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Baptists ODAY

NEWS JOURNAL

AUGUST 2012

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House today, temple tomorrow

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STORY AND PHOTOS BY
TONY CARTLEDGE,
Contributing Editor

House today, temple tomorrow

Baptists in Cuba find
sure footing for growth
amid challenges

SANTIAGO DE CUBA — Make a mental list of places where Baptist work is growing, and chances are it wouldn't include Cuba — but it should.

The Eastern Baptist Convention of Cuba (EBCC) has seen remarkable growth during the past decade. After more than a century of tepid growth that was almost completely stymied during the first two decades of Fidel Castro's Socialist revolution, Baptists have found a sure footing for growth.

Joel Luis Dupont, executive president of the EBCC, told a group of volunteers from North Carolina that Baptists in Cuba have always had "a strong missionary concern and a heart for social work."

Speaking from his office in Santiago, on Cuba's southeastern coast, Dupont said that in the century or so after its beginning in 1898, the EBCC developed about 200 churches. But in the past 10-15 years, he said, "there has been a great evangelistic movement that has resulted in 300 more churches, 800 house churches or missions, and thousands of cell groups called 'houses of prayer.'"

HOUSE CHURCHES

As used in Cuba, the term "house church" denotes far more than a dozen people meeting occasionally in someone's living room, as is often the case in the U.S. In the Cuban context, "house church" describes a congregation that meets regularly in a building that's also used as a home, often for the pastor's family. It is easier to get government permission to use a building for church purposes if a family also lives there.

House churches can be sizeable. At Tenth Baptist Church in Santiago, for example, pastor Rolando Ortiz Bodie's family lives in a tiny three-room apartment behind a rickety sanctuary space that can pack in 120 to 150 people.



Donkeys, horses and carts are common forms of transportation in Cuba, where few people own cars. Below: Pastor Alexi Garcia speaks with leaders of Maranatha Baptist Church in front of a small house they hope to renovate and expand for use as a house church.

The congregation has 130 members and supports multiple missions, but is still called a “house church.” Self-standing church buildings are called “temples.”

Cuba was very closed to the gospel for many years, Dupont said, “but God has opened many doors through miracles.”

SEEING MIRACLES

Government approval for a senior center designed to house retired pastors and spouses is one miracle, said Dupont.

Volunteers affiliated with North Carolina Baptist Men have been assisting Cuban Baptists in the construction of the sizeable center for nearly 10 years. The main building was recently dedicated, but it lacks needed equipment such as hospital beds and commercial washing machines because the United States’ long-running trade embargo has made such goods difficult to find in Cuba.

The number of Cubans converting to Christianity in the past decade is another miracle, Dupont said. And, current president Raul Castro has publicly asked Christians to pray for him and for the government, Dupont said, a miracle in itself.

“We believe, like Esther, that God has prepared us for this time,” Dupont said, as he appealed for additional funds and promised a continued emphasis in planting new churches.

Noting that the Cuban government just recently began allowing Cubans to sell property, he said: “We need to buy houses so we can start house churches in them; to have a temple tomorrow, we need a house today.”

Many houses can be bought for \$6,000-\$12,000 U.S., but poverty, inflation and the low value of the Cuban peso make it very difficult for the churches to raise the needed funds.

PLANTING, GROWING

Baptists in Cuba have a straightforward strategy for planting and growing churches. Existing churches encourage the development of “houses of prayer” throughout the community and in surrounding communities.

Typically, participants in the “houses of prayer” outnumber members in the church. At Maranatha Baptist Church in Sevilla, for example, pastor Alexi Garcia took visitors to a large open garage currently used as a meeting place. The garage, attached to the home of church members who don’t own a car, can accommodate the 80 members who normally attend. When the church’s 17 cell groups gather for a monthly meeting, however, more than 140



Baptists from the Cuban villages of El Caoba and El Cobre sing with typical exuberance during a joint service held in the Eastern Baptist Convention of Cuba seminary gymnasium.

people spill out among the flowers in the yard.

The church recently baptized 19 new converts, none of whom have Bibles. The congregation has purchased a ramshackle home on a plot of ground nearby, which members hope to renovate and expand to serve as a house church.

Garcia meets separately each month with cell group leaders, outlines an emphasis for the month, and leads them in a related Bible study. Group leaders then replicate the study in their homes so the monthly emphasis (family, evangelism, or support for the senior center, for example) spreads through the church.

While many cell groups remain small, others grow and take on a life of their own. Working with the convention, the congregation then appoints a missionary pastor to lead the house of prayer to become a house church that can function on its own.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

To be constituted as an independent church, Garcia said, congregations must have a minimum number of members, at least two “departments” (such as a men’s and women’s organization), and the ability to pay at least half of the pastor’s salary.

Pastors generally make 350-400 Cuban pesos per month, about 20 U.S. dollars. The EBCC provides limited financial assistance for new church starts, decreasing funding as the church grows.

With finances tight, the churches struggle. The Hope of Life Baptist Church, near Oasis, currently meets beneath a small outdoor shelter adjacent to the home of a woman who began by hosting a house of prayer. Members have laid the foundation for a church building at a nearby location, but are far from being

able to complete it.

In the rural community of El Esparillo, Christ the Rock Baptist Church also meets in an open shelter constructed less than a yard from the pastor’s home. The church first met in the shade of a large tree, but built the shelter after a hurricane uprooted the tree.

The shelter has rudimentary benches facing a speaker’s stand on which *Cristo la Roca* (“Christ, the Rock”) is carved. In the back is an outdoor kitchen and fellowship area used for Sunday school, along with a primitive bathroom for the 50-75 people who attend.

A woman who works with the church as an evangelist — but does not own a Bible — said remnants of witchcraft from Cuba’s early West African slave population continue to be a strong force in the community, as does alcoholism fed by homemade liquor distilled from fermented molasses.

Much prayer goes into the ministry, she said: both prayer and weeping for those who come, but then fall away.

Women are free to preach in the EBCC, and several churches have women pastors. There’s no question that women are the backbone of the church in Cuba.

Though most of the pastors are men, most of the members are women, and children abound. “Men often feel too much machismo to want to come to church,” one pastor’s wife said, but women are much more open to the gospel. Then, in time, they try to draw in the men in their families.

Obstacles abound, but Baptist churches in eastern Cuba are alive and well and growing. From “houses of prayer” to house churches to the occasional freestanding “temple,” they believe God has given them a special opportunity in a special time, and are striving to see it through. **BT**

quotation remarks

“Hate will blind you to so many things;
...It consumes you.”

—Chris Simpson, a 38-year-old garbage man and former Marine who gave up white supremacy for Christianity and is having his many Nazi and white pride tattoos removed (RNS)

“Many Southern Baptists were on the wrong side of the hoses in Birmingham. And I think that brings with it a memory that lasts a long time. I think Southern Baptists have the opportunity and the necessity to go further and be more intentional than anyone and everyone else.”

—Ed Stetzer, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Lifeway Research, on the election of Fred Luter as the first African American to serve as president of the SBC (Fox News)

“This kind of behavior is not isolated to children and school buses and suburban communities. It stretches to the upper reaches of society — our politics and our pulpits and our public squares.”

—New York Times columnist Charles Blow on a group of boys tormenting a grandmotherly bus monitor in upstate New York

“Let’s celebrate religious pluralism; after all, we [Baptists] helped invent it.”

—Church historian Bill Leonard of Wake Forest University, speaking to a Baptist Joint Committee for Religion Liberty gathering in June, on Roger Williams creating Rhode Island as a shelter for people of conscience

“We have never considered ourselves in any way unfaithful to the church, but if questioning is interpreted as defiance, that puts us in a very difficult position.”

—Sister Pat Farrell, head of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, speaking to the National Catholic Reporter about strained relations after the Vatican criticized American nuns (RNS)

“Partisan Christianity cannot effectively change our culture ... If American Christians continue to see the culture wars as the primary way of shaping culture, they should expect to see their numbers decline and their influence wane. But if they wake up to our current reality and return to the foundations of their faith — love, compassion, and a rigorous commitment to the ‘Gospel’ story that drives them to faith in the first place — the faith’s best days may yet lie ahead.”

—Author Jonathan Merritt, a graduate of Liberty University and son of former Southern Baptist Convention president James Merritt (The Atlantic)

“There was a sense that we are not just a fellowship, but are cooperative Baptists.”

—George Mason, chair of the search committee seeking a new executive coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, on the input received from hundreds of participants

“...[G]ender-inclusive language is foundational to the entire question of ‘women’s place’ in church and society. Language shapes thought; thought precedes action.”

—Naomi K. Walker, music and worship pastor at Immanuel Baptist Church in Frankfort, Ky. (ethicsdaily.com)

“It would have been terrible if we elect Fred [Luter] with enthusiasm and then reject one of the biggest needs that African Americans expressed to us. It would have been inconsistent.”

—Jimmy Draper, retired president of the SBC’s LifeWay Christian Resources and chairman of a task force whose recommendation that Southern Baptist churches be able to use the alternative identification of “Great Commission Baptists” received just 53 percent approval (RNS)

“Anything to put the Bible in people’s hands is a good thing.”

—Gideons spokesman Ken Stephens, responding to plans by the InterContinental Hotels Group to replace printed Bible with electronic versions loaded on Kindle e-readers (kypost.com)

“Christians have perpetrated the myth that the man or woman of God who has been called to ministry doesn’t have the same struggles, stresses and temptations that the person in the pew experiences. Those of us who have been in ministry any length of time know how wrong that is!”

—Ircel Harrison, coaching coordinator for Pinnacle Leadership Associates and adjunct professor for Central Baptist Theological Seminary, encouraging ministers to seek pastoral counseling (ABP)

“Andy was a person of incredibly strong Christian faith and was prepared for the day he would be called home to his Lord.”

—Cindi Griffith, in a statement issued through the Andy Griffith Museum in Mount Airy, N.C., following the July 3 death of her husband at age 86 (CNN)

Getting more comfortable with an uncertain future

In growing numbers, Baptists seem to be getting more comfortable with an uncertain denominational future. That is good.

Such a perspective allows for doing creative ministry “in the now” — without an illusion that the latest shift will be the current shift in the future. And denominational life, in response or resistance to cultural changes, is continually shifting. That is neither startling news nor a fact that can be easily denied.

Those made nervous by shifting sands or an uncertain future will continue to be troubled. However, it is encouraging to see the growing willingness of church leaders in congregational and denominational life to accept the challenge of ongoing adjustments.

We hear less about “long-range plans” now because more of us are admitting that no one can see around enough corners. The result is not necessarily a fly-by-night but rather a fly-by-faith approach that seriously considers the current context for ministry without assuming that context will remain unchanged for any discernable time.

While such an approach can be frightening, it can also be freeing. It removes the risk of building fortified structures — figuratively and literally — that are quickly outdated and hard to renovate or demolish.

In our communications role, *Baptists Today* seeks to provide information about and analyses of the changing landscape in which congregations and related organizations carry out their tasks. Such information, I often tell church leaders, is necessary to discern between a fad that is here today and gone tomorrow

and greater cultural shifts that deserve the full attention of churches and denominational groups.

Panic is never the right response to ongoing change and uncertainty. But that can happen when old ways of doing things don't work anymore and once robust organizations struggle as their resources dwindle.

The most constructive response, however, appears to be a growing affirmation of the state of uncertainty — a willingness to be nimble enough to adjust to ongoing change.

In my earlier work as a campus minister, I would often have new students stumble into my office with great concern. They were uncertain about which major to choose and what career to pursue. Often that pressure was coming from parents or other external forces.

My response to them was always to relax and engage in college life and dig into the core curriculum as a way of refining their interests. I urged them to get practical experience in a variety of jobs to determine what kind of work might fit their gifts.

Often I reminded those less-certain students that changing majors is not a crime — and that hardly anyone retires from the first career they begin anymore. Chill. Explore. Learn. Then decide a clearer course with openness to another.

Those with uncertainty about the future concerned me a lot less than the one who had every aspect of his or her life determined before reaching age 20. The landscape is too prone to shift, and the future is too uncertain. Whether seeking a vocational course or

discerning congregational direction or reorganizing a denominational approach to ministry, the best starting place is a confession that we don't know what the future will look like. This is especially true for Baptist congregations and other groups where affiliation and cooperation are voluntary.

We don't know what the future holds — and that is OK. We will face the current context with faith, hope and love — and with open eyes to whatever might change before us.

For me to call anyone or any organization to patience is the height of hypocrisy. Patience has never been my strongest virtue. However, it is important during times of shifts and uncertainty.

Like some other denominational groups, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is going through such a time of transition and reorganization amid great cultural shifts. Unlike some historic denominations — with their old structures — CBF is more nimble. But even 20 years worth of doing things a certain way requires more than simple tinkering.

Trusting God with the future is easier said than done. But I am pleased to see more faith and patience — and less panic — at play.

In individual congregations, the changing landscape calls for revisiting established ways of doing church — with the heightened awareness that the new social context of today may well be an old context in just a few years.

We are learning — and must learn — to live more comfortably with a mix of ongoing discernment and action. Perhaps we can find comfort also in knowing that emerging church leaders will know no other way of being and doing church than within a sea of constant change.

Both sincere prayers and good plans allow us to move ahead while realizing that the destination may change before we get there. **BT**



We don't know what the future holds — and that is OK. We will face the current context with faith, hope and love — and with open eyes to whatever might change before us.



In a close vote, members of the Southern Baptist Convention have voted to accept the alternate unofficial name of “Great Commission Baptists.” The debate immediately followed the election of Fred Luter as the denomination’s first African-American president. RNS photo courtesy Baptist Press

‘Historic Moment’

Southern Baptists elect Fred Luter as first black president

NEW ORLEANS — Pointing heavenward and wiping away tears, Fred Luter was elected June 19 as the first black president of the predominantly white Southern Baptist Convention.

“To God be the glory for the things that he has done,” Luter said moments after more than 7,000 Southern Baptists leapt to their feet, cheered and shouted “Hallelujah” when he was declared their next leader.

Luter, 55, a former street preacher who brought his mostly black New Orleans congregation back from near annihilation after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, will lead the nation’s largest Protestant denomination for at least a year. Most Southern Baptist presidents traditionally serve two one-year terms.

Southern Baptists leaders had urged the nomination and election of Luter for more than a year. Many said it was long time for such a move for a denomination that was born in 1845 in a defense of slavery.

“We have the opportunity to make history, to show a watching world the truth about our savior and ourselves,” David Crosby, pastor of the mostly white First Baptist Church of New Orleans, said in his nomination of Luter.

“Let’s give our ballots a voice and shout out to the world: Jesus is Lord! This is our president! We are Southern Baptists!”

Crosby’s church, which sustained less damage after Katrina, shared space with Luter’s remaining congregants after the hurricane.

Members of black Southern Baptist churches — which make up about 8 percent of the SBC’s 45,000 congregations — hailed the expected election. Some said they were shocked and never thought they’d live to see such an occurrence.

Black Southern Baptists have attended the annual meetings in limited numbers and some have complained when they seldom saw people who look like them speaking from the convention platform. This year, more attended than usual and ushers came from Luter’s Franklin Avenue Baptist Church.

In the months before the election, SBC ethicist Richard Land was embroiled in controversy for saying President Obama and civil rights leaders had exploited the case of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed Florida teen who was killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer. Land, who was reprimanded and lost his radio talk show as a result of on-air

plagiarism and the racial tension his remarks caused, was among those immediately cheering Luter’s election.

“Today was as truly a historic moment as Southern Baptist life will ever experience,” said Land, who helped craft the denomination’s 1995 statement apologizing for the “deplorable sin” of racism. “Praise God for his redeeming grace.”

Many said before his election that Luter deserved to be elected not because he is black but because of his commitment to the denomination, preaching skills and success in rebuilding his church into one of the largest in Louisiana. A recent survey by the SBC’s LifeWay Research found that the majority of Southern Baptist pastors were ready for a black president.

Luter closed out the annual pastors’ conference on the eve of the Southern Baptist meeting, and had the audience on its feet as he waved his Bible in a fervent sermon.

“Only the Word of God can change the heart of a racist; only the Word of God can change the desire of a child molester,” he preached. “The Word of God can change a lifestyle of a homosexual. The Word of God is the only hope for America today.” **BT**

Transition time: CBF approves plan, seeks new executive coordinator

FORT WORTH, Texas — The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) looks forward to an “in-between year” characterized by implementation of a new identity statement and a search for a successor to retiring CBF Executive Coordinator Daniel Vestal, the group’s incoming moderator said during the June General Assembly.

“In this coming year, we’ll lay down the foundations for a new organizational structure and we’ll welcome a new leader who will give direction to our shared calling, who will partner with us and who will lead,” said Keith Herron, pastor of Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo.

