

BIBLICAL RECORDER

January 25, 2020 • VOLUME 186 NO. 2 • News Journal of North Carolina Baptists • BRnow.org



NAMB, association back church planter facing deportation

By LIZ TABLAZON | BR Assistant Editor

The San Diego Southern Baptist Association (SDSBA) and North American Mission Board (NAMB) are standing behind a British church planter and his family who are facing deportation at the end of the month.

Obed Brefo, pastor of King's Cross Church in San Diego, Calif., and his wife, Elena, were working toward extending their religious (R1) visa and applying for permanent residency and eventual U.S. citizenship when the church sponsoring their visa terminated their application in 2018.

"When we started seminary [in 2010] ... the goal was to graduate and head back to England to start a church," Brefo said in an interview with the *Biblical Recorder* Jan. 15. "But after being here for five, six years, we really began to look around and see the need around us in southern California."

In 2017, Brefo learned of an opportunity through NAMB to plant a church in one of the least churched neighborhoods of San Diego.

First Baptist Church of Pacific Beach, then under interim leadership, agreed to sponsor Brefo and host King's Cross in their facilities, providing him an office and the new church space for their services.

King's Cross launched in March 2018 but members of FBC Pacific Beach voted weeks later to end their partnership with King's Cross and no longer sponsor Brefo's application.

FBC Pacific Beach did not respond to the

See Planter page 5



Hendersonville church models revitalization

By LIZ TABLAZON | BR Assistant Editor

Ebenezer Baptist Church in Hendersonville, N.C., averaged 70-80 people in attendance five years ago. Today there are more than 500 members.

Steven Blanton, senior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist, attributes the growth to "God's favor and a willing people." When he became pastor in 2015, Blanton did not emphasize a mission statement but rather a concept from scripture, he told the *Biblical Recorder* in a phone interview Jan. 15.

Church leaders wanted to turn the narrative, he said.

"This is not an older church trying to become young. We're just the church trying to be a church."

They focused instead on becoming a "1 John, Titus 2 and Acts" church: one that loved God and others; prioritized mentor relationships between

Revitalization for Ebenezer Baptist Church in Hendersonville came as a result of focusing on being the church to its community. (Contributed photo)

See Models page 8

Explainer: ERLC, Soros and Evangelical Immigration Table

Baptist Press

A *Breitbart.com* article recently highlighted the Evangelical Immigration Table (EIT), an organization credited with persuading multiple governors to allow refugees to resettle in their states. The article also suggested the group has ties to the progressive billionaire George Soros. A number of blogs have circulated these rumors,

charging the group and those affiliated with it as advancing an "open borders" mass immigration agenda. These claims have proved to be false.

What is EIT?

EIT is a nonpartisan coalition of evangelical groups who partner together to advocate for a bipartisan solution on immigration.

See Explainer page 9

WHAT'S INSIDE

Milton Hollifield: Conference to emphasize 'Gospel Above All'	3
Randy Adams to be nominated for SBC president	4
Greear urges churches to 'fill the tank' on Easter	5
Sunday School lessons	10

What's happening with N.C. Baptist disaster relief?

Recently, I traveled to the eastern part of North Carolina to see the ongoing disaster relief efforts of Baptists on Mission. They continue to deploy teams in the wake of Hurricane Florence, a storm that wreaked havoc on the area in 2018. What I observed was staggering, and N.C. Baptists deserve to know about it. Here's what I saw.

Baptists on Mission (also known as N.C. Baptist Men, NCBM) is continuously funneling resources and mobilizing volunteers to bring hope back to devastated communities that have been long-forgotten by so many others. Their ability to radically change a family's living situation is a profound blessing – to the ones being served, to volunteers sharing the love of Christ and to N.C. Baptists across the state who support the ministry.

Escorted by NCBM executive director Richard Brunson, I walked through rebuild centers in Lumberton, Rose Hill and New Bern. I also witnessed the wide smiles and blushing pride that spread across the faces of homeowners whose flooded houses had been repaired by N.C. Baptist volunteers.

Each of the rebuild centers we visited was undergoing renovations to better suit the needs of long-term recovery efforts. Jay Baugham, site coordinator at the Lumberton rebuild center, pointed out retooled bunk

rooms, bathrooms and dining space to host volunteers. He talked about the dedicated teams that donate tireless hours to serving others.



