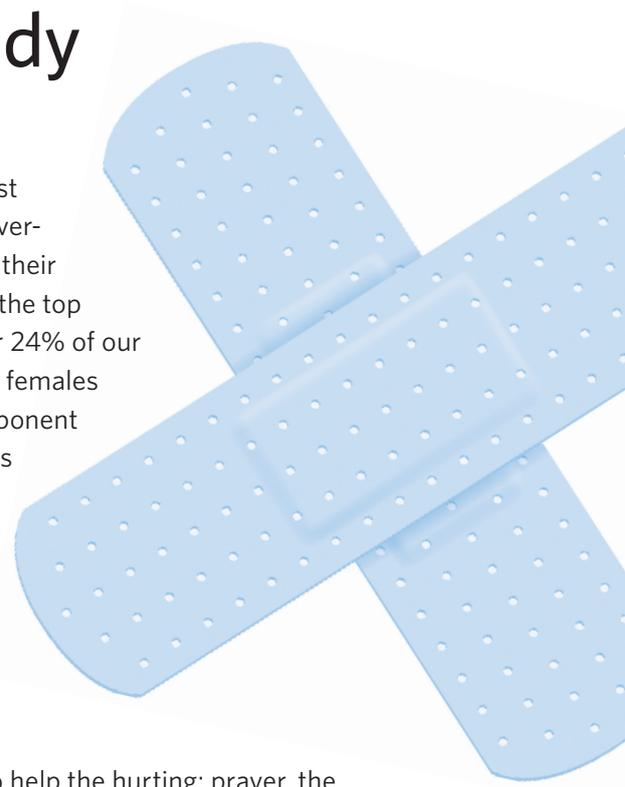
Recently, the Executive Office has begun working with churches to help them become "First Aid Ready." We use a format like The Hope Initiative to help churches easily equip small groups of members to help others. We believe this approach will create a new culture of helping, not only within the church but also within the surrounding community.

Does this sound like something of interest to you and your church? Please contact us through the form at nafwb.org/firstaid, and together we will become ready to help a hurting world. **ONE**



Eddie Moody

Executive Secretary,
National Association of
Free Will Baptists



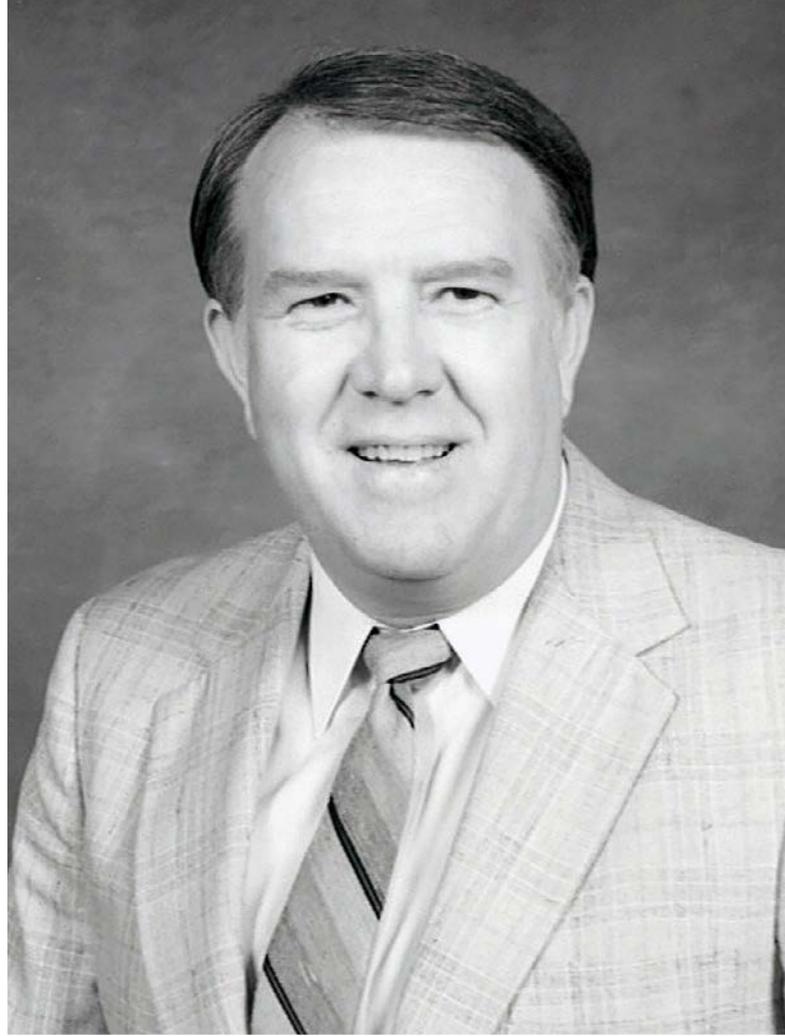
A Legacy of **Excellence**

Dr. Milton Fields was born April 26, 1941, in Millport, Alabama, to O. L. and Lois Fields. Milton spent a lifetime in education, first as a student (earning degrees from five colleges and universities) and later as an educator. Dr. Fields joined the Welch College faculty in 1994 as chairman of the Teacher Education department. He later served as academic dean (1998-2006), vice president for institutional planning (2006-2011), and as a member of the President's Leadership Team. During his time at Welch College, Fields played a vital role in raising the standards of academic excellence.

Why not start your own legacy of excellence through an endowment to **benefit Welch College** through Free Will Baptist Foundation?



Free Will Baptist Foundation | www.fwbgifts.com



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