With final approval of a new model for identity, governance and financial support intended to guide the moderate Baptist group formed in 1991 for the next 20 years, Herron, who assumed the gavel from outgoing moderator Colleen Burroughs, now turns to implementation of the plan.

Herron said he and interim CBF coordinator Pat Anderson will assemble a group of strategic thinkers and leaders to sort through the report and “develop a playbook that outlines how we think we can best put this plan into action.”

Herron said he hopes to have a first draft of the implementation plan for the Coordinating Council to consider when they meet in October and again in February before presentation to next year’s General Assembly in Greensboro, N.C.

“There are several alignments we can begin to lean into this fall, while other steps will take some time to put into practice,” Herron said. “This work won’t happen in a corner, and its implications are wide-ranging and important.”

The new identity plan is the result of a two-year study that included more than 100 listening sessions conducted by a task force chaired by David Hull.



CBF Moderator Keith Herron

“You have spoken; we have listened,” Hull, pastor of First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Ala., said in a presentation during the opening business session of the 22nd annual CBF General Assembly. “Together we have tried to imagine a future of life and vitality for Cooperative Baptists.”

The new plan seeks to pull together a myriad of national, state and regional CBF organizations into “a seamless cooperating community,” while doing a better job of sharing resources that already exist and reducing duplication of effort among CBF and partner organizations.

“Our future lies in our ability to live into our name,” Hull said. “We are cooperative Baptists.”

The plan also for the first time suggests a way for churches desiring to identify publicly with CBF mission and values to do so beyond financial contributions.

“Congregations may embrace their identity by sending a letter that outlines the details of their partnership with CBF,” the report recommends. Such a letter might list or describe ways the congregation participates in CBF, including but not limited to affirming its identity, values and mission; praying for CBF; including CBF ministries — state/regional and/or national — in church budgets;

promoting and collecting the Global Missions Offering; participating in regional or national CBF ministries and attending their state or national General Assembly.

That section of the report was amended during the General Assembly to clarify grammatically the intent is not to force the issue of CBF affiliation within churches where it might be divisive.

Hull said the task force heard from many churches requesting a way to highlight their CBF identity above and beyond giving money.

“There is nothing required by this at all,” Hull said. “Some churches said, ‘Give us a way to identify with CBF apart from just sending money to you.’ Many churches will choose not to do this. That’s fine. This is for churches who want to say in a public sense, ‘This is who we are.’”

The new plan also calls for more communication in the process of developing budgets for state/regional and national CBF organizations. Currently the budgets for various CBF entities are developed separately, sometimes with little or no communication between the two. The new plan recommends that regional and national bodies negotiate cooperative agreements about not only division of funds but also responsibilities for ministry resources.

Connie McNeill, task force member and coordinator of administration for the CBF Atlanta staff, said the plan affirms both the national organization’s role in missionary and resource work and the geographical proximity offered in the state and regional CBFs.

The plan will “create a process for national, state and regional organizations to work together more closely, while respecting the autonomy and uniqueness of each,” she said.

Ruth Perkins Lee, vice chair of the 2012 Task Force, said while much attention the last few years has been on budget shortfalls at the national level, the listening sessions actually revealed an abundance of resources that aren’t being fully tapped.

She called for “a paradigm shift that recognizes we are the best resources CBF has.”

“We have done great things together, and we can do infinitely more,” said Lee, minister of students at Auburn First Baptist Church in Auburn, Ala. **BT**

Baptists in U.S. provide support for new Zimbabwe seminary

Twenty-three years after launching Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (BTSR), the Alliance of Baptists is now working with partners to birth the Zimbabwe Theological Seminary.

Two U.S. Baptist groups that formerly sponsored a Baptist seminary in Zimbabwe have switched loyalty to a new school started since the 2011 firing of a principal who opposed changes in governing documents that included required adherence to the Southern Baptist Convention's 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message*.

The Zimbabwe Theological Seminary in Gweru, Zimbabwe, opened classes last September and enrolls 50 students, said Philip Mudzidzi, an adjunct lecturer at the new seminary and former national youth and student director of the Zimbabwe Baptist Convention.

In July 2011 the Zimbabwe Baptist Convention fired Baptist Theological Seminary of Zimbabwe principal Henry Mugabe for refusing to abide by an amended school charter adopted by a new council formed to replace the seminary's board of trustees.

Changes reportedly related to the transfer of school property from the SBC International Mission Board to the Baptist Convention of Zimbabwe, naming the president of the Zimbabwe Baptist convention the seminary's official legal authority, and requiring all academic staff "to subscribe to the 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* upheld by the Baptist Convention of Zimbabwe, IMB and the Southern Baptist Convention."

Mugabe, a Ph.D. graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary who has taught adjunctively at U.S. seminaries affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, is appealing his termination in Zimbabwe and is not officially connected to the new seminary. He is visiting the United States this summer, with

speaking engagements being arranged by the Lott Carey Missionary Convention, which lists the new Zimbabwe Theological Seminary as a global partner.

The Lott Carey convention, formed in 1897 by black Baptists in the U.S. committed to missionary work on the African continent, was one of several funding sources tapped by Mugabe in the 1990s to make up for a reorientation of Southern Baptist International Mission Board priorities that meant funds would no longer be available for operating institutions such as the Baptist Theological Seminary of Zimbabwe.

Another was the Alliance of Baptists, a 25-year-old organization of 135 churches formed by progressives seeking distance from the "conservative resurgence" in the SBC in the 1980s. One of the Alliance's early actions in 1989 was to launch BTSR to fill a void of "reverence for biblical authority and respect for open inquiry and responsible scholarship" created by the loss of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, an idea at the time widely viewed as ambitious or even audacious.

Recently the Alliance sent out a press release saying for similar reasons, the group is "helping give birth" to the new Zimbabwe Theological Seminary. According to the release, a group of U.S. Baptists committed to the new seminary began teleconference meetings last summer to coordinate support efforts.

Chris Caldwell, pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., provided the phone bridge and took early leadership in the conversations. Early meetings included staff members from the Alliance, the Lott Carey Convention and BTSR.

In addition to funding, the group focused on securing books for the new seminary's library and helping to develop and launch a website.

Beginning with a book list provided by the seminary, team members e-mailed colleagues and friends across the country asking for assistance. Some donors gave books from their personal libraries; others purchased books and donated them to the new school.

Baptist scholar Glenn Hinson donated his entire library. "It is not easy even at age 80 to part with things you have cherished much of your life," Hinson, senior professor of church history and spirituality at the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, said in the news release.

When the seminary requested Bibles, students at BTSR and the library at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond donated more than 75. The committee quickly determined that fundraising was needed to help offset the cost of shipping: \$3.50 per pound and more than \$13,000 to date. They recruited individuals, schools, Sunday school classes and vacation Bible school programs in Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina and Kentucky to adopt the cause as a mission project.

A former BTSR student donated her time to design a new seminary logo. Colleagues at Lott Carey volunteered their webmaster to design, launch and maintain a new website, now up and running at www.zimsem.org. The Italian Baptist Union, another longtime partner of the Baptist Theological Seminary of Zimbabwe, also pledged support for the new school.

The website describes the Zimbabwe Theological Seminary as committed to a "distinctively Baptist heritage with an ecumenical commitment, a global perspective, and participation in the worldwide Christian mission."

Mudzidzi said about 10 denominations are represented so far, including Anglicans, Evangelical Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists and some of the African-initiated churches, also known as indigenous churches, independent denominations established by African initiative rather than foreign missionaries.

Mudzidzi said the new seminary is seeking accreditation through Great Zimbabwe University in Masvingo. The Alliance of Baptists press release described successes so far as "a testimony to the power of collaboration and cooperation."

"No one group or organization could have launched this groundbreaking new school alone," the release stated. "As a global village, however, we are making the dream a reality." **BT**

Some donors gave books from their personal libraries; others purchased books and donated them to the new school.



Do Baptists have a core identity?

Philip Thompson, professor of systematic theology and Christian heritage at Sioux Falls Seminary, says theological disputes among Baptists are often cast in terms of violating Baptist principles or distorting Baptist history.

When the Baptist History & Heritage Society met in Raleigh in June, the official topic was “Baptists and Theology.” Through three keynote addresses and a variety of breakout sessions, both historians and theologians addressed the subject.

The meeting was held at both of Raleigh’s First Baptist churches: the predominantly Anglo Salisbury Street church and the predominantly African American Wilmington Street church.

Historian Glenn Jonas, chair of the religion department at Campbell University, highlighted some of the theological developments in the two churches, which began as one, including issues of race relations and leadership roles for women. Jonas recently published *Nurturing the Vision: First Baptist Church, Raleigh 1812-2012*.

Theologian Fisher Humphries, retired professor of divinity at Samford’s Beeson Divinity School, reviewed significant theological works written by Baptists since 1950, highlighting a number of those from a list of more than 250 titles.

Numerous other papers were presented with theologians and historians agreeing that there is no single Baptist theology. Philip

Thompson, professor of systematic theology and Christian heritage at Sioux Falls Seminary, argued for one distinction.

Noting that Baptists talk a lot about “principles,” Thompson said that the formulation of Baptist principles in the 19th century displaced dogmatics from theology to history. Baptist principles state the Baptist dogma, or what makes us identifiable, he said.

When theological disputes occur among Baptists, Thompson said, they are often cast in terms of the violation of Baptist principles or a distortion of Baptist history. Whatever the issue, people holding opposing views are likely to accuse each other of abandoning historic Baptist principles.

“Clearly, principles are bound up with history,” Thompson said, “But lists of principles are not enough to establish Baptist identity.”

Historian Bill Leonard, who holds the Dunn Chair of Baptist Studies at Wake Forest University Divinity School, spoke of convictions and contradictions in Baptist life. He pointed to widely divergent theological views held by both early and contemporary Baptists, with special emphasis given to the doctrine of salvation, which Calvinist and non-Calvinist Baptists understand quite differently.

Leonard asked, “What might be the center of Baptist theological and ecclesial identity?”

As he has done before, Leonard said “I continue to insist that it rests in the concept of a believer’s church ... a company of faithful

people separated from the world by repentance and a confession of faith in Jesus.”

This has been normative from the beginning of the movement, he said.

Leonard pointed to several aspects of a believer’s church in the Baptist tradition, including beliefs in the necessity of an uncoerced faith, freedom of conscience, the right of dissent, and a separation of church and state. He added that Baptist congregations hold to a tension between biblical authority and liberty of conscience, congregational autonomy and associational fellowship.

Baptists have been inevitably confessional and selectively creedal, he said: “From the beginning, Baptists have constructed confessions of faith but have differed in how to apply them.”

The Baptist identity continues to evolve, he said, impacted by everything from demographics to technical developments to cultural change. One of the greatest challenges facing Baptists, Leonard said, is that we live in a time when one of the fastest growing identity groups is the “nones” (people who express no religious identity).

As a result, Baptists must confront the reality that a growing number of people, including younger Baptists, are increasingly indifferent to theological or ecclesiastical aspects of the debate over the Baptist identity. In other words, the question is not only who gains the upper hand in the debate over Baptist identity, but also how many people — even among Baptists — really care. **BT**

Ben McDade joins staff of *Baptists Today*

MACON, Ga. — Benjamin L. McDade Sr. is executive vice president of the national news journal, *Baptists Today*, as of Aug. 1. He comes from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) where he has worked in communications and advancement since 2002.

McDade will direct all development and marketing efforts and help give strategic direction to the expanding organization. The news journal, which has grown in circulation since adding the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies in 2011, recently launched a subsidiary to publish books, additional curriculum and other church resources under the Nurturing Faith imprint.

“With a background in journalism and advancement, and a knowledge of the Baptist people, Ben McDade is a natural to help lead *Baptists Today*,” said Board Chairman Walter B. Shurden, minister at large for Mercer University. “Our Board of Directors is thrilled to have him on board.”

Founded in 1983, *Baptists Today* is a fully



autonomous, national news journal headquartered in Macon, Ga., and guided by an independent Board of Directors. McDade will work out of Atlanta, while other staff is spread from Raleigh, N.C., to Bozeman, Mont.

“Ben brings the right gifts, experience and energy to *Baptists Today* at just the right time as we grow and expand our ministry,” said Executive Editor/President John Pierce. “He will be a vital part of a dynamic team of talented and committed people with whom I’m privileged to work.”


Because of its independence, *Baptists Today*

relies on mutually beneficial partnerships with other organizations and the strong support of individuals who value the mission of the news journal. McDade will help expand those partnerships and solidify the support base as well as broaden awareness of the news journal, books, curriculum and other resources being produced now and in the future.

McDade recalled how the news journal, that predates the creation of CBF, provided unrestricted coverage of Baptist life during a tumultuous shifting of the denominational landscape during the era in which the Fellowship was born.

“While we all owe a debt of gratitude to those who were committed to keeping Baptists informed with unvarnished news and information during those days, it’s the continuing innovative vision, passion, enthusiasm and commitment to excellence of *Baptists Today’s* staff and board leadership that call me to this next phase of ministry,” said McDade. “I am most pleased that my work will allow me to continue serving within the greater Fellowship community as *Baptists Today* builds on its proud tradition — and to be a part of the new publishing venture Nurturing Faith.” **BT**

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'Intellectually dishonest'

Pastor challenges biblical inerrancy claims based on unidentifiable original autographs

Biblical inerrancy — the idea that the Bible's authors were safeguarded against error when inspired by God to write facts about science and history in Scripture — is a misleading and harmful concept that has been used to hurt people and is damaging to the cause of Christ, a Baptist pastor in Georgia said recently.

"Few words in the last 30 years have caused more mischief than the word inerrancy," Pastor Richard Kremer said in a sermon at Garden Lakes Baptist Church in Rome, Ga.

Kremer, who came to Garden Lakes three years ago from St. John's Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C., said while the word "inerrant" might seem like a perfectly fine word to describe the authenticity and authority of the Bible, the term "has been used and manipulated," especially during the divisive area in Southern Baptist life often called the "conservative resurgence."

"This word has in fact done horrendous damage to the character of the Bible and ruined countless lives," Kremer said. "The cause of Christ is being damaged by its use even now."

In a sermon text picked up by a website opposed to recent changes at the Georgia Baptist Convention-related Shorter University, Kremer referred to a biology professor there who resigned because his boss wanted him to teach theories such as young-earth creationism that have no scientific basis.

In effect, Kremer said, the administrator wanted the professor to "turn a blind eye to the fossil records, ignore the evidence of geological shifts and continental drifts, ignore the pottery shards — all of which make the point that 6,000 years is but a sliver of human existence on this earth, much less the history of the earth as a whole."

Kremer, who holds a Ph.D. in systematic

theology from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said the reason some people want to treat the Bible like a science book is "the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration," which he summarized as, "God said it, and humanity wrote it down."

Kremer said there are a few Bible passages that seem to support the idea, such as God dictating the Ten Commandments to Moses and commanding Moses to write them down. On the other hand, Kremer said, God would have to be pretty egotistical to dictate words to the psalmist to be read back as praise unto himself.

Kremer said the fact that each of the four Gospels reports different details surrounding Christ's resurrection, such as who was present and how many angels were at the empty tomb, shows the Bible wasn't intended to convey history in the same way that a modern historian would write a book about the Civil War.

Kremer noted that the creation account in the first chapter of Genesis says that God created everything in the world first and humanity last. Another account in chapter 2 says that God created humanity first, and then followed with the natural order. Kremer said the editor of Genesis was surely smart enough to notice the discrepancy, "but he didn't care," because he was not proposing a scientific explanation of creation, only that it ultimately goes back to God.

Kremer also pointed out that the traditional understanding of biblical inerrancy applies not to modern versions of the Bible but to a hypothetical original referred to as "the autographs."

"That's very convenient," he said. "For no one has ever seen the Bible's original autographs. Do you know why? They don't exist!



Richard Kremer

There is not some dusty text, this original hidden away in some obscure cave in Israel."

"The Bible came into being over a period of centuries," Kremer said. "Its pages originated in diverse places and in diverse times. The Old Testament existed in oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation before it was ever recorded in print. When it was printed it was written in a variety of places in a variety of versions."

"There is no such thing as an original autograph of the Scripture, and to claim such a manuscript is the basis for the inerrancy is intellectually dishonest," he said.

Kremer said some people might desire to just dismiss the whole argument with, "Why does it matter?" but in fact it does matter what people say about the Bible.

"I don't want young people thinking they have to discard their faith because some scientist has made a discovery that seems to contradict some biblical principle," he said. "I don't want a scientist having to put his/her brain on ice because his/her discoveries contradict what the Bible allegedly teaches about one scientific discipline or another."