SETH BROWN
BR Executive Editor

Richard Weeks, site coordinator in Rose Hill, walked me through the sprawling campus of the newest and largest rebuild center, formerly known as Charity Middle School. The facility has become a launching pad for more than 200 volunteers at a time. Weeks, who also serves as associational mission strategist for the Eastern Baptist Association, recounted stories of how churches in the area had seen new growth as Baptists on Mission fanned out across the communities, touching lives along the way.

In New Bern, site coordinator Carrie Fisher introduced me to Louise Foy, who recently moved back into her home after living 15 months in a camper. The house took on more than two feet of water in 2018. During our visit, Ms. Foy could not stop expressing her gratitude to NCBM staff and volunteers for the beautiful repairs made throughout her house.

The ministry is astounding, and it makes a significant difference in communities across our state. While there is certainly more to say about the ministry of NCBM, space is limited. Experience says it all, so consider getting involved.

Visit baptistsonmission.org to learn more. 



Before, above, and after, below, photos of Louise Foy's home in New Bern. (Top photo by Carrie Fisher, NCBM; bottom photo: Seth Brown, BR Executive Editor)



Latest update

Hurricane Florence was the most devastating natural disaster ever to strike North Carolina. Approximately 100,000 homes have been affected. There are currently six rebuild sites in operation, down from 14. More than 5,800 rebuild projects have been completed. Total recovery time will extend extend 2-3 years.

Get involved

NCBM welcomes all volunteers. No prior training is required. A \$10 donation is requested per volunteer per day to help cover lodging, meals and insurance. Contact Tom Beam at (800) 395-5102, ext. 5626, or email tbeam@ncbaptist.org.



**BIBLICAL
RECORDER**

(ISSN 0279-8182)

Volume 186 No. 2

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News Journal of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina
Founded 1833 by Thomas Meredith

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- Individual subscriptions, \$19.99 (one year) or \$2 per month
 - Group (5+) \$14.99
 - Bulk (10+) \$12.99
 - Digital rates: \$7.99 (one year).
- Payable in advance. N.C. sales tax will be added.

Publication

Published biweekly on Saturdays with the exception of no issue at the end of December, by the Biblical Recorder, 205 Convention Drive, Cary, NC 27511, as authorized by the Baptist State Convention in annual session at Winston-Salem, November 21-23, 1939. Periodicals postage paid at Raleigh, NC 27676.

Postmaster

Send address changes to Biblical Recorder Inc., P.O. Box 1185, Cary, NC 27512-1185.

Conference to emphasize ‘Gospel Above All’

There is nothing more important in life than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Everyone needs to hear the gospel, and as followers of Christ, we never outgrow our need for the gospel. The message of Jesus Christ’s death, burial and resurrection is both life-changing and life-altering. The gospel not only has the power to save us, but it also has the power to sanctify or spiritually develop us as we grow in Christ.

This year’s Disciple-Making Conference will emphasize making the gospel a priority in our lives, and it is focused on the theme of “Gospel Above All.”

I hope you will make plans to join us for this year’s event on Tues., Feb. 25, at Green Street Baptist Church in High Point.

This annual daylong conference is our largest event that is focused primarily on training and equipping participants. Whether you are a pastor, a church staff member or a lay person, this event at Green Street Baptist has something for everyone who desires to be encouraged and equipped to share and live out the gospel where they live and serve.



MILTON A. HOLLIFIELD JR.
Baptist State Convention
of North Carolina executive
director-treasurer

Our keynote speaker this year is Jimmy Scroggins, lead pastor of Family Church in South Florida. Pastor Scroggins is one of our sharp younger pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention, and many of the experiences he’s faced in ministry are some of the same issues that our churches here in North Carolina are facing. I’m looking forward to hearing and learning from him.

Pastor Scroggins also developed the popular witnessing tool known as the “3 Circles Life Conversation Guide,” or “3 Circles,” for short.

We utilize this resource in the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina’s Gospel Conversations trainings, and I have utilized it myself in several witnessing opportunities.

In addition to keynote addresses from Pastor Scroggins, conference attendees will have the opportunity to choose from more than 40 different breakout sessions throughout the day being led by pastors, ministry leaders and church practitioners.

As part of the registration process this year, attendees will have the opportunity to select in advance which breakout sessions they want to attend when they register for this event.

You can learn more about the conference and see a complete list of



breakout session offerings by visiting disciplemakingconference.org. The cost for all of this is \$12 per person and includes lunch and a bundle of free resources.

It’s been said that some people may be able to share the gospel better than you, but no one can preach or share a better gospel.

I hope to see you at this year’s conference as we seek to prioritize the gospel above all.

“For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the scriptures” – 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 (NKJV).

Impeachment, the 2020 election cycle and the church

Even with the political divisions in our country, it should be our aim as pastors and evangelicals to prioritize the gospel of Jesus Christ and diminish, as much as possible, the division politics causes in the body of Christ.

Unfortunately, sometimes political conversations are unavoidable in the life of the church. Just the other Sunday, several members were discussing the recent impeachment proceedings.

If that weren’t enough, Mark Galli’s *Christianity Today* editorial “Trump Should Be Removed from Office” stirred even more tension within evangelical circles.

Galli’s article prompted a number of responses, not the least of which came in the form of an open letter signed by nearly 200 evangelical leaders.

Regardless of the outcome of the impeachment proceedings within the Senate, there will remain significant tension within evangelicalism regarding politics and the 2020 election.

Personally, I think it is wise to keep as much political tension out of the church as possible.

The more we allow it to divide us,

the less effective we will be in evangelizing the lost.



CHRIS HEFNER
Guest Column

I’m not going to get into the details of the impeachment, nor defend either side of those within evangelicalism. As pastors and church leaders, we must remember and be gracious with the following reminders.

1. We might not be who we choose to vote for. As a democratic republic, we have the privilege of voting for politicians to represent

our values and interests.

But because of our two-party system, the presidential candidates may or may not reflect our values or the character we wish to be associated with.

At times this dynamic creates an unappealing “lesser of two evils” choice. Many people vote out of a sense of duty and conscience.

Others vote against a candidate rather than for another one. Just because someone may have voted for a Democrat or a Republican does not mean that person automatically carries the same values, character or even holds all the policies of the candidate.

2. We might be who we choose to defend. Voting for someone and defending someone require different levels of engagement.

While some are pleased with current policies or were pleased with the previous administration’s policies, we do not have to defend said politicians. If we defend a politician’s character in the midst of immoral or sinful behavior, we can become guilty of overlooking or defending sin. We must be careful here.

Whatever your positions, when we defend the indefensible, we run the risk of losing our witness.

3. We must be careful to retain a prophetic voice. As Christians, we must be willing to speak prophetically and evangelistically. When politicians act immorally or unethically, we ought to speak out.

When unethical and immoral platforms are being promoted, we ought to speak out. If we do not retain a prophetic voice, we will lose our witness in the world. And as Christians who have an allegiance to the kingdom of Christ, we should be willing to speak out prophetically regardless of the party in power or the party we align with.

4. We should occasionally get out of our echo chambers. In their

excellent work *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt explore the tensions related to the “us versus them” culture that is so prevalent in contemporary politics.

Part of the reason we are so divided is that we are able to get our information within our own chosen echo chambers of news. Social media plays to this reality as well.

Clicks and likes form the basis for populating the articles on your feed. I’m not suggesting that you should watch, listen or read all news from all sources, but you should have a variety of news sources.

At the least, we should recognize that each news source carries a bias. Using multiple news outlets helps us be more objective.

Might I humbly suggest that you get your news first from the *Biblical Recorder*.

While the *Recorder* will not give you a rundown of the latest impeachment news, their staff is committed to news from a biblical worldview aiming to help Baptists fulfill their disciple-making mission.

(EDITOR’S NOTE – Chris Hefner is senior pastor of Wilkesboro Baptist Church and vice chair of the Biblical Recorder’s board of directors.)

Randy Adams to be nominated for SBC president

By TESS SCHOONHOVEN | Baptist Press

A group of Southern Baptists announced their intention Jan. 14 to nominate Randy Adams, executive director of the Northwest Baptist Convention (NWBC), as president of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).

Adams' nomination will be presented to messengers at the SBC annual meeting June 9-10 in Orlando, Fla.