Kremer said nearby Shorter University's new statement of faith "We believe the Bible ... is the inerrant and infallible Word of God" is true to a point. "When you come to talking about the character of God, the Bible is indeed inerrant," he said. "When you're talking about the revelation of God in Christ, we can trust that information with perfect confidence."

Those who assert that the Bible is correct on its teaching about geology, however, "grossly misinterpret the Bible's purpose," he said, because the ancient biblical writers did not even know that an endeavor known as "geology" would ever exist.

Kremer said those who argue for the Bible's perfection go beyond what Scripture has to say about itself. "The word never claims perfection for the word," he said. "The perfection is for the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ." **BT**

"I don't want young people thinking they have to discard their faith because some scientist has made a discovery that seems to contradict some biblical principle."

Describe a healthy pastor search process, please

The search process for a new pastor is both an exhilarating and a risky time for a congregation. Healthy congregations go at this task from the framework of a spiritual discernment process that is unique to the free-call tradition of congregational life.

While every search is unique, there are some guiding principles that apply to all of us. While there is a good bit of generic material on the market, best practices remain an excellent way to learn from one another.

Recently, I asked four pastors who have transitioned to new churches in recent months a series of questions about their experience. The pastors are: Mike Smith (Central Baptist of Fountain City, Knoxville, Tenn.), Bob Setzer (Knollwood Baptist, Winston-Salem N.C.), Charity Roberson (Sharon Baptist, Smithfield N.C.) and Doug Dortch (Mountain Brook Baptist, Birmingham, Ala.). Here is a glimpse at some of their observations.

What about the search process impressed you?

Smith: “The committee took time to research and report back to me on difficult questions. They did not attempt to rush me, but actually prayed and reflected with me about the decision.”

Dortch: “During the introductory weekend, the committee planned a Saturday morning reception. This activity served to ‘lower the temperature’ of the weekend and gave that time a much more relaxed feel.”

Setzer: “Using video conferencing allowed us to ‘meet’ one another without the expense, trouble and exposure of a trip. Having not done this in 15 years, I was surprised at how much harder

we had to work to maintain confidentiality about the search process. The committee did an extraordinary job with this.”

Integrating a new pastor into an established staff is one of the most perilous aspects of a call. How did you approach this?

Setzer: “I was blessed to meet with the staff ministers at length at a mid-point in the process. They had long tenure at the church, and knew the church far better, in some ways, than the search committee.”

Smith: “I spent one full day meeting with each staff member individually and with the entire group twice. Each had prepared and shared a written document outlining their backgrounds, current work, aspirations and what each was looking for in the next pastor. These documents helped make our conversations quite meaningful.”

What worked well for you in terms of your entry into the life of your new church?

Roberson: “The pictorial directory was invaluable to me. I kept referring to it 10 weeks in, [and] I find myself still going back to it regularly.”

Dortch: “I was fortunate to come during Advent and was able to meet with a number of small groups that had already planned Christmas socials. One way or another, I would recommend small group gatherings.”

Smith: “My first two months on the job, the staff assumed responsibility for Wednesday

programming so that I was free to move around and observe what was going on, talk with persons as I had opportunity, etc. This arrangement was valuable in helping me get a feel for programs and become acquainted with a sizable segment of the church leadership.”

Setzer: “An intentional interim process had identified and begun to work with some of the hot-button issues in the congregation. Also, the church held a big installation service several weeks after my arrival that was an important celebration for them and for me.”

What advice would you give other clergy involved in a search process?

Dortch: “The chairman of the search committee formalized the terms of the call with a ‘Memo of Understanding,’ something I had never been given in other situations. It served to clarify for all parties all aspects of my transition.”

Roberson: “Don’t be afraid to slow down the process. When a search committee gets to the point of having narrowed down to a candidate, sometimes I think they are just really ready to move forward and be done with the job. It’s a great game of wait, wait and then hurry up.”

Setzer: “Ask for whatever you feel you need and want at the front end prior to your arrival. I negotiated a sabbatical that included ‘credit for accrued service’ that took into account my service at my previous church. Also, try to cobble together a good chunk of time between pastorates. It was invaluable to us as we prepared a house for sale, said goodbye to good friends, and regrouped and retooled for the next leg of the journey.”

Smith: “Don’t want the new place too much. Force yourself to take your time and discern the health and honesty of the potential situation, to pray and reflect honestly to discern if your gifts and skill set fit their needs and if God might be in this.”

Let those who have ears, hear. **BT**

—Bill Wilson is president of the Center for Congregational Health in Winston-Salem, N.C.
This column was distributed by ABP.

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By Guy Sayles

When the church is the church's greatest threat

FDR famously said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Similarly, I sometimes think the church’s greatest threat is the church itself.

These days, many people are intensely interested in Jesus, but, at the same time, profoundly disinterested in the church.

This wide gap between how people feel about Jesus and how they feel about the church reflects, in part, a broad cultural trend away from involvement in organized groups.

Across America, membership in civic clubs — Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions — has been declining for two decades.

Far fewer Americans vote in elections, participate in political parties, and attend city council, county commission or school board meetings.

More and more Americans say something like: “I am spiritual but not religious,” which means they have feelings of connection with the divine and practices that nurture such connections, but keep their distance from churches.

Jesus is popular. The church? Not so much. That distance from the church isn’t simply the

result of broader trends away from civic engagement and social affiliation. The gap between people’s fascination with Jesus and their indifference, or even resistance, to the church also has to do with the church’s own failure to be like Jesus.

Big and obvious wrongs show how the church can fail to look and sound like Jesus: Priests abuse children. Preachers call for men and women created in God’s image to be rounded up, locked up and quarantined or killed because of their lifestyles. Televangelists amass wealth scammed from people living on fixed incomes.

But there are everyday ways in which the church denies Jesus, just as surely as Peter did on the night before Jesus’ death.

When justice, peace and concern for the marginalized get pushed aside by petty moralism, nervous deference to the status quo and anxious refusal to share resources with those who need them, then the church is a long way from Jesus.



When church people use the Bible like a weapon to bludgeon people with whom they disagree or to oppress women and keep them “in their place”; when fear is a tactic to force conformity of behavior and uniformity of thought; when condemnation is more common than compassion; when legalism overrules freedom; when forgiveness gets lost in the fog of judgment; when status matters more than service; and when harshness drives out humility, then the church has made itself unlike Jesus.

When these kinds of things happen, people outside the church see sooner and more clearly than do people inside that something is desperately wrong.

They wonder how there can be so much talking and singing about Jesus and so little evidence that the people doing all that talking and singing mean to follow him and be like him.

The greatest threat the church faces is the church itself, and the best hope for the church is Jesus. Those of us who claim to follow him need actually to do so. **BT**

—Guy Sayles is pastor of First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C. This column also appeared on his blog and at ethicsdaily.com.

The gap between people’s fascination with Jesus and their indifference, or even resistance, to the church also has to do with the church’s own failure to be like Jesus.

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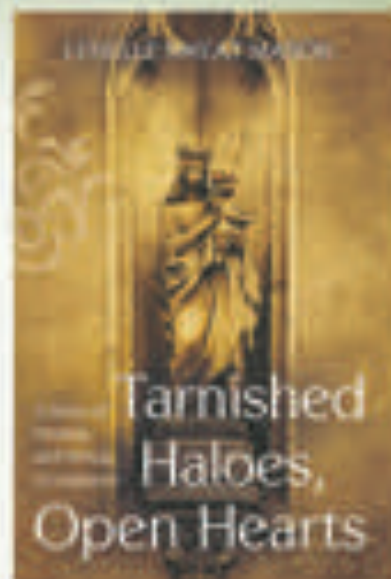
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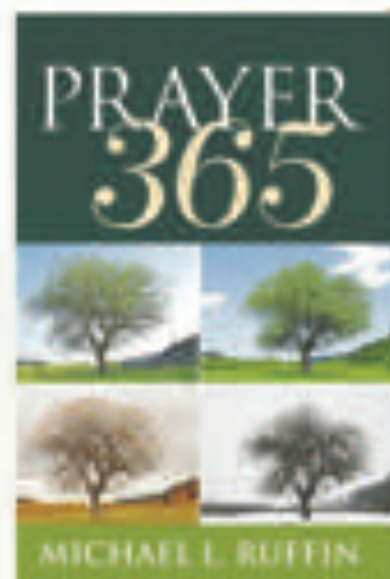
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Popular Bible teacher and writer **Tony W. Cartledge** writes each of the weekly Bible studies in *Baptists Today* (beginning on page 18). Themes are based on selected texts from the Revised Common Lectionary.

These lessons — found exclusively in this Nurturing Faith section of *Baptists Today* — form the foundation for the teaching resources for all age groups. **Each class participant should have a copy of *Baptists Today* with these lessons in hand.**

Christian educator **Rick Jordan** of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina provides a teaching plan for each lesson, available at nurturingfaith.net. His FIT FAITH approach to teaching allows for class engagement with the biblical texts as well as with one another.

The Youth Lessons — found on pages 22-23 — build off of Tony's Bible studies and direct these biblical truths to the daily lives of students. Curriculum developer **David Cassady** writes the youth lessons in the news journal, and student minister **Jeremy Colliver** provides the online teaching guides for each lesson found at nurturingfaith.net (or linked from baptiststoday.org).

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These Bible studies for adults and youth are sponsored through generous gifts from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (Bo Prosser, Coordinator of Congregational Life) and from the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation. Thank you!

Bible Study

Song of Songs 2:8-15

with Tony W. Cartledge

Sept. 2, 2012

A Woman Who Loves

Who is the wisest person you know? Chances are good that it's a woman – perhaps a grandmother or teacher who offered you good counsel in times past. In the ancient world, wisdom was often associated with women. During the month of September, we'll be studying five lessons that relate to wisdom in some way, and four of them directly involve women.

Our first lesson might not strike you as wisdom literature, but wouldn't we all like to be wiser in the ways of love? Sunday school lessons from the Song of Songs may be even scarcer than sermons on that beautiful but mysterious text, but the ancients were wise enough and inspired enough to preserve it as a part of the scriptures. This may seem strange, because the Song never mentions God or Israel, has no religious themes, and is frankly, exotically, erotically focused on human intimacy and sex with no mention of marriage – or of sin. ⚓

So, what wisdom might we find in the Song of Songs?

The wisdom of love

The Song of Songs, traditionally (but erroneously) called the Song of Solomon, is one of five short books the Hebrew Bible refers to as the *Megilloth* (scrolls). ⚓

The name of the book comes from its first verse, which literally reads, "The song of songs, which is to/of/by/for Solomon." This notation, like the superscriptions of the psalms, was



probably a later addition to the original text. ⚓

"Song of songs" is a superlative expression, a way of saying "the greatest song." Catholic-influenced translations call it "Canticles," after the title in the Vulgate. ⚓

The short book's 117 verses comprise anywhere from five to 50 different poems, depending on how one counts them. The book is not a unified, lyrical love song or a clear drama, though some scholars have labored hard to argue for that and identify speaking parts. It is a collection of love poems that probably refer to more than one couple. Just how the Song functioned in Israel's life and worship is unclear. ⚓

A fascinating aspect of this book is that, despite the patriarchal dominance of Israel's history, the woman plays a positive and powerful role in the Song. She is not a passive target for the man's affection, but appears just as bold as he in describing what she wants and what

she admires. She is assertive and sexual and clearly appreciates the joy of intimacy apart from its role in procreation or patriarchal family systems. It is also interesting that she often speaks of her mother's house and her mother's bedchamber, both of which speak of female power or autonomy in lovemaking. ⚓

The fact that the woman speaks so often suggests the distinct possibility that a woman could have written all or part of the poetry found in the Song of Songs.

Love desired (vv. 8-9)

Today's text is the latter part of a speech in which a smitten woman speaks gleefully of her beloved and the joy she takes in him. In v. 7, she addresses "the daughters of Jerusalem," who are likely the audience for her earlier musings. She describes her beau in lavish terms as a rare find, "like an apple tree among the trees of the wood"

Additional background information online where you see the "Digging Deeper" icon



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(v. 3). **U** “I sat in his shadow,” she says, “and his fruit was sweet to my taste.” The image of shade suggests both protection from the blazing sun and the delight of a secretive location. It is her beloved who is the source of shade, however, and she extends the metaphor with a figurative description of their happy encounter. **U**

The notion of taste leads to v. 4, where “the banqueting house” (literally, “house of wine”) is a metaphor for the feast of love they share. **U** While the woman asks for raisin cakes and apples for sustenance in her love-sick state (v. 5), the cure she most desires is to be in her beloved’s arms: “O that his left hand were under my head and that his right hand embraced me” (v. 6). **U**

Enamored with thoughts of love, the maiden calls on her companions, the “daughters of Jerusalem,” to swear that they will not “awaken or arouse love” until “it delights” (literally), sometimes translated “until it is ready” (v. 7, NRSV). Here, as in many other places in the Song, “love” is not abstract, but descriptive of physical passion. The idea seems to be a caution that one should not arouse one’s ardor before the time is right.

With v. 8 (and the official beginning of today’s text), the maiden exults in the sound of her beloved’s voice and the sight of his approach. She describes him as being like a gazelle or a young stag (v. 9), “leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.” Both stags and gazelles, sure-footed residents of the area’s mountain crags and open plains, were often associated with male virility in the ancient Near East.

The maiden is so anxious for his arrival that she does not wait for a knock at the door, but watches for him as he approaches.

Love invited (vv. 10-15)

With v. 10, the beloved arrives, and his voice – quoted by the woman – is heard in the next several verses. The man is just as eager to see the woman as she is to be reunited with him. In

words that sound reminiscent of a rite of spring he bids her come away with him, apparently to relish their love amid the beautiful world of springtime.

With the passing of winter rains (v. 11) – when planting was done – springtime offered a window of opportunity for other pursuits. Kings led their armies forth to war in the spring (2 Sam. 11:1) because they weren’t needed in the fields until harvest. The same freedom brought the man to his beloved, declaring that spring had arrived and it was time for love.

As romantic partners today enjoy hiking mountain trails, strolling through floral gardens, or ambling along a beach, the man calls the woman to come away with him. He speaks of flowers, birdsong, fig trees, and fragrant vineyards, all possible background settings for expressions of love (vv. 12-13).

Despite her earlier enthusiasm, the woman appears to have become afraid. The male lover speaks of her as a dove hiding in one of the many holes characteristic of the pockmarked rocky cliffs of Palestine (v. 14). He calls her to come out of hiding so he can see her face and hear her voice, “for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.” **U**

With v. 15, the woman speaks again, apparently giving voice to her fears. Whether she is speaking to her lover or to a wider audience is unclear, but she appeals for someone to “catch the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom.” **U**

Earlier, the man had spoken of vineyards in blossom, and now she returns to the image as a metaphor for their love, which appears to be threatened. Several of the poems in the Song speak of lovers who don’t match up with social conventions and are thus discouraged from meeting, leading them to meet at night or in secret places.

Who were the foxes that threatened the couple’s love, which was just in bloom? The poem does not say, but evidence in other parts of the Song point to possible ethnic or class differences. In 1:5 she is “black but beautiful,” though she attributes her dark coloring to being forced to work outdoors as a vine-keeper.

In chapter 5 she goes out in search of her lover, but is caught and beaten by night watchmen, though the cause of her offense is not clear.

Whatever obstacles they had to overcome, the lovers succeed, and the woman describes their love (or perhaps lovemaking) through metaphor: “My beloved is mine and I am his,” she says, “he pastures his flock among the lilies” (NRSV, or NET: “he grazes among the lilies,” v. 16). The woman hopes the encounter will last through the night (“until the day breathes and the shadows flee”), urging her beloved to “be like a gazelle or a young stag on the cleft of the mountains” (v. 17).

What do we do with such a frank and erotic description of love between two people? Why is this in scripture?

As noted in the online “Digging Deeper” comments, interpreters have employed a variety of approaches in trying to make sense of the text or to make it palatable to prudish readers. While the idea that the Song describes God’s love for Israel may have been the most popular, it is exegetically the least satisfying, for such an interpretation has to be imposed on a text that doesn’t really invite it.

In the end, we may regard this and other texts from the Song of Songs as a welcome biblical endorsement of the wonder and beauty of love, passion and sexual encounter as being among God’s most beautiful and praiseworthy gifts.

The man considers the woman to be a “lily among the brambles” (v. 2) while she considers him to be “an apple tree among the trees of the wood” (v. 3). Surely that kind of joyful, devoted relationship has something sacred about it, something worthy of poetry and song – even of scripture. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Sept. 9, 2012

A Word About Justice

Have you ever spent much time reading the Book of Proverbs? If so, you have noticed that the book includes a variety of materials that address many different topics. Today's texts deal, in one way or the other, with issues of justice. Before we get into specifics, however, let's get a quick overview of Proverbs, which we'll be studying for the next three weeks.