Adams said that if elected, he would aim to focus on the SBC's Great Commission efforts, rebuilding trust among the convention's churches, entities and other organizations, according to the Northwest Baptist Witness.

In an announcement on Adams' personal website, he said he believes the SBC needs a directional shift.

"I am allowing my name to be entered into nomination for the presidency of the SBC because I believe that we need a clear change in direction in order to fulfill our God-given mission and reverse our present course of decline in every key measurement of Great Commission advance," Adams said in the announcement.

"While Southern Baptists retain considerable ability to impact the world for Christ, we are currently experiencing our greatest challenge. After waging a decades-long battle for the Bible, we are in danger of losing the war we were founded to fight, that of advancing the Great Commission by making disciples and rescuing the captives of the evil one.

"If we do not honestly confront issues others will do so, including

those who do not love the SBC like we do. Christians must be able to engage in honest discourse, speaking the truth in love."

Adams said in his announcement that although he believes the SBC is in the midst of great challenge, it is also a time of immense opportunity – a chance to recommit to the purpose of advancing the Great Commission.



RANDY ADAMS

The only other nominee for the SBC presidency thus far is R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., who will be nominated by H.B. Charles, pastor of Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla.

Gideon cited Adams' goals for the SBC as reason for his nomination.

Blake Gideon, pastor of First Baptist Church in Edmond, Okla., and president of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, is the intended nominator of Adams at the SBC annual meeting.

"His experience, integrity, and the vision he has for the SBC is vital," Gideon told Baptist Press. "We face some increasing challenges from our culture and increasing decline and division in the SBC. Randy is the kind of guy who will lead us according to God's Word, and unite us behind the Great Commission."

The group of Southern Baptists nominating Adams includes pastors Dale Jenkins, Airway Heights (Wash.) Baptist Church; Ronny Cooksey, Sandia Baptist Church, Albuquerque; Deris Coto, pastor of Hispanic Ministries, First Baptist Church, Fairburn, Ga. and Troy Smith, Mill Park Baptist Church, Portland, Ore.,

The group also includes Mary

Habila, NWBC Woman's Missionary Union president and member of Living Spring Fellowship, Des Moines, Wash.; Denise Hayden, member of Pellville Baptist Church, Hawesville, Ky.; Nick Phoenix, pastor and executive director of Words to Works Ministries, Jacksonville, Fla.; Mike Scifres, member, North Fork Baptist Church, Eufaula, Okla. and Bill Agee, executive director-treasurer of the California Southern Baptist Convention.

Explaining why a collective group is making this nomination announcement, Gideon said "in order to demonstrate unity of Southern Baptists from across different demographics and ethnicities. [We] wanted to express a united effort of people who we believe really reflect the SBC."

The group, like Gideon, also cited Adams' "experience, integrity and vision" as their reasoning behind the nomination, reported the Northwest Baptist Witness.

Adams is a member of Go Church, a church plant in Ridgefield, Wash. The plant reported 34 members and an average of 100 weekly attendees on

the 2019 SBC Annual Church Profile (ACP). Of total undesignated receipts of \$233,660, the church gave \$13,805, or 5.9 percent, through the Cooperative Program, according to the ACP.

In 2019, the NWBC, where Adams has served as executive director since 2013, reported Cooperative Program receipts of \$2,861,490. Of that, \$641,093.65 (22.4 percent), was forwarded to national and international CP causes. The 2020 budget for the NWBC anticipates \$2,920,000 in Cooperative Program gifts from member churches, with \$2,236,000 supporting mission work in the Northwest, \$584,000 (20.0 percent) being passed on to the national Cooperative Program allocation budget, and \$100,000 to support the work of Gateway Seminary's Pacific Northwest Campus in Vancouver, Wash.

"His proven leadership over the Northwest Baptist Convention proves his focus in advancing the Great Commission," Gideon said. "It also demonstrates the value of cooperative work and supporting the Cooperative Program." BR

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Planter

Continued from page 1

Recorder's request for comment by publication time."

SDSBA became Brefo's sponsor, but last week the Brefos learned the couple's application for green cards was denied because of inconsistencies in their visa status, referring to the 2018 cancellation.