The Book of Proverbs, along with Job, Ecclesiastes and a few of the Psalms, belongs to a genre of writings we refer to as Wisdom literature, which differs from other Old Testament writings. ↓

Wisdom's primary purpose is not to narrate the redemptive history of Israel's relationship with God, as we find in the Pentateuch, the narrative literature, and the prophets. Nor is it to express joyful or lamenting worship to God, like the Psalms. The Wisdom books explore what it means to live wisely, and also ask questions about God that are not broached in the other writings. ↓

Wisdom literature says nothing of Abraham or Moses or covenants with God, but is based largely on a theology of creation and providence. Like their compatriots in Egypt and Mesopotamia, the Hebrew sages saw God primarily as the creator and sustainer of all. They believed that God had instilled a divine order into the universe, and that the wise could perceive relationships between cause and effect based on that order.

The Book of Proverbs consists mainly of practical wisdom that would have been passed down from father or mother to son or daughter, or from a



teacher/tutor to a student. Terms such as “your father” and “my son” may refer to teacher and pupil, not just family relationships. ↓

In structure, Proverbs are basically short, popular sayings that communicate a familiar truth in easily memorized form, usually two- to four-line poems. ↓

While some of the Proverb collections are attributed to Solomon, this does not mean he wrote them all. Many of the proverbs, no doubt, are bits of traditional wisdom that had been passed down for many years. ↓

A good name (vv. 1-2)

The other four Bible studies for September deal specifically with female characters. Today's lesson focuses on issues of justice, which is not gender-specific. In my experience, however, when I think of people I know who work for social justice, most of them are women.

Our study consists of three pairs of proverbs. ↓ All are found in chapter

22, but they come from two different collections. The first two pairs (vv. 1-2, 8-9) are found near the end of 375 proverbs identified as “Proverbs of Solomon” (10:1-22:16). The last pair is near the beginning of a section called “The Sayings of the Wise” (22:17-24:22). ↓

The first text deals with a proper attitude toward wealth, and offers an appropriate word for our materialistic, greed-driven society.

“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,” v. 1 contends, “and favor is better than silver or gold.” The word “good” is not present but implied: a literal translation would be “A name (is to be) chosen over great riches, and favor over silver and gold.”

The proverb does not criticize the enterprise of seeking honest gain to provide for one's family and prepare for old age. Other proverbs, in fact, extol hard work and strategic planning (e.g. 6:6; 12:24, 27; 13:4; 15:9; 19:24; 20:4; 21:25; 26:13-16). This same chapter, in fact, chides those who make any excuse

Additional background information online where you see the “Digging Deeper” icon



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A good advocate (vv. 22-23)

to avoid work: “The lazy person says ‘There is a lion outside; I shall be killed in the streets!’” (22:13).

The caution expressed in this proverb is not about money, but extreme amounts of money: a good name and good favor are contrasted with the possession of “great riches” and “silver and gold.”

What is your attitude toward money? Is enough ever enough? Is your sense of self-worth measured by your net worth?

The proverb reminds us there are things far more important than a fat bank account, luxurious vacation homes, and more vehicles than family members. Specifically, this proverb speaks to the value of our (good) name – a common Hebrew way of talking about our reputation, the esteem we have in others’ eyes. 📖

Would we rather be known for our kindness or our cash? For relationships or riches? For investing in a better community, or accumulating capital?

The companion proverb adds perspective to the first: “The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all” (v. 2). We all come into the world as part of God’s creation. When we exit this world, we take nothing with us. When we stand before God, the goods we gained on earth will have no value: all we will have is our name, and what it signifies.

A good heart (vv. 8-9)

Our second set of two proverbs moves from personal greed to intentional injustice. Even a small group of people devoted to amassing wealth – if successful – can foment an economic system in which the deck is stacked so that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. As the exceedingly rich increase their slice of the fiscal pie, the less there is for everyone else.

Statistics compiled in 2007 showed that one percent of Americans control about 35 percent of the nation’s financial wealth and the top 20 percent own 85 percent of the nation’s net worth. That leaves just 15 percent for the

remaining 80 percent of the population.

Wealthy people may not consider profiting at the expense of the poor to have a moral aspect, but Israel’s Wisdom teachers would have considered it unjust, and warned of consequences: “Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail” (v. 8). 📖

In contrast, “Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor” (v. 9).

The metaphor of sowing and reaping occurs commonly in the Bible, nearly always some variation of the notion that we reap what we sow. Those who sow injustice will reap calamity, the writer said. 📖

The global financial meltdown of the past several years – triggered by a wildly speculative and undisciplined financial system that rewarded greedy risk and ultimately collapsed – could be “Exhibit A” in the sage’s case. Despite losing more total wealth, the richest Americans suffered far less than those in the lower economic strata who lost their jobs and who remain unemployed or who earn far less than before.

In contrast, one who is generous understands the moral imperative of helping the poor. They share, taking action to feed the hungry. “Those who are generous” is from an idiom that literally means “one [who is] good of eye,” or “one [who has] a bountiful eye.” A good eye is the opposite of the dreaded “evil eye.” It is open to the needs of others, and seeks to bless rather than to curse.

In return, the sage insists, generous people are blessed. Such blessing may or may not be in the form of material gain. Those who give of their money or volunteer their time on mission trips or in social ministry efforts often remark that they feel more blessed than the people they have helped. Have you had this experience?

The third proverb pair in today’s study is in the same chapter, but belongs to a different collection, called “The Words (or Sayings) of the Wise.” Scholars have often noted that this collection of sayings (22:17-24:22) bears many similarities to an Egyptian wisdom text called “The Instructions of Amen-em-o-pe.” 📖

The second set of proverbs contrasted human injustice with human generosity, and our third set goes a step further by insisting that Yahweh (the Hebrew name for God represented by “the LORD”) is an advocate for the poor, and pleads their case.

Those who are wise will not “rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate” (v. 22). People do not take from the poor just because they are poor, of course, but because they are easy targets, with little power to resist.

The prophets roundly criticized those who acquired large tracts of land by fraudulent means, often by bringing false charges against poor farmers and hiring false witnesses to testify against them before the elders who sat in judgment at the city gate (e.g. Isa. 1:23, 5:8).

Robber barons should be warned that the poor may have no defense at the city gate, but “the LORD will plead their case, and will rob those who are robbing them” (v. 23, NET). Such retribution may not happen immediately or even individually, but over time, balance will come. When the Assyrians conquered Israel in 722 B.C., and when the Babylonians gained sovereignty over Judah in 597 B.C., the first people to go into exile were the elites: the wealthy and well-educated people whose power could prove threatening to the new overlords if they were left in place.

As we consider the economic disparities of our world and our nation today, do you think these texts might have something to say to us? Do our personal financial practices, or even our investments, contribute to an inequitable, unjust system that favors the “haves” and leaves the “have-nots” wanting? **BT**

Youth



David Cassady and Jeremy Colliver

September 2 — September 30, 2012

Youth lessons are made possible through the generous support of the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation.

Her Love Story

Do you remember the love notes you used to pass in class: "Do you love me? Check 'Yes' or 'No.'" You usually didn't check either box but rather created your own: "Maybe." Then you would send the note back through the maze of friends who brought it to you.

Our passage for today is a short love poem between a woman and the man she desires.

The woman begins by speaking of hearing the voice of the man she loves, and she continues to describe the way he comes over the hills after her. He arrives at her place and waits while looking through the windows for her. When he speaks to her, he is trying to persuade her to come with him now that it is springtime and he has time for her. She

seems to have changed her mind because now she is hiding from him.

He describes her as a bird hiding in the clefts of the hill. She hears his voice and comes out of hiding to speak truth into his fears. The poem ends with the woman coming back to the man and hoping that he will stick around through the night.

So where do we find God in this poem of a man and a woman chasing after each other and speaking their love to each other? They don't even speak of their love being grounded in God. Maybe the relationship that is built of joy and devotion to each other is one that is being shown as sacred, or maybe it is meant to remind us of the way God pursues and loves us.

SEPTEMBER 2

Think About It:

Why did a poem about two people in love that doesn't directly mention God make it into the Bible? What does the relationship of these people reveal about how God loves and seeks us?

Make a Choice:

Have you ever pursued someone you love? Did you base your relationship on the joy the other brings as with the two people in this poem?

Pray:

God, we praise you for the joy and love that relationships between two people in love bring.

Dollars and Sense

Teenagers earn more than \$90 billion a year! That's a lot of iTunes downloads and clothing bought at the mall. On what do you spend all the money you earn or that is given to you each year? How much of that money do you give to the church or to other charitable organizations?

The three scripture references for this session from Proverbs 22 will help you consider what you should do with your money.

The first set of proverbs gives us some insight into the extreme wealth a person can possess. There are, after all, things that are more important than wealth — for example, a good reputation. We are also to remember that whether we are rich or poor, the LORD is the maker of us all.

The second set of proverbs talks about

the results of intentionally sowing injustice. People who treat others unjustly are not blessed because they are wealthy but cursed. Those who are blessed are the ones who share with the poor.

The third set of proverbs adds another dimension of responsibility to the first two sets: the LORD pleads the case of the poor and afflicted. We are not to take advantage of these people; they have no one to speak on their behalf except the LORD. The LORD does not only plead their case, but also destroys the life of those who destroy the life of the poor and afflicted.

Through these proverbs we see that it is not money that is evil but rather the heart in which the money is amassed. Be aware of what your money can do to you.

SEPTEMBER 9

Think About It:

Teens make more than \$90 billion a year. That's between \$2,000 and \$4,000 per youth! Where does your money go?

Make a Choice:

You have an amazing amount of spending power. What you spend your money on influences how producers create their products. Research where your products come from, and then buy from companies that treat their workers well.

Pray:

God, we ask that we spend our money in ways that build up the Kingdom of God. May we have hearts to help those who are less fortunate as we spend our money.

Woman of Wisdom

SEPTEMBER 16

If you were to ask most people you know what face they would put with wisdom, most likely they would mention a wise old man with a long grey beard and pointy nose.

In the passage for this session the character presented is not an old man, but a woman called Sophia.

Lady Wisdom operates in the circle of men but is not bound by what they say to her. She has her own authority and even calls those around her simple. She wants them to

listen to her so they may come out of their troubles. They do not listen to her, and so she will not help them when their day comes.

Lady Wisdom does offer some hope in saying that some will listen to what she has said. Those who listen will be at ease in their life and will avoid disaster. She does not promise they will have no trouble, but rather it will not be self-inflicted.

So where or from whom do you hear words of wisdom today?

Think About It:

There are a variety of voices you can listen to for advice. How do you decide to whom you will listen?

Make a Choice:

You make hundreds of choices every day, some bigger than others. Where do you find wisdom in making your choices?

Pray:

God, we pray that the choices we make will reflect your will.

Womanhood

SEPTEMBER 23

Guys, what do you look for in a girl? Girls, what type of woman are you striving to be?

Today's passage from Proverbs provides some criteria of what a woman should strive to be. There is some debate as to whether this advice came from a mother to her son or whether it was a man reflecting on women. Either way, the passage provides attributes for an ideal woman.

The proverb begins with a list of the accomplishments of this woman. She has had

her hands in everything and done well. She not only is strong, but also is wise. Above all, though, she has had time to teach and serve the poor.

Her accomplishments do not go unnoticed as she has praise heaped on her by her children, her husband and others who know of her deeds.

It is the closing verses of the passage that reveal where all of her wisdom comes from: the fear of the LORD. And this is where we should all begin, whether male or female.

Think About It:

How many of the personal traits we desire begin with faith in God?

Make a Choice:

How can you help women see that true beauty flows out of a relationship with God instead of what society pushes on them?

Pray:

God, we pray that we will hold up attributes of women that are sustainable and in your will.

Saving Her People

SEPTEMBER 30

What is the most pressure-packed situation you have been in because of your faith? In our scripture from Esther we read about how she saved the lives of every Jew in Persia.

The passage begins in the middle of the story with the king dining with Esther. The king has again asked her what he can do for her. This time Esther responds by asking him to save her life and the life of her people.

If the king didn't know why, Esther tells him of her people's history. She points

to Haman as the man whose actions have endangered her people. This disclosure sends the king into a rage because Haman is his number-two man. The king orders Haman to be hung from the gallows Haman had constructed for Mordecai's hanging. (You wouldn't believe this stuff if it was a movie plot!)

Through all of this intrigue we read of a woman who used her position not for herself but to help her people. She followed the will of the LORD.

Think About It:

Esther had Mordecai as someone to support her when times got difficult. Who do you have in your life to hold you up?

Make a Choice:

Esther could have requested anything from the king. What would you have asked of him?

Pray:

God, we ask that the decisions we make reflect your will.

Bible Study

Proverbs 1:20-33

with Tony W. Cartledge

Sept. 16, 2012

A Shout in the Street

Today's text introduces us to one of the more intriguing characters in the entire Bible, a figurative representation of wisdom – the most valuable of all things – as a woman. Scholars have tended to call her “Lady Wisdom,” “Dame Wisdom” or “Woman Wisdom.”

The word for “wisdom” in Greek is Sophia, and there was a Greek goddess known as Sophia. Some writers refer to the biblical Lady Wisdom as “Sophia,” but the two should not be confused. The authors of Proverbs used the metaphor of Lady Wisdom as an effective rhetorical device. Whether the poet behind Prov. 1:20-33 also considered her to be a literal, supernatural being is unclear.

Lady Wisdom appears again in Prov. 3:13-20, where she is much to be desired, and in Proverbs 8, where she again calls for the unlearned to follow her.

In Prov. 8:22-36 we find a powerful, elegant poem in which Wisdom describes herself as God's first creation, an ever-present companion as God established the foundations of the earth, shaped the sky, and delimited the seas. In verses 30-31, Wisdom implies that she was a participant in creation, not just an observer: “then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always ... and delighting in the human race.”

Another impressive ode to Wisdom is found in Job 28, where Job wants understanding and searches constantly for Wisdom, but cannot find her.

Those who have read *The Shack*, a popular novel by William Young,



will recall that a supernatural character named Sophia makes an appearance near the end of the book. Since other representations of the Trinity are already present in the narrative, many readers find Sophia's presence and divine characteristics to be confusing. An awareness of Lady Wisdom's role in the Book of Proverbs reveals the source of Young's “Sophia.”

While these poetic tributes to Wisdom as a personified woman are intriguing – and as offering a helpful balance to the Bible's preponderance of male language about God – we should still regard Lady Wisdom as a useful metaphor rather than a fourth person of the godhead.

The beginning of wisdom (vv. 1-19)

Today's text begins with v. 20, but a quick review of the opening verses will help us to appreciate the context for Lady Wisdom's speech. Both are part of a larger section of extended instructions that characterize chapters 1-9.

While later parts of the book consist

mostly of individual proverbs, the first nine chapters contain longer units of instruction. Scholars generally consider this section to have been composed later than the proverb collections that make up the bulk of the book. Evidence suggests that final composition took place some time after Israel's intelligentsia returned from exile.

The opening verse, probably an even later addition, attributes the instructions to Solomon, but it does so tongue-in-cheek, because later sections are clearly credited to other sages. Solomon was regarded as a wise man par excellence, however, and was also known as a patron of wisdom.

The purpose of the Book of Proverbs is set forth in vv. 2-6: its intent is to teach. Note the piling up of nouns and verbs that indicate the book's didactic purpose: learning, instruction, understanding, insight, shrewdness, knowledge, discerning – all point to the book's educational objective.

While much of the wisdom to be found in Proverbs is practical or secular in nature, the writer believes that all

Additional background information
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Deeper” icon



knowledge is grounded in God; that wisdom begins with a healthy respect for the creator of all things, including wisdom (v. 7).

Specific instruction begins with vv. 8-19, which warns young men against various enticements to evil. We note that the book consistently addresses young men, because in Israel's patriarchal system, men held the power to make most decisions. Whatever educational system Israel had would have targeted boys only; girls would have been expected to learn at home. 📖

Following wisdom (vv. 20-33)

While vv. 10-19 speak of brigands who would entice young men to embark on a raffish life of violence and greed, vv. 20-33 offer a different kind of enticement, as Lady Wisdom calls the simple to a more profitable path. 📖

A number of scholars have pointed to the chiasmic structure of 1:20-33, in which a sequence of elements or themes is set out and then repeated in reverse order, often surrounding a central point. This has the effect of adding emphasis to the main point, and making the larger instruction more memorable. 📖

Note the extended parallelism of vv. 20-21: Wisdom's voice is heard in the street, in the squares, at busy corners and at the city gates. Why is this significant? Wisdom is personified as a woman, but she operates in the sphere of men. She is not bound to the home or under a husband's control, but speaks on her own authority and does her work in the mercantile streets, the public squares and the very gates of the city, where the "elders" (inevitably men) presided over a common law justice system.

Wisdom addresses her audience as "simple ones," "scoffers" and "fools" who seem stuck on the dead-end road of dullness, mockery and foolishness (v. 22). She calls upon them to "give heed to my reproof" and hear her words of wisdom (v. 23), then decries their stubborn refusal to respond. They have refused her invitation and disregarded the hand she offered to lift them from

dangerous complacency (v. 24). They have ignored her counsel and spurned her reproof (v. 25).

Such recalcitrance comes at a cost. By remaining committed to their shiftless ways, Wisdom says, she will have no pity when they meet the inevitable disaster that awaits them. Unlike the narrative and prophetic literature, in which both the nation and individuals cycle in and out of favor with God, constantly being given another chance, Wisdom sees a day when the foolish will run out of chances.

When that day comes, when calamity strikes and they panic in the face of the storm, when distress and anguish finally get their attention, it will be too late. Wisdom will offer no helping hand then, but threatens to laugh and mock their discomfiture (vv. 26-27).

"Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer," she says. "They will seek me diligently, but will not find me."

They will have ignored her one time too many, and it will be too late to turn around. 📖

The announcement of judgment is framed by the motivation for it, as vv. 29-30 reflect the similar thoughts to those in vv. 24-25. The foolish have ignored the way of Wisdom and chosen to follow the empty-headed road that leads to destruction.

What is different in vv. 29-30 is that Wisdom makes it clear that the knowledge, counsel and reproof she offers has divine roots: the foolish have refused to choose "the fear of the LORD," which v. 7 had identified as the root of true wisdom.

Those who choose errant ways will "eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices" (v. 31), an alternate way of saying "you reap what you sow." Wayward and foolish persons will suffer, but their suffering will be self-inflicted. 📖

Wisdom's speech ends with a word

of hope. She is aware that many people will prove deaf to her call and suffer for it, but retains hope that some will listen. In Hebrew thought, listening is obeying. Those who follow Wisdom's advice and live with respect for God's way "will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster" (v. 33).

This promise, of course, is in direct contrast to the fate of the foolish. While those who reject Wisdom's way will panic and cry out in the face of calamity, Wisdom's followers will live in peaceful security, without fear of trouble.

Readers may be inclined to respond to this final claim with skepticism. We know better than to think those who seek to follow God will be invulnerable to trouble. We all have known saints of God who tried to live wisely but still had to face cancer, job loss, storm damage or heartache. How does this match up with v. 33?

At this point, it might be helpful to read the online "Hardest Question" response from last week's lesson. There is a sense, however, in which we can regard Wisdom's claim as perfectly accurate. Her speech has consistently insisted that the foolish will face calamities they bring upon themselves. They should live in fear of trouble, because they are constantly courting trouble.

Those who follow Wisdom's way are not immune to trouble (often brought on by others who choose the way of folly!), but they can rest easy in knowing that any trials they may face will not be self-inflicted.

In the end, the problem is that those who are most subject to self-destructive behaviors are also most likely to be blind to the danger.

How does Wisdom speak today? Surely we don't expect to see a robed woman striding through our streets with a strident voice, calling for the foolish to change their ways.

Wisdom, however, may speak through our voices, in our streets, in our homes. Where have you heard the voice of Wisdom? Has it often been in your own speech? **BT**

Bible Study

Proverbs 31:10-31


with Tony W. Cartledge

Sept. 23, 2012

A Woman Beyond Belief


Superwoman: Is there a better word to describe what is expected of many women today? It's now more customary than not for a woman to work outside the home, yet surveys show that the burden of housekeeping and childcare still falls mainly to her.

Who can live up to the expectations of being a sharp businesswoman, a terrific parent, a perfect wife and an effective housekeeper? Proverbs 31:20-31 describes just such a woman, a woman who seems too good to be true.

Could any mortal woman really be and do all the things attributed to “the ideal wife” in this text, or should this paean to virtuous womanhood be understood as another description of wisdom personified, this time in the form of the consummate spouse? 

A mother's advice (vv. 1-9)

Proverbs 31 is attributed to a king named Lemuel, who passed it on as lessons his mother taught him. This is a surprise, because the Bible never speaks of any Hebrew king named Lemuel. An old Jewish tradition holds that Lemuel was an alternate name for Solomon, which would mean the advice originated with Bathsheba, but there is no real evidence to support the claim.

An alternate translation could be “The sayings of Lemuel, king of Massa, which his mother taught him.” Massa may have been a small kingdom in northern Arabia. This may suggest that the author borrowed from non-Israelite traditions, giving credit to the source. 

Additional background information online where you see the “Digging Deeper” icon



In either case, we note that the originator of this teaching is not the king's father or a male teacher, but a woman – his mother. This is also the only biblical example of instructions being given directly to a king, although it was quite common in Mesopotamia for wisdom texts to address the king directly.


Many scholars have noted that Proverbs 1 and 31 contain many similar themes, and both feature a strong woman who personifies wisdom. As such, they frame the teachings between and give us cause to wonder how much of the wisdom in Proverbs originated with women.

The queen mother urges her son to avoid losing himself in either women or in wine, lest his judgment should become cloudy and he should be distracted from upholding justice and defending the rights of the poor, which are his main functions (vv. 3-9). While this may end the advice directly attributed to Lemuel's mother, there is no indication of another speaker before the closing poem about the ideal wife. Thus, the reader is led to consider that

this final bit of instruction came from a woman, too.

A heroic wife (vv. 10-27)

The poem describing the “capable wife” or “ideal woman” is carefully structured on a number of levels. Most obviously – at least to Hebrew readers – it is an acrostic. The poem contains 22 lines, and each line begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in alphabetical order from *'alef* (v. 10) to *tau* (v. 31).

Further, the composition – like the poem about Lady Wisdom in 1:23-30 – can be analyzed as a chiasm, with two mirrored descriptions surrounding a central thought. In this case, the central thought is how the woman's tireless labors and eminent wisdom honor her husband. 

While a surface reading might lead one to assume the poem is simply a model pattern for an idealized wife, there is more to it. No woman could actually be expected to live up to this woman's accomplishments. She appears to work both day and night. She takes

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perfect care of her family while also owning and managing real estate interests, vineyards and a commercial cloth/clothing enterprise. She finds time to assist the poor, and imparts her wisdom to others as she works.

Reading beneath the surface, we see that the poem, coming at the end of the book, distills the essence of the collected wisdom and virtues that make up the prior chapters. Men as well as women can learn from the poem's approach, which praises "godly wisdom that is beneficial to the family and the society" (NET, Prov. 31:10 n. 23).

We get a clue as to the "super-woman" status of the ideal wife with the title given to her in v. 10: "a capable wife, who can find?" (NRSV). "Capable wife" is really inadequate to express the fullness of the term *'ayshet khayil*.

The word *'ayshet* can mean either "woman" or "wife." Although the same term was used of the heroic Ruth (Ruth 3:11), *khayil* is more commonly used of men to indicate a high level of wealth, power or valor. David, for example, was called a *gibbor khayil*, indicating his prowess as a warrior. In Judg. 6:12, Gideon was addressed by the same term, usually translated "mighty warrior."

We get a second clue to the woman's special nature through the awareness that she is an uncommon treasure who has to be sought out, and when found, "is far more precious than jewels" (v. 10, cp. 3:15 and 8:11).

The woman's husband is most fortunate. His wife contributes steadily to the family's income as an accomplished businesswoman (v. 11), and he can trust her implicitly, for she "does him good and not harm all the days of her life" (v. 12).

The noble wife engages in a variety of business ventures. She seeks out the raw materials of wool and flax (v. 13), and works with distaff and spindle to weave them into cloth (v. 19). She makes clothes of scarlet to keep her family warm in the winter (v. 21), and fine linen garments for herself and to sell in the marketplace (vv. 22, 24). 📖

Exercising economic acumen, she invests in real estate and plants vineyards (v. 16), always running a profitable business (v. 18a) in part because she works tirelessly and extends her interests widely. "Her lamp does not go out at night" (v. 18b), and "she rises while it is still night" to care for her children and manage the servants, never stopping to "eat the bread of idleness" (vv. 14-15, 17). Despite that busy schedule, she finds time to reach out and provide for the poor (v. 20). 📖

The woman's impressive activity and optimistic outlook are further described in more metaphorical fashion: "She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong" (v. 17). "Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come" (v. 25). She is both wise and strong.

The relationship of the heroic wife to Lady Wisdom as a model for emulation is further strengthened with the claim that in the course of her work, she takes time to teach others: "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (v. 26).

Give her a hand (vv. 28-31)

The wise and hard-working woman of vv. 10-27 deserves praise upon praise, and receives it. "Her children rise up and call her blessed," we read, "and her husband, too" (v. 28). "Many women have done excellently," he says, "but you surpass them all" (v. 29).

The husband certainly should be pleased. While his heroic wife works her fingers to the bone and spreads wisdom all around, he apparently spends his days sitting at the city gate with the other elders of the city (v. 23).

While we might look askance at the husband, who appears to be sponging off of his wife, the narrator has a different perspective. The city gate was the locus of justice in Israel, the place

where respected elders of the city acted as legal authorities to settle cases and uphold justice.

From the poet's perspective, the noble wife's untiring efforts to support the family enable her husband to contribute to the larger community by promoting justice.

The final two verses of the poem address the reader directly as they elaborate on the value of the ideal wife, whose characteristics have so much in common with Lady Wisdom. Both charm and beauty could lead one astray, the poet says, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised" (v. 30).

This closing thought revisits the book's opening verses, which set the stage with the foundational concept that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (1:7). Thus, the entire book is framed by the admonition that respect for God's way is the root of true wisdom.

The closing verse multiplies praise for the valorous wife who seems such an embodiment of wisdom. "Give her a share in the fruit of her hands" suggests that she should rightly share ownership of the fruits of her vineyard, the profits of her labor. It could also, however, be a figurative way of saying "give her credit for what she has accomplished" (NET).

The noble wife's very works should bring honor to her, the poet says: "let her works praise her in the city gates." 📖

A close look at Proverbs, then, reveals that the teachings of wisdom are not just for men or by men, despite the frequent use of "my son." Wisdom begins with a healthy respect for God, who created all things and ordered the universe to act as it does. Wisdom is not bound by gender; it may be taught by women or men, all of whom should follow its path if they are to understand how the world works and to succeed in life.

The "noble wife" may be a model of perfection that none of us could match, but the call of wisdom extends to all, and wiser living is a goal to which every boy, girl, man and woman should aspire. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

Sept. 30, 2012

A Winning Woman

Our month-long study of “wise women” concludes with Esther, a Jewish heroine of the post-exilic period. Like the woman in Song of Songs 2:8-15, Esther was beautiful and charming. Like the Noble Wife of Proverbs 31, she was careful and calculating. She knew how to do what needed to be done – nothing less than saving the lives of every Jew in Persia. How wise is that?

Esther’s predicament

The short Book of Esther appears in the Hebrew Bible as one of five books called the Megillot, or “Scrolls,” each of which was read in conjunction with a major Jewish feast. Esther is read during the Feast of Purim, for which Esther alone offers an explanation. ⚓

The story is set in Persia under a king most English translations call Ahasuerus, and who is often identified as Xerxes I (486-465 BC). The king is said to have ruled over lands from Egypt to Afghanistan, similar in size to what we know of the ancient Persian Empire (1:1). ⚓

With this king, everything is super-sized. The story claims he threw a banquet for his nobles that lasted for 180 days! Then, he reportedly gave a seven-day banquet for ordinary men, while Queen Vashti hosted a weeklong banquet for women (1:2-9).

Near the end of the banquet, the story says, the drunken king called for Queen Vashti to come out so all could admire her beauty, but Vashti refused to put herself on display. The king



was enraged, and with his counselors’ advice, he banished her. ⚓

To find a new queen, young women throughout the kingdom were brought to the palace, where they were elaborately purified and beautified, then brought to the king for an overnight visit. ⚓

One of the promising candidates was Esther, a young Hebrew who had been raised by her uncle Mordecai after her parents had died.

Esther lived up to her name, which meant “star.” Everyone loved her, the text says, from the eunuchs in charge of the harem to the other women. The king loved her as well, and was so pleased after his night with Esther that he declared she would be his new queen (2:15-17), not realizing she was Jewish (Mordecai had advised her to keep it a secret, 2:20).

Mordecai, a palace official, was known as a Jew, but had served the king faithfully and had once saved his life by uncovering an assassination plot (2:21-23). This put Mordecai in good standing with the king, but Haman, the king’s next highest official, hated Mordecai

because he refused to bow and scrape in Haman’s presence (3:1-5).

The infuriated Haman persuaded the king that all members of “a certain people” scattered throughout the land were disloyal and should be exterminated. He chose the 13th of Adar as a propitious date for the genocide by casting lots (*purim*), and promised to deliver at least 10,000 talents of silver to the royal treasury, to be acquired by plundering the offensive segment of the population. The king, apparently without asking who the “certain people” were, affirmed a public proclamation to that effect (3:7-11). ⚓

When he learned of the plot, Mordecai pleaded with Esther to intercede with the king. She was hesitant at first, aware of the danger to anyone who approached him unannounced.

In the most memorable line from the book, Mordecai suggested there was a deeper plan behind her phenomenal rise: help might come “from another quarter,” but perhaps Esther was brought to royalty “for such a time as this” (4:14). This is the closest thing to a mention of God in the Hebrew version

Additional background information online where you see the “Digging Deeper” icon



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of the book.

After fasting for three days, during which the other Jews were also asked to fast, Esther approached the king, who not only accepted her, but also promised to grant any boon she wanted – up to half the kingdom.

Rather than simply asking the king to find a way around his proclamation – which reportedly could not be revoked – Esther asked only that the king and Haman come to a dinner she would prepare. At the dinner, the narrator tells us, the king renewed his offer, but again Esther requested that the two men return for another meal the next day (5:1-8).^U

Esther's plan (7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22)

The plot now moves quickly. Haman was so elated by the honor that he was fit to burst, but when Mordecai again refused to bow, he became furious and ordered that a 50-foot gallows be built for Mordecai's execution.

Meanwhile, the king had insomnia, and called for someone to read court records to him. When the records reminded him of how Mordecai had saved his life, the king realized he had failed to reward Mordecai.

A large dose of Hebrew humor enters the story as the king asked Haman for advice on how to honor a favorite of the king. Assuming he was the honoree, Haman said the king's robes and crown should be put on the man, he should be seated on the king's horse, and one of the king's highest officials should lead him through the streets shouting "Thus it shall be done for he who pleases the king!" (6:4-9).

To his chagrin, Haman was then instructed to go out and do that very thing for the despised Mordecai. He returned home in shame and was berated by his wife before being summoned to the second dinner with Esther.

Finally, the moment of truth arrived. As the king repeated his offer to give her up to half the kingdom (7:2), Esther asked for something more important than material things: she asked

for her life, and the lives of her people (7:3).

The story assumes the king would have been puzzled by this and unaware that Esther's life was being threatened. So, she continued: "For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated."^U If they had only been sold into slavery, Esther insisted, she might have held her peace, but if the genocide was carried out, "no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king" (7:4).^U

When Esther fingered Haman as a wicked "foe and enemy" (7:5-6), the king went into a rage and left the room, while Haman quailed in fear and fell upon Esther to beg for mercy. When the king returned and saw Haman fawning at Esther's knees, he accused him of trying to accost the queen and grew even more incensed.

The king soon ordered that Haman be hanged on the very gallows he had constructed for Mordecai (7:9-10), then gave Haman's house to Esther and Haman's position and signet ring to Mordecai (8:1-2).

Though the reader may feel relieved, the story is not over nor the danger ended, for the king's edict that the Jews be killed on the 13th of Adar could not be changed.^U At Esther's urging, the king issued another edict allowing the Jews to defend themselves. The Hebrews then prepared for the attack, and on the appointed day the Hebrews became the aggressors, reportedly killing 75,000 persons in the provinces (9:16) and another 800 in the capital, where Esther gained permission for fighting to continue a second day.

So, the story says, the Jews in the countryside won relief on the 13th of Adar and celebrated on the 14th, while Jews in Susa took their vengeance on the 13th and 14th, not stopping to feast and celebrate until the 15th. It is for this reason, the text says, that Mordecai

issued an edict declaring that the feast of Purim should be celebrated on both the 14th and 15th of the month of Adar (9:20-22).