Obed and Elena, along with their three children who were all born in the U.S., must now leave the country by the end of the month. When they arrive in England, the couple will refile for a new R1 visa in hopes of returning to California by February 2021.

"It's so challenging for us as a family," Brefo told the congregation in an announcement Jan. 12.

"This church is our home. You guys are our people," Elena said through tears. "None of us want to leave. We're still shocked, to be honest."

The family is praying God would provide an unexpected way for them to stay in the U.S., or at least reduce their time in England.

King's Cross, which now meets at a different location in San Diego, is a "thriving" church, according to Brefo and Mike Carlisle, SDSBA director of missions. Brefo said members "stepped up" when they heard the news and committed time and resources to help the family with the transition.

"Our San Diego association stands

behind Obed in his attempt to finalize his immigration process. We are his sponsor and would love to see something worked out for him to stay and continue pastoring the new church. It [the church] is going very well," Carlisle told the Recorder.

The congregation will rely on guest preachers and video sermons Brefo plans to record from England, continuing a sermon series in Acts.

"I've got incredible leaders on the ground that will take care of a lot more of the discipling and administrative responsibilities that need to be done ... I can do a lot remotely across the pond, as well," Brefo said.

NAMB expressed support for the family and church.

"Our city missionary in San Diego has been closely involved and is working with Obed and the church plant. He is working to be sure the church is well led and cared for in Obed's absence," a NAMB spokesperson told the Recorder. "The church loves Obed, and everyone is praying he will be able to come back and continue to be their pastor. We are doing everything we can to support the church and Obed during this process." Pacific Beach is known as a "graveyard for church plants," Brefo said. "We haven't been surprised by these intense challenges ... we're praying this actually really brings about incredible things."



Obed Brefo, pastor of King's Cross Church in San Diego, Calif., and his wife, Elena, are having to return to England because of visa issues. They want to return, but with refiling, they won't likely be able to return until 2021.

(EDITOR'S NOTE – Seth Brown, BR executive editor, contributed to this story.)

Greear urges churches to 'fill the tank' on Easter

By TESS SCHOONHOVEN | Baptist Press

J.D. Greear, president of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), is calling SBC churches to participate in a nationwide focus on baptism this Easter Sun., April 12.

After the success of the first "Baptism Sunday" in September 2019, Greear and other SBC leadership hope to continue to focus on growing proclamations of faith through public baptism services.

"We have heard some of the most amazing stories coming out of our Baptism Sunday in September," Greear said. "We heard stories of family members, friends and even taxi drivers responding in baptism – many of whom had been prayed over for years. I believe last fall was just scratching the surface of what God wants to do,

and will do, when we extend the call to believe and be baptized. Many sit in our pews that simply need to be instructed and invited."

Greear explained that a Baptism Sunday service is an opportunity for thousands of people in churches to immediately respond to the gospel by taking that first step of obedience and faith.

"Many of the people who will fill our pews on Easter will come as interested spectators," Greear noted. "When we invite them to be baptized, we're calling them to make a decision to be followers of Jesus – and that's exactly what people who hear the gospel need to do."

Ronnie Floyd, SBC Executive Committee president and CEO, said that while churches should baptize regularly, "emphasizing a day like Easter

takes baptism to an entirely different level.

"Challenging people to be baptized on this Easter Sunday makes this a memorable day they will never forget," Floyd continued. "It also serves as a gospel illustration in each worship service that a pastor can mention in his sermon as he calls people to follow Jesus, even into the public declaration of baptism."

Church members and leaders alike

are encouraged to take the stories of changed lives to public platforms, sharing images and victories on social media using hashtags like "#BaptismSunday" and "#Fillthetank."

Baptism Sunday is not a gimmick, Greear emphasized. Rather, it is a statement of faith that God is drawing people to Himself in surrounding communities. The call to this special Sunday comes with an equally vital call to prayer.

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George Schroeder named EC's associate VP for convention news

By JON WILKE | Baptist Press

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Executive Committee (EC) has hired award-winning journalist George Schroeder as its new associate vice president for convention news.

In this new role, Schroeder's nearly 30 years of experience in the news industry will help him lead the editorial direction and team of journalists and editors at Baptist Press (BP), the convention's news service.