Esther's aftermath

Can Christian believers find anything helpful in the Book of Esther? It's not easy.

One could argue, perhaps, that a reading of the book promotes balanced living, as opposed to the excesses of the king and his court, or that it testifies to the power of the written word, with emphasis on the various edicts issued.

For greater profit, we have to imagine ourselves in the place of the Jewish people for whom the book was written. While we have little interest in the rationale for dating the Feast of Purim, other aspects of the story may be more meaningful.

The Jewish people, who have continued to be persecuted through the years, may find in Esther a continued promise of hope for difficult times. Although there is no direct correlation to the kind of threat faced by Esther and her people, we know that we all face difficult and trying days. In that generic sense, readers may find encouragement in Esther's perseverance through troubled times.

We may also find inspiration in Esther's careful planning. The story portrays her as living in a delicate balance, having to walk a fine line in dealing with the king. In that sense, Esther's example blends with our month-long introduction to wise women of the Old Testament. Esther's ability to develop a plan and finesse its success may speak to our own need for giving careful thought to our relationships with others.

Additionally, we may take heart in Esther's courage. Convinced by Mordecai that she had the ability to save her people, Esther was willing to do what needed to be done, even at considerable risk. If we don't recognize the risks inherent in truly following Jesus, perhaps we haven't been following closely enough. **BT**

Adventures with LULER the Hound



Kelly Belcher

B

aptists have two special times in worship that are called ordinances. "Ordain" means "set apart for a special purpose," and these two ordinances are actions we do that are symbols for our love of God. One is baptism, and the other is the Lord's Supper, also called Communion.

Watch your church members as they serve and take Communion. We honor our belief in the priesthood of believers by serving one another. Each person serves the next person, ministering to her. We also honor our identity as the body of Christ by eating and drinking at the same time.

You don't just take the bread piece and eat it up. (Well, Luler might do that because she can't wait!) Baptists hold the piece of bread until everyone is served. We also hold the cup of juice until everyone is ready to drink together.

Notice the words that are said as we eat and drink this special meal. We remember Jesus until he comes again. We are hoping that, as we eat and drink, Christ's spirit is coming again into the heart of every person.

The Bow-wow

Luler says we share Christ's love and our love for one another with this special meal. Remember the two ordinances!

The Question Box

Ask grown-ups in your church to tell you about the first time they ever received the Lord's Supper. Have you received it?



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BWA aims to increase participation



Scenic Santiago, Chile, in the shadow of the Andes, was the setting for this year's Annual Gathering of the Baptist World Alliance. Below: Membership committee chair Jonathan Edwards of England (left) and president John Upton (right) welcome representatives from the Reformed Baptist Convention of Rwanda into the Baptist World Alliance.

SANTIAGO, CHILE — Participation in the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) should be back on the upswing following actions taken by the organization's General Council during its annual gathering July 2-7. About 300 global delegates convened in Santiago, where Chilean Baptists treated them to an evening of entertainment and worship July 2.

Following several days of administrative committee and ministry commission meetings, the General Council voted July 7 to take steps to involve more persons in the global body's work. In earlier comments, General Secretary Neville Callam noted a decline in participation due to changes implemented in 2009 at the recommendation of an appointed task force.

While the task force made some important contributions, Callam said, changes made in the name of efficiency had left many persons feeling excluded from the BWA's work. Callam called for several changes, including the reinstatement of the body's 12 vice-presidents to the Executive Committee and the inclusion of more persons on the various commissions. The Constitution and Bylaws Committee made recommendations to that end, which were approved.

Callam also expressed concern that 69 percent of the BWA's member bodies made no direct financial contribution to BWA work in 2011. Callam suggested that, as an incentive, travel scholarships for entity leaders from poor countries be limited to those bodies that



contribute financially to the organization, even if it is a small amount. The suggestion was later affirmed by the Council.

Two new bodies were added to the more than 220 member unions already participating in BWA. These were the Reformed Baptist Convention of Rwanda, with 12,000 members, and the Free Baptist Churches of Burundi, with 8,000 members.

Council members adopted a 2013 budget of \$1,582,050, slightly less than the 2012 budget of \$1,651,350, but still higher than 2011 income of \$1,388,118.

Edgar Palacios of El Salvador and Washington, D.C. was presented the Denton and Janice Lotz Human Rights Award for 2012, based primarily on his work in helping to broker peace during El Salvador's 1980-92 civil war.

The Council approved six resolutions, including a statement of appreciation for African-American preacher Gardner C. Taylor,

and an affirmation of religious liberty that recalls the 400th anniversary of Thomas Helwys' tract *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, widely regarded as the first document to call for complete religious liberty.

A resolution on global missions celebrated the 200th anniversary of the pioneering work in Asia by Adoniram and Anne Hasseltine Judson and Luther Rice, along with others who followed, while the fourth resolution called for the BWA to endorse a guide for missionary behavior called "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World." The document has previously been endorsed by the World Evangelical Alliance, the World Council of Churches, and the Catholic Church.

A fifth resolution built on previous resolutions in 2008 and 2009 by challenging Baptists worldwide to express concern about global climate change, and to urge governments, multi-national corporations, and other entities to work toward reducing the impact of climate change.

A final resolution decried recent violence in Nigeria, calling for Baptists to pray for the people there who face religious conflict, and to advocate for peace.

The 2013 Annual Gathering of the BWA will be held July 1-6, 2013, in Ocho Rios, Jamaica. Leaders urged participants to begin planning for the next World Congress, to be held July 22-26, 2015 in Durban, South Africa — the first World Congress to be held in Africa. **BT**

Classifieds

Pastor: Lawtonville Baptist Church of Estill, S.C., is prayerfully seeking a full-time pastor. This position consists of a salary, benefits and a parsonage. Our 200-year-old, non-affiliated church consists of more than 100 members and has a strong children- and youth-oriented ministry. Please send résumés to Laurie Hanna, P.O. Box 1096, Estill, S.C. 29918.

Pastor: First Baptist Church of Claxton, Ga., is seeking a full-time pastor with five or more years of ministry experience in a pastoral position and who holds a master's or doctorate degree. The ideal candidate should be an effective communicator with leadership and well-developed vision for the future of our church. First Baptist Claxton has a membership of 300 and is located in southeast Georgia, 50 miles west of Savannah. Interested candidates should submit résumés to fbccpastorsearch@aol.com or to Pastor Search Committee, First Baptist Church, P.O. Box 607, Claxton, GA 30417.

Associate Pastor: First Baptist Church of Augusta, Ga., is seeking to fill the position of associate pastor who will work with the senior pastor in the following capacities: providing ministerial staff leadership; teaching and preaching; coordinating the ministry calendar; and providing pastoral care leadership. At a minimum, qualified candidates must possess a master's degree from an accredited seminary and 5 years of ministry experience. For a complete job description or to submit a résumé, please contact dedemaddox@fbcaugusta.org.

Minister of Music and Worship: South Main Baptist Church, Houston, Texas, seeks a full-time minister of music and worship to oversee an extensive music ministry, assist with worship planning, and serve as a part of a vibrant, collegial pastoral team. Among other things, the successful candidate will have a minister's heart; an earned graduate degree in music from an accredited school; a passion for music education; and prior experience as a choral and instrumental conductor, including arranging music for choirs, ensembles, and instruments and overseeing a comprehensive music program from preschoolers through senior adults. Founded in 1903, South Main today is a growing, multi-generational church with a 15-acre campus located in midtown Houston, between the world's largest medical center and the downtown business district of the nation's fourth largest city. Our congregation, which averages 525 in Sunday School and 600 in worship, values musical excellence, and our Sunday worship services draw from traditional Baptist, classical, and broader liturgical streams. Please send résumés to musicsearch@smbc.org.

Minister of Music and Youth and/or Children: First Baptist Church Hawkinsville, Ga., is seeking a person who would have dual ministerial staffing responsibilities. This minister will work with music and worship leadership along with a specific age group. Send résumés to Search Committee, First Baptist Church, P.O. Box 210, Hawkinsville, GA 31036 or to dmcclung@cstel.net.

Minister to Students and Families: Boulevard Baptist Church in Anderson, S.C., is seeking a full-time minister to students and families. Boulevard is a progressive Baptist church affiliated with the CBF and affirms women in ministry and all positions of leadership. The candidate should be a graduate of a seminary or divinity school and have a strong sense of calling to work with children and youth. A ministry description can be found at boulevardbaptist.com. Submit résumés to jmckinney@boulevardbaptist.com.

CBFSC Coordinator: Applications and nominations are being accepted until Sept. 15 for the position of coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of South Carolina. The coordinator will give leadership to organizing, facilitating and coordinating CBFSC to fulfill its vision of growing as a community of grace on a shared spiritual journey that connects people to Christ and one another. The coordinator will also serve as a catalyst to nurture spiritual development, encourage congregations to thrive, and value collaborative and innovative ministry and missions. Inquiries, applications or nominations for the position may be sent to cbfscsearch@gmail.com or to CBFSC Search Committee, Attn: Casey Callahan, 397 College Ave., Clemson, SC 29631.

In the Know

Carlos Malave is executive director of Christian Churches Together in the USA, a 10-year-old network aimed at promoting interchurch collaboration. For 11 years he worked in ecumenical relations for the Presbyterian Church (USA). CCT is a network of more than 40 churches and Christian groups — including those from Catholic, evangelical Protestant, historic black, historic Protestant and Orthodox traditions — that is addressing racism, poverty, evangelism and immigration.

Aubrey L. Hawkins of Roswell, Ga., died June 22 at age 93. Before retirement, he had been a longtime employee of the Georgia Baptist Convention and spent much of his career overseeing the work of campus ministries and Baptist colleges across the state.

Bill Tillman has retired as the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas.

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Willie Nelson on my mind

Georgians do not get Willie Nelson. The crowd at his concert in Atlanta made me miss Texas. There may have been five of the cowboy hats that a reasonable person would expect to see, and there were at least a thousand baseball caps.

More people wore flip flops than cowboy boots, and most of the boots were worn by teenage girls in shorts.

The coolers were filled with pasta salad. Where was the barbecue? Far more concert-goers drank from wine glasses than beer bottles.

The crowd only knew the most popular lines. They excitedly shouted, “Mamas don’t let your babies grow up to be cowboys,” but mumbled through “they’re always alone even with someone they love.” (The bearded bald guy in bifocals next to me knew the songs, but he was wearing a Bon Jovi T-shirt, so he doesn’t count.)

A senior citizen complained that it was so loud we might be bothering the neighbors. No one in Austin, Fort Worth or Luckenbach ever made such a comment.

Half the crowd could have been there for Britney Spears and the other half for Tony Bennett. It had to be the only completely white crowd in Atlanta that was not in church.

Some ministers are reticent to admit their love for Willie Hugh Nelson, but Willie is the only artist born the same year as my father that my son is willing to hear. There are legitimate concerns about adoring Willie.

He has been arrested almost as many times (three we know about) as he’s been married (four). He’s had difficult conversations with the IRS. Some of his songs,



Photo credit: Broadway.tv

“Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die” for instance, cannot be sung in every church. The legalization of marijuana is not an issue on which Willie can count on church support. Some might argue that he started down the wrong road when he dropped out of Baylor University in 1956, but they would be wrong.

Willie defends family farmers and the environment. He speaks out on issues of war and peace. He sings about heartache and hope. Willie’s themes are despair and faith, brokenness and healing, death and life. Our concert went from sin to salvation.

The sin portion began with “Whiskey River,” which is about “feeling the amber current flowin’” but also a prayer to “warm an empty heart.”

“Good-Hearted Woman” portrays “the night life, the bright lights and good timin’ friends,” but laments the “dreams that fell by the way.”

“Seven Spanish Angels” is about a shoot-’em-up, but the eighth angel whispers “God will keep us free.”

I wish “Me and Paul” was about St. Paul, but it is, unfortunately, about getting busted.

My mother would not care for “All the Girls I’ve Loved Before” or “I Gotta Get Drunk and I Sure Do Dread It.” Mom would definitely have problems with “Beer for My Horses,” even though it is a call to

stand “against evil forces.”

“Georgia on My Mind,” “Always on My Mind,” and “Crazy” (the greatest jukebox song of all time) are about broken hearts, but like every great country song they hold out a hint of hope.

“Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground” is redemption: “If you had not fallen, then I would not have found you ... love’s the greatest healer to be found.”

In the closing salvation section Willie promised:

*Hymns of faith that made us strong ...
Hear the angels sing along ...
There’s a better home a-waiting
In the sky, Lord, in the sky.*

Willie assured us:

*Some glad morning when this life is o’er,
I’ll fly away
To a home on God’s celestial shore ...*

In the finale Willie sang:

*I wandered so aimless, life filled with sin.
I wouldn’t let my dear Savior in.
Then Jesus came like a stranger in the night.
Praise the Lord, I saw the light.*

During “Amazing Grace,” Jimmy Carter came on stage and, to the biggest ovation of the night, put on a bandana. Years of teaching the Bible must have made it clear to the former president that the Gospel shows up in amphitheaters as well as sanctuaries. Some people think that the only place to hear of God’s grace is inside the church. They need to listen to Willie Nelson. **BT**

—Brett Younger is the associate professor of preaching at the McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta and the author of *The Lighter Side: Serving Up Life’s Lessons with a Smile*.

“Worship planning hemmed in by perceived congregational expectation is tantamount to a pitcher ‘aiming’ his pitches, instead of simply trusting his eye and his arm; the result in both cases is mediocre and tentative.”

Pastoral *perspectives*

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — Since the summer of 1990, Mitchell Simpson has served as pastor of University Baptist Church in Chapel Hill. He is a graduate of the nearby University of North Carolina. He did graduate studies at Duke Divinity School and Florida State University where he earned his doctorate.

BT: How would you briefly describe your leadership style as a pastor?

MS: My leadership style is collegial, relational. It seems to me that is the way Jesus went about it. I have a strong aversion to the CEO business model of pastor/church.

BT: Can you identify a couple of the biggest challenges in pastoral ministry today and share how you and your congregation are facing them?

MS: Scattered, distracted parishioners with diminished ability to pay attention or endure quiet or mystery. Blaise Pascal was right: The chief ills of our culture can be traced to our inability to sit for 30 minutes, alone and silent, in our room.

Entertainment worship is pandemic. At UBC, we work at worship that is both dignified and warm-spirited, concerned less with a particular style than with the importance of whatever we offer being of high quality, whether English hymnody or bluegrass settings of the Psalms.

BT: What do you know now that you wish you had known earlier as a pastor?

MS: The importance of building a backyard shed.

BT: Are denominational identity and engagement important to you? To your congregation? How do you engage with other churches — and what value does that bring?

MS: Not so much, but reclaiming the bracing impudence and fierce integrity of our English Baptist forebears (on their best days) is worth all

From Mitchell Simpson

Pastor, University Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, N.C.

the concentrated effort it requires.

Carlyle Marney, Clarence Jordan, James Dunn, Flannery O’Connor, my preacher father and my reading mother — these were among my best guides along the way.

Our congregation, with its mixed lineage of religious leanings, is nonetheless always responsive when we offer studies in what it means to be authentically Baptist, for which identity we feel no need to make apologies in our upscale university community.

We value the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Alliance of Baptists, Baptist World Alliance and especially our covenant sister-church relationship with the predominately African American First Baptist Church of Chapel Hill.

BT: How do you keep a balanced life that allows for personal time and study while being accessible to your congregation?

MS: I don’t try to keep a balanced life. My wife and our three children (now ages 24, 22 and 19) are the delight of my life and, second only to Jesus of Nazareth, the center of my being.

In my study there is taped on the bookcase, where I cannot help but see it every day, a picture I clipped from a pastor’s magazine years ago. It is the silhouette snapshot of a man holding the hand of a young child as they walk along a lakeshore, the evening sun reflecting around them, with this caption: “When the sun sets on your ministry, your greatest heritage will be your family.”

Amen to that, and may every person



aspiring to pastoral ministry be given to precisely that lovely imbalance.

As to accessibility to the congregation, Elton Trueblood’s warning still holds true: That person who is always available has nothing worth hearing when he/she is available. Without personal time and study, as an adjunct to family time, little worthwhile will be forthcoming from the pulpit.

BT: Every church member knows exactly the right time for scheduling worship and the proper format of the service. The problem, of course, is that these are as different as the people. How do you, as a pastoral leader, plan worship with such varied expectations?

MS: Liturgically informed give-and-take, employing (but not slavishly) the lectionary and premised upon the notion that our task as preachers is not so much to interpret scripture as to allow scripture to interpret us, then inviting the congregation to eavesdrop on that conversation between proclaimer and creator — such is the stuff of credible worship preparation.

Clarence Jordan’s wisdom endures: Faith is a life lived in scorn of the consequences. Worship planning hemmed in by perceived congregational expectation is tantamount to a pitcher “aiming” his pitches, instead of simply trusting his eye and his arm; the result in both cases is mediocre and tentative.

BT: What keeps you coming back for more?

MS: O’Connor’s great and damned soul, Hazel Moats, from her novella *Wise Blood*, says it for me in describing Jesus: “That raggedy figure that lurks from tree to tree a-chasing me, and won’t let me go.” God’s pursuing love — pure and simple. **BT**

EDITOR’S NOTE:

In this series, experienced pastors are asked the same seven questions about the important and sometimes misunderstood work they provide in congregational leadership and care. The monthly feature is designed to help pastors learn from one another and to give others greater insight into the multi-faceted work of pastors in changing times.

Tax exemption for religious groups faces challenge

How much money does the U.S. government forgo by not taxing religious institutions? According to a University of Tampa professor, perhaps as much as \$71 billion a year.

Ryan Cragun, an assistant professor of sociology, and two students examined U.S. tax laws to estimate the total cost of tax exemptions for religious institutions — on property, donations, business enterprises, capital gains and “parsonage allowances,” which permit clergy to deduct housing costs.

Their article appears in *Free Inquiry* magazine, published by the Council for Secular Humanism, an organization of nontheists. U.S. tax law grants religious groups and other nonprofits the exemptions because of their charitable nature.

And while the authors do not claim theirs is a comprehensive or unbiased appraisal, their findings have raised eyebrows in the nontheist community, which has long sought to eliminate the tax exemptions on the grounds that they unfairly favor religious institutions.

“The issue of religious tax preferment is especially relevant now because the number of Americans living outside any religious tradition continues to grow,” said Tom Flynn, editor of *Free Inquiry*. “That underscores the unfairness of taxing all Americans to subsidize religious institutions that only some Americans utilize.”

But Mark Rienzi, senior counsel at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, said that Americans have made a democratic decision that religious institutions are good for our communities — believers and atheists alike.

“Whether it is the Quakers opposing slavery, Reverend King arguing for equality, or a Catholic soup kitchen feeding and sheltering all in need,” Rienzi said, “our history is full of examples confirming the great public benefit of our religious diversity.”

If history is a guide, the *Free Inquiry* article and any call for tax reform it may engender are not likely to have much effect. Since the 1950s, there have been several attempts to quantify religious tax exemption and only a handful of legal challenges to those exemptions. Most were unsuccessful.

“It is something lots of people have been against, but not very much has been done about it,” Flynn said. “Coming up with hard numbers has been so difficult. But if there are going to be good discussions about this, we need good data.”



Cragun and his co-authors — Stephanie Yeager and Desmond Vega — examined federal tax exemption laws, and some state and local laws, specifically in their home state of Florida. They conclude:

- States bypass an estimated \$26.2 billion per year by not requiring religious institutions to pay property taxes.
- Capital gains tax exemptions for religious institutions may be as much as \$41 million a year.
- U.S. clergy may claim as much as \$1.2 billion in tax exemptions annually via the parsonage allowance.

But Cragun, who specializes in the sociological study of religion, said the article is not a call to completely revoke the tax-exempt status of religious organizations. Rather, he would suggest tax exemptions only for nonprofit organizations — religious or secular — whose services the government would have to supply if those organizations disappeared.

“It makes little sense for a group like the Red Cross to pay taxes because what they are doing is truly a benefit to all society,” he said. “But if we took religious organizations away, would the government say ‘We really need religious-based charity, so we are going to step in.’ I don’t think they would.”

Challenges by nontheists to religious tax exemptions have gained little. In 1969, the Supreme Court ruled in *Walz v. Tax Commission of the City of New York* that tax exemptions for religious organizations did not

violate the Constitution’s Establishment Clause because they did not favor one religion over another.

But in 1988, the Supreme Court rejected a Texas state sales tax that exempted religious publications.

Other challenges have had little impact. The Freedom From Religion Foundation has twice challenged the parsonage allowance, so far to no avail. FFRF also supported a 1996 Colorado ballot initiative to repeal tax exemptions for nonprofits, including religious ones. It was defeated by a margin of 60 percent.

Sarah Barringer Gordon, a professor of constitutional law at the University of Pennsylvania, says religious-based tax exemptions date to the late 19th century and have always been controversial.

“People say we have always had these tax exemptions, but that is not true,” she said. She notes presidents James Madison and Ulysses S. Grant both opposed tax exemptions for religious groups.

Part of the problem is the complexity of tax laws, which vary by state and municipality. Another complicating factor is determining who owns what, as many religious groups own things under different names. Gordon, who is at work on a book about the history of tax exemptions for religious institutions, once tried to tally Catholic Church property in Philadelphia.

“I had to stop at 129 names” under which the church had holdings, she said. **BT**

BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

The spirits of the Confederacy are running high. Richmond, the Confederate capital, is safe. Generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson are outfoxing their northern counterparts. Conscription is swelling the ranks of the Confederate army. Inflation is a problem, but politicians, preachers, writers, and the slaveholding elite are proclaiming the gospel of self-sufficiency, insisting that the South can endure long enough to tire the northern public of the war and turn the North against its tyrannical “black president” (Abraham Lincoln).

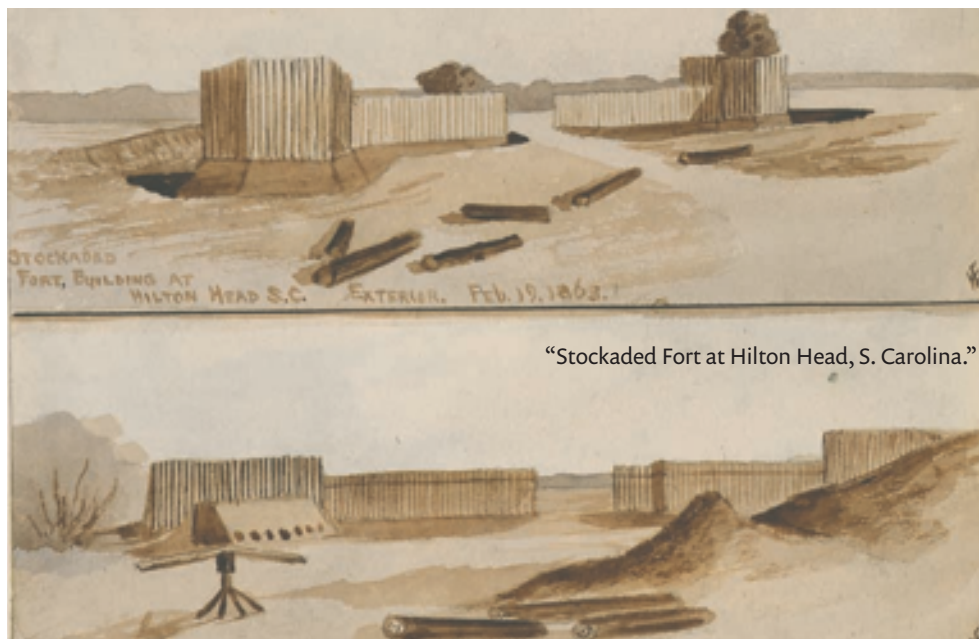
Northward, Washington D.C. is wary of a possible Confederate offensive. The public patience is wearing thin for want of battlefield successes. In addition, many northerners are upset over Lincoln’s reticence in emancipating African slaves. Although he knows that freeing the slaves is the key to victory, and is longing to announce his emancipation plan (but waiting for the most opportune moment), Lincoln’s public response this month is: “If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could do so by freeing all the slaves I would do it.”

Baptists, meanwhile, struggle to keep their focus on missions in the midst of the war. Especially in the Southern states, the number of active pastors and missionaries, as well as baptisms, has plunged since the beginning of the great conflict. A statement from Kentucky’s Campbell County Association of Baptists reflects a common lamentation among many Baptists of the South:

.... the idea that a financial crisis or national troubles should be an excuse for Christians not endeavoring to have the gospel preached is too glaring an absurdity to be entertained for one moment.

Yet, the Kingdom of God is expanding in ways anew, enabled by the slow but steady advance of the United States military along the southern coastline.

Hilton Head, S.C., now in Union hands, was one of the wealthiest southern coastal towns prior to the war. Previously home to several millionaires (most millionaires in the United States before the war were large Southern planters) in one of the South’s richest states, Hilton Head is



“Stockaded Fort at Hilton Head, S. Carolina.”

150 YEARS AGO

August 1862

headquarters for the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, overseeing the blockade of Savannah. Whereas the town’s former millionaires made their fortunes in cotton from the forced labor of slaves, the Union blockade of the Southern coast has made cotton worthless. Meanwhile, under the Union policy of seizing “contraband” (a United States military term referring to slaves) of southerners who oppose the North, Africans on the island are now freemen, with many former slaves serving as the first black Union troops.

Against this backdrop, the first African Baptist Church of Hilton Head is established on August 17. *The New South Newspaper*, a local Union-published paper, reports on the “organization of the First Baptist Church of Hilton Head, and the ordination of its pastor”:

These events occurred on Sunday, [August] the 17th instant, and the ceremonies attending them were conducted in a very impressive manner. The society thus established numbers about 120 members, all of whom are contrabands. Of these nearly 70 were professing Christians under the rule of their late masters, while the others have been converted

and baptized since our advent among them. Abraham Murchison, a colored man in the employ of the Chief Quartermaster, has been selected as the minister to these people, and was duly installed as their pastor on the Sabbath before last. The following was the order of exercises: Ordination Sermon — Chaplain H. S. Wayland, 7th Connecticut Volunteers; charge to candidate — Chaplain W.C. Patterson, 1st Massachusetts cavalry; ordination prayer and right-hand of fellowship — Chaplain H. Hovey, Volunteer Engineers; charge to the church — Chaplain Whitehead, 97th Pennsylvania Volunteers.

The African Baptists of Hilton Head are merely one example of former slaves translating their newfound freedom into religious autonomy, and by so doing acting — to the horror of their former owners — upon Baptists’ overarching founding principles: freedom of conscience and voluntary faith.

The hopes of Baptists of the South, in short, are inherently conflicted. White Baptists place their hopes of maintaining white supremacy in military generals Lee and Jackson, while African Baptists know their path to salvation is through the military might of the North. Not only are the prayers of North and South at odds with one another, but the prayers of the South itself are irreconcilable. **BT**

Starting point

Evangelical group proposes code of ethics for pastors

WASHINGTON — The National Association of Evangelicals is urging pastors to seek a common moral ground by uniting under a consistent code of ethics.

NAE leaders said the new code will provide uniform guidance to church leaders across the 40 denominations that comprise the nation's largest evangelical group.

The new code is a good starting point for ministers in a profession that can be individualistic and entrepreneurial, said David P. Gushee, a professor of Christian ethics and director of the Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer University.

"In some ways it's the Wild West out there in terms of the context of preparation for ministry in the evangelical world," he said. "Any effort to raise the moral bar and establish a minimal set of expectations for clergy — or any profession — is a very good thing."

The code puts into writing ethical

guidelines that often go unspoken. Specifics include, among other things, sexual "purity," regular financial auditing, not recruiting members from a pastor's former congregation, and counseling ethics.

Seven in 10 evangelical leaders are not required by their congregations to sign a formal code of ethics, according to a recent NAE survey. Signing the code will not be required for NAE membership, but NAE President Leith Anderson said it offers a tool for denominations to secure moral leadership.

The code was compiled by a team of ethicists, pastors and denominational leaders working over an 18-month span. "It's like writing a book," Anderson said. "It's a lot of work to get things correct."

Issued in English and Spanish, the code covers issues ranging from sexual behavior to resource management and financial integrity to physical health.

"It's setting an example, it's lifting the bar, and it's calling pastors to meet a standard," said Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference.

Rodriguez lauded the code for holding leaders to a higher standard in a world he says is saturated in materialism and moral relativism.

"You would assume that Christian leaders, of course, would embody the idea of integrity and purity and accountability. This code of ethics is a call to affirm standards to not only live a life above reproach, but to really apply to higher standards than what society today will deem appropriate," he said.

Early on, the code received support from prominent evangelical leaders. Signatories include Rodriguez; Bishop Charles Blake, pastor of West Angeles Church of God in Christ in Los Angeles; megachurch pioneer Bill Hybels; and *The Purpose Driven Life* author and megachurch pastor Rick Warren.

Gushee said the next step is to move from a broad framework of principles to specific behavioral guidelines, such as budget oversight and counseling practices. He said these might best be instituted by individual churches.

Anderson said the NAE has already begun its next project — a code of ethics for churches. **BT**

Vatican blames lack of priests on secularism, abuse, parents

VATICAN CITY (RNS) — The sexual abuse scandal has tarnished the image of the priest and contributed to a crisis of priestly vocations in the Roman Catholic Church, the Vatican said in June, while also faulting a widespread "secularized mentality" and parents' ambition for their children, which leaves "little space to the possibility of a call to a special vocation."



The "Pastoral Guidelines for Fostering Vocations to Priestly Ministry" were prepared over the last seven years by the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education.

The document says candidates to the priesthood shouldn't be accepted if they show "signs of being profoundly fragile personalities," and says future priests should learn the "importance" of their future commitments, "in particular with regard to

celibacy."

The guidelines acknowledge that "in many places the choice of celibacy is questioned" and say that such "erroneous opinions within the church" are responsible for a "lack of appreciation" for those who make the choice to remain celibate.

In fact, Western culture, with its "indifference to the Christian faith," is "unable to understand the value of vocations to a special consecration."

Data presented by the congregation's undersecretary, Angelo Vincenzo Zani, show that priestly vocations over the last 10 years fell sharply in Europe. They remained stable in North and South America and rose significantly in Asia and Africa, though still not enough to offset the rapid growth in Catholics' numbers worldwide.

Communication involves shared understanding of a group

By Mark Borchert

One day I made a research visit to two nearby churches that taught me one of the most important lessons in church communication.

In the morning I visited a Baptist church that had grown rapidly over the past decade, adding new members and outgrowing its previous downtown location. The church relocated to a new campus and built beautiful new multi-million-dollar facilities.

One of the church programs that the staff highlighted caught my attention. With mounts of deer, elk and bear decorating the fellowship hall, the church invited the community to a "wild game supper."

Church members and staff donned camouflage to serve venison, trout and wild turkey to community members, and a speaker related his hunting exploits to the gospel message. Outdoor enthusiasts, including many visitors, packed into the church's new facilities for this special church event.

That afternoon I visited another Baptist congregation that also had experienced unprecedented growth. It, too, relocated to a new campus and built new facilities. In discussing church programming, the ministerial staff shared with me photographs of one of their most recent and significant outreach events.

This event involved sacred dance. The photographs showed ballet dancers interpreting the gospel message to an overflow crowd. Dramatic lighting and music, even a smoke machine, were used to enhance this graceful retelling of Christ's story through dance.

Here were two churches, both experiencing growth, and yet in key events they communicated their faith in radically different ways. In one brief day, visiting two neighboring churches, I could not possibly overlook the unique character of individual congregations.

It is clear to me that the most important step in effective church communication is first to understand the distinct identity of a congregation.

Church leaders, however, tend to think about communication differently. Rather than focusing on identity, church communication is often approached as the sending and receiving of information.

Staff members ask what information needs to go out in the newsletter or announcements. Does the church need to purchase newspaper advertisements or radio and television spots to communicate an event? Perhaps billboards or social media are ideal ways to inform people.

It is almost second nature to think about communication as conveying information to people inside and outside the walls of the church. This perspective on communication seems obvious.

Communication, of course, is conveying information. Ideas travel through various channels to impact the lives of the receivers. Communication is extending messages across geographic space. We send email and letters; we post blogs and updates, and we make calls in an effort to get out the word.

In his seminal collection of essays, *Communication as Culture*, scholar James Carey describes this information-oriented approach as dominating American thinking and research about communication. This model of communication focuses attention on "transmitting," "sending" or "imparting" information often for the purpose of control.

Carey also offers an alternative approach to understanding communication, a model rooted in a more ancient concept, but one very familiar to Christians. From this alternate vantage point, communication is linked with the ideas of "commonness," "communion" and "community."

In contrast to a "transmission view," this perspective connects communication with "sharing," "participation," "fellowship" and

"the possession of a common faith."

Communication involves the shared understanding of a group. This alternative understanding of communication focuses attention on the issue of identity. Communication questions no longer center on imparting information but on representing the core values, beliefs and behaviors of the group.

This identity-oriented view of communication can completely change the way churches approach the process. Seen in a new light, communication is not only about transmitting a message across space but also is characterized by sustaining values through time.