In 2012, Schroeder joined *USA Today* as a senior writer reporting breaking news and writing enterprise and feature stories, along with analyses and columns. His national college sports coverage earned him nine Associated Press Editor awards. Schroeder was named president of Football Writers Association of America in 2009 and has served on various boards of professional reporters.

In addition to *USA Today*, Schroeder's bylines include *The Register-Guard* (Eugene, Ore.), *The Oklahoman*, *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* and *Sports Illustrated*, and he is also a regular host and co-host of multiple shows on SiriusXM radio.

George and his family are members of Trinity Baptist Church in Norman, Okla., where he serves on the church's missions team, overseeing their ministry efforts in Guatemala through multiple trips each year.

Schroeder said these trips have fueled his passion for Christ.

"My desire is to proclaim the gospel and to see people come to Christ," he said. "I'm so thankful for His kindness in allowing me the opportunity to go and share the Good News. In the last few years, working with partners in Guatemala, we've been intentional in attempting to sink roots into the village of Santa Lucia Milpas Altas, Sacatepequez – and praise God, we have seen many come to saving faith."

Southern Baptist service is not new to the Schroeder family. George shares his name and passion for service with his grandfather, George W. Schroeder, who was the executive secretary of the Brotherhood Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention for 19 years from 1952-1971. Under his grandfather's leadership, enrollment in Brotherhood units in Baptist churches climbed to a high of over 634,000 in 1964.

A graduate of Oklahoma Univer-

sity, Schroeder serves on the Board of Advocates at the Children's Hospital Foundation in Oklahoma City, assisting in event planning and raising awareness as well as promoting and raising funds to cover the medical needs of the children at the Oklahoma University Medical Center.

He also serves on the board of *neverthirst*, a ministry which grew from the membership of The Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham, Ala., with the goal of providing clean water as a conduit to share the gospel.

Schroeder said his "desire is to spend my life for Christ." Over the last few years, he has sensed a growing desire toward ministry, he told BP.

"I began pursuing a master's of theological studies with a concentration in cross-cultural missions at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, even as I wasn't sure what God might have in store. While my purpose doesn't change in this new role at the Executive Committee, the ability to fuse the skills God has given me with the mission He has for every Christ-follower – to proclaim the gospel – is incredibly exciting," Schroeder said.

"With great excitement, it is a joy for me to welcome this humble, godly man and highly-gifted leader to our team," said Ronnie Floyd, president and CEO of the SBC EC. "He has done news at the highest level including digital, print, audio, and video.

"George is an award-winning journalist and highly regarded by his peers," Floyd continued. "As a consummate professional who is operating daily in this real-time world of news, he will help us advance the vision of the Great Commission by leading Baptist Press to provide current news for the church.

"As a strong, faithful follower of Jesus Christ, this layman is actively involved in his church and leads mission trips annually."

"During challenging times, God has given the Southern Baptist Convention so many opportunities," Schroeder said. "And Baptist Press has a vital role to play in clearly communicating the message of what God is doing in and through the lives of Southern Baptists. My prayer is to be useful in helping tell that story, and to help equip and encourage our people to proclaim the gospel to a world in desperate need. Amid all of the bad news, we truly have Good News to share."

George has been married to Shan-

non since February 1997, and they have three children, Elizabeth, 19, George, 18, and Christopher, 10.

Other additions

The SBC EC has expanded its communications team with the hiring of Tess Schoonhoven in late 2019 and Jon Wilke and Kyle Cochran this month.

"As we looked to add to the communications team, we wanted to expand our offerings and services to Southern Baptists and media members," Jonathan Howe, EC vice president for communications, told BP. "With the addition of Jon, Kyle and Tess, we now have a team better equipped for online media distribu-

tion and relations. It's exciting to see where God is leading and equipping us as we strive to better tell the Southern Baptist story and to report relevant news for and about Southern Baptists."

Wilke will serve as media relations director at the EC. In this role, Wilke will work with members of the media to share the news, vision and mission of the SBC. Over the past 17 years, Wilke has used his experience and skills as a former U.S. Marine Corps and Army correspondent, community newspaper reporter, spokesperson, and media producer to help Christian ministries communicate their Kingdom work. Wilke has worked with

See News page 11

AROUND THE STATE

Staff change

MICHAEL DAVIS has been called to Berryhill Baptist