In communication a group creates a culture, building a sense of shared mission and community. This approach clarifies a number of church communication principles:

- Effective communication is rarely achieved by merely applying what has worked at one church to another congregation.
- Effective communication grows out of the identity and context of an individual church.
- Effective communication encompasses every aspect of church life, including worship services and events, facilities and decor, promotional material and websites, and the stories that members tell about their church.
- Effective communication involves everyone in a church, not merely the church staff.
- Effective communication focuses attention on values and stories rather than only on conveying information.

God is at work, shaping the story of each individual congregation. In church communication, congregations are God's partners in this storytelling process. **BT**

—Mark Borchert is an associate professor and chair of the communications department at Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tenn. His forthcoming book is titled *Communicating Church*.



Generosity multiplied

Gift for church activities building keeps on giving

ATLANTA — An anonymous gift of \$270,000 was offered to Wieuca Road Baptist Church in 1967 to build and equip a new facility for recreation ministry — and to provide a couple of college scholarships. The donor, who chose to remain anonymous, approached the late Oliver Wilbanks, who was serving as associate pastor at the time.

This Christian businessman, who was not a Baptist, had been pleased with the positive impact the expansive youth and activities ministries of Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church, just a couple of miles down Atlanta's fabled Peachtree, had made on his children. So he wanted to see such ministries available at another church — and perhaps another.

Bill Self, Wieuca's pastor at time, said the gift sounded too good to be true. It took the congregation two business meetings to accept it.

"You can't believe someone would give you an activities building," said Self of the surprise, anonymous gift.

The timing was good, said Self, in that the recreation facility could be built near the same time the congregation would erect its current sanctuary with the large white steeple seen from all around the shopping and business district in bustling Buckhead.

Wieuca's current pastor has little memory of those events 45 years ago — but a close connection.

Mark Wilbanks, son of Oliver and Betty, played in the same recreation leagues at Second-Ponce as the donors' sons. His father had served on the staff at Second-Ponce before coming to Wieuca.

Mark benefited as well from the J. Robert Ward Activities Building, where he worked one summer. The couple making the gift to



Pastor Mark Wilbanks stands outside the J. Robert Ward Activities Building of Wieuca Road Baptist Church in Atlanta. The building — provided by an anonymous gift that keeps growing — was erected in 1968 when Mark's father served on the church staff.

Wieuca had asked that it be named for the director of the recreation programs at Second-Ponce during that era. It was a good choice, said Wilbanks.

"Bobby Ward was known as a really good basketball coach," said Wilbanks, recalling piling into a van with his youthful teammates to take on teams near and far.

The gift to Wieuca came with three stipulations. First, an activities building would be built with all new equipment and adequate staff. The donor even asked that the building have its own custodian.

Second, some funds would provide college scholarships to deserving persons identified through the recreation ministries.

Third, the church would some day seek to bless another congregation with a similar gift.

"It was a visionary gift," said Self, of the anonymous couple's wish to see Christian recreation ministries expand — and for each blessed congregation to bless another.

Wieuca fulfilled its commitment in the mid-1990s. During an effort to renovate facilities, the congregation raised an additional \$250,000 that was given to the First Baptist Church of Grayson, Ga., east of Atlanta, for a similar purpose and with the same hope that the gift would grow yet again.

It did. In February of this year, the Grayson congregation presented a check for \$250,000 to seven-year-old Woodlake Baptist Church in nearby Walnut Grove, Ga., for the construction of a multi-purpose building.

As their gifts have been multiplied, the donors have always stayed in the background, said Wilbanks. But they have visited each of the churches — quietly and supportively.

"It was a way for him to say thanks," he said of the businessman who initiated the gift that has helped three congregations — and still counting — to expand their ministries. "You'd like to think this is the way churches would partner with each other."

His is more than a detached, professional perspective. The gift has had a personal impact on Wilbanks — who participated in the recreation ministries, received the first J. Robert Ward scholarship from Wieuca, worked in the activities building, and is now pastor of the congregation where he was ordained to ministry.

"It's a connection of relationships," said Wilbanks, who is hopeful that more relationships will result in new opportunities for ministry as the result of a gift that keeps on giving. **BT**





ABOVE LEFT: Children from a YMCA summer camp make good use of the Southside Baptist Church gym. Several community organizations are made to feel at home in the congregation's facilities in downtown Birmingham. ABOVE RIGHT: Cedric Williams (left) and Associate Pastor Tim Kelley (center) are joined by volunteers Rufus, Martha, Shirley and Doris, who staff the congregation's clothing ministry while caring for one another.

Beyond Sundays

Congregation lives out commitment to building an inclusive community of grace

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Just one block west of historic Five Points South, in the middle of downtown Birmingham, Ala., sits an imposing but beautiful structure that is Southside Baptist Church.

Established soon after the founding of Birmingham, Southside has been at the center of the city's physical and spiritual community for more than 120 years. The church's stated mission is "... to build an inclusive community of grace, first in our own community and then in the world."

Commitment to that mission continues to shape the congregation's presence in the inner city.

CHURCH IN COMMUNITY

"Southside was built from the very beginning, intentionally, with the idea of being a church used every day by the community," said Tim Kelley, associate pastor of ministries and administration. "When our gym was built in 1926, practically unheard of at that time, it was with the idea of community use in mind."

Currently, in addition to the Southside

Baptist Church congregation, three other congregations worship in the Southside facilities and seven non-profit organizations have office space within the building. Pastor Steve Jones and Kelley have formed close relationships with the various congregations that have met there including Temple Emmanuel and the Korean Baptist Congregation.

Southside has been sharing space with other congregations and organizations on a consistent basis since the late 1970s. From its earliest days, the church has promoted and been involved in missions and mission education.

This focus led to the formation of and long relationship with two international congregations. The first grew out of working with Chinese students at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), a group that later evolved into the Birmingham Chinese Christian Church.

This Chinese congregation met at Southside until 2006 when they moved to a location more centrally located to their members. The other international church,

the Korean Baptist Congregation, still meets on the fourth floor of Southside's Jackson Education Building.

Other organizations, though not based at the church, make use of the facilities for meetings and other activities. These include Alcoholics Anonymous, choral groups and the YMCA.

OVERLAP

The beauty of this community-oriented church is best realized when the congregation and the community programs overlap. Cedric Williams is a good example.

He works with friends in Southside's clothes closet ministry several days each week. He found his way to Southside while staying at the Salvation Army in downtown Birmingham.

"I still get goose bumps when I think about that first Sunday that I came to Southside Baptist," said Cedric. "Being an African American man in Alabama and having a troubled past, I had often experienced rejection. But on the first day I came to this church, the people wrapped me up in love."

In particular, he recalled the fellowship time after worship.

“They not only invited me to stay, but several people asked me to sit with them at their table,” he recalled. “I wasn’t left by myself in a corner.”

Kelley said Williams attended the church for a year, always sitting on the fourth or fifth pew in the sanctuary.

“One day shortly after that, our deacons were meeting and discussing whether or not we should continue our clothes closet ministry,” said Kelley. “It was being kept up by some of our wonderful, elderly women but they were having health and transportation issues and we were concerned about them not having someone with them upstairs.”

Williams was the answer to their prayers.

“The next day, Cedric walked into my office and said, ‘If there’s something I can do, I would like to help,’” said Kelley. “I honestly wondered about how they would all get along, but they instantly became fast friends and have really kept that ministry together.”

Williams has been working with the clothes closet for two years now — and calls his co-workers “family.”

“When Shirley had an accident and couldn’t drive anymore, I visited her in the hospital and said we would make a deal,” he recalled. “If she



Southside Baptist Church’s 120-year presence in downtown Birmingham has been marked by commitments to engage the community rather than live in isolation.

would concentrate on getting better so she could come back to church and the clothes closet, then I would come pick her up.”

Ever since, Cedric has been picking up Shirley and her friend, Martha, each week to work in the clothes closet.

“God is love, and that’s what I experienced when I came here,” he said. “That’s how I knew that God was here.”

DOWNTOWN DAYS

On a Monday at Southside Baptist Church, the Shades Valley YMCA was hosting a summer

camp in the gym and several other parts of the massive church building.

Collaborative Solutions, an organization operating more than \$2.5 million in grants and contracts to strategically enhance housing and services to special needs populations, was moving more furniture into its office space to help address low-income housing needs.

The Birmingham Hospitality Network was trying to figure out how to get another van for its work with homeless families. And Cedric and his group of volunteers were separating and hanging up clothes.

These activities were in addition to the day-to-day ministry programs of the Southside Baptist congregation. Kelley said such cooperation and collaboration speak to the congregation’s commitment to building an inclusive community of grace.

“There is a strong commitment by Southside to remain in the city, using the resources available, whether financial, human, or building and facilities, to share the love and grace of God to all we encounter,” said Kelley. “We see and understand that God is always at work around us, working in and through people and organizations that may be different from us, yet a synergistic effect is realized with positive results through which more of God’s Kingdom work is made evident.” **BT**

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‘Beautiful’

Kentucky volunteers build new home in 10 days

PINE KNOT, Ky. — Butch and Mary Ann Brown were nearly at a loss for words walking for the first time through their new home built by volunteers with the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship.



“Beautiful,” Butch, terminally ill and confined to a wheelchair, said of the three-bedroom house built in 10 days in place of the deteriorating 40-year-old double-wide where he raised a family in Pine Knot, Ky.

Asked what she would say to each of the 110 volunteers from various churches across Kentucky who made it happen, Mary Ann said: “Thank you. God has blessed so much.”

Pine Knot is in McCreary County, which with Owsley County is one of two Kentucky counties among the 20 poorest counties in the country identified in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s Together for Hope initiative aimed at reversing rural poverty.

Desiring seven years ago to involve Kentucky Baptists in the ministry, then-KBF associate Rhonda Abbot Blevins networked with local agencies to help families such as the Browns who need a new house but can’t afford it. She had connections with Habitat for Humanity and took advantage of their experience to coordinate the first “Extreme Build” summer mission project.

For Joshua Speight, the current associate coordinator for missions, this was the fifth home-building blitz and the first to finish ahead of schedule. “It’s a very good feeling,” he said.

“If we could put a sign up right now that said ‘Mission Accomplished’ that would be true,” beamed Steve Holm, general contractor and a member of St. Matthews Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky.

Because of his health, Butch had not been to the building site since demolition. Neither had Mary Ann, so when they pulled up for the noon dedication service, they were seeing the completed home on their property for the very first time.

“It was an emotional moment for all of us, full of tears, joy and love as we welcomed the

Browns home and thanked God for them and the next chapter in their life,” Speight said.

The Browns occupied their new house valued at \$120,000 after signing a \$40,000 long-term, low-interest mortgage they will be required to pay. They qualified through Kentucky Highland’s Investment Corporation, an organization formed in 1968 to stimulate growth and create employment opportunities in a nine-county region of Southeastern Kentucky. In 2003 the service area expanded to 22 counties.

KBF, which put up \$20,000 collected from member churches for the financing package, selected the family because the boost will benefit not only the couple but also will be passed on to children and grandchildren living in the area.

“We’re looking at changing generational poverty,” Speight said.

The KBF is the only charity operating in McCreary County focused on economic development through affordable housing. KBF Coordinator John Lepper said the impact goes far beyond the seven families helped so far.

“I think the impact of it is in the area of hope,” Lepper said, “to build hope to change the future of a family and community.”

Lepper recalled one teenager from a past Extreme Build who had been in trouble until working with KBF volunteers. At the end of the week he announced to his family he was going back to the regular high school. His siblings said, “You can’t. You always get in trouble,” but he insisted this time would be different.

“We’re not here to build a home,” Lepper said. “We’re here to build a new narrative.”

Lepper said Extreme Build, the Kentucky Fellowship’s premiere mission project, is a model of how the statewide Cooperative Baptist Fellowship operates — coordinating resources from various sources to accomplish

what none could do on their own.

It also serves to reunite veteran volunteers from far-flung KBF churches who otherwise probably wouldn’t be acquainted. “We call it old-home week,” Speight said.

Charlie Gatton, 88, a veteran of all seven Extreme Builds and member of Buechel Park Baptist Church in Louisville, said he has seen the quality of work improve over the years.

“Every year we get a little more knowledge and a little more people,” said Gatton, who for the last three years has worked as a consultant with Kentucky Highland’s Investment Corporation. “I think every year they have been more professional. Everybody finds a niche.”

The dedication ceremony on the Browns’ front porch included handing over keys to the house and gifts including a mailbox hand-painted by one of the more artistic volunteers and large-print Bibles signed by everyone who participated during the week. Lepper led a dedication prayer, followed by everyone singing the hymn “Amazing Grace.”

Holm summarized the philosophy behind Extreme Build by referring to a verse from the New Testament book of James. “We’re not saved by works,” he said. “We’re saved for works.” **BT**



Fig-uratively speaking



By Tony W. Cartledge

It is a known fact that I'm a big fan of figs. Few things are better straight from the tree — and this year my tree (really more of a bush) is loaded.

The tree is an offshoot from a turkey fig growing near the old house in Georgia where my grandmother used to live, and where I lived for the first four years of my life. North Carolina's climate suits it well, though it would do even better if my neighbor's tall hollies

didn't crowd out so much of the sun and space.

The warm winter and wet spring contributed to a bumper crop. The tree is loaded with smaller figs that will ripen late into the summer, along with an appreciable early crop.

My biggest problem is getting to the figs before the birds do. Figs don't ripen further after they're picked, but as soon as they start turning brown, they get pecked full of holes and the ants invade.

That leaves me walking a fine line, watching the figs carefully and either eating holey fruit or picking them a day or so before they're really ripe. They're not quite as sweet and flavorful that way, but at least they're intact and still make for a happy snack.

I also like figs because they remind me that I have at least one thing in common with Jesus, who apparently loved them. The gospels include several stories in which Jesus was disappointed when he checked out a fig tree but found no fruit on it. Once, he cursed a tree with remarkable results

Selections from recent blogs at baptiststoday.org

(Mark 11:11-14, 20-21).

My favorite of Jesus' parables is about a fruitless fig tree found in Luke 13:6-9. When a landowner noticed a tree that had produced no fruit for three years running, he told his gardener to cut it down.

Not ready to give up on it, the gardener asked the landowner to "let it alone" (the same word as "forgive") for another year so he could dig around the tree and fertilize it with manure in hopes of kick-starting some fruit.

The parable is open-ended, because it's really not about a fig tree, is it? It's about fruitless folk who face justified judgment but are offered the "manurified" mercy of a patient master gardener.

Could it be that the messy stuff of life serves a purpose? Will we produce the kind of fruit that better the world and honors God?

The end of the story remains open...BT

Learning through the lens of history

By John Pierce

The making of two new baseball-themed movies this year would be good enough news to me. The fact they were filmed in familiar environs adds to the excitement.

Clint Eastwood rolled into Macon, Ga., earlier this year to eat lunch (on film) at a local hangout and to shoot some scenes at historic Luther Williams Field. He plays a baseball scout in *Trouble with the Curve*.

The film, expected to be released in late September, also stars Amy Adams and Justin Timberlake. My daughter's college town, Athens, Ga., was also a location for this movie, and apparently Timberlake's presence there was well noted.

On the heels of such stargazing, Harrison Ford and others came to Macon as well to shoot scenes for *42* — a movie about Jackie Robinson who, as Archie Bunker once put it, "changed the complexion of baseball forever." Some downtown Macon streets were made to look like Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1947, when Robinson became the first African American to play in the Major Leagues.

Ford, who plays Branch Rickey, the president and general manager of the Dodgers who signed Robinson, and other actors and crew came to Macon after shoots in Birmingham and Chattanooga, where historic Engel Stadium was made to look like Brooklyn's now-demolished Ebbets Field.

Out for some exercise one morning during a June visit to Chattanooga, I decided to trek over to Engel Stadium to see what might have resulted from the movie venture. To my surprise, a baseball scene — with teams and umpires in their '40s-style uniforms — was being filmed. I hurried back to my downtown hotel as quickly as possible to get my camera, my car and my family.

There's an added pleasure in watching movies shot in familiar settings, such as *Remember the Titans* and *Sweet Home Alabama*, that were filmed at my alma mater, Berry College. That is especially true when the movies, such as those two, are good ones.

Since so many films turn out to be duds, I sure hope these two new baseball-themed movies will be good ones. But my hope for *42* — the film named after



a baseball uniform number that has been retired throughout the Major Leagues — is even greater.

May it be a needed reminder that racial discrimination and bigotry violate the best of human behavior — and that the calling of God is to see inward qualities rather than outward appearances.

And the late groundbreaking Dodger player can teach us more lessons as well — about discipline, courage and grace. Play ball and pass the popcorn. BT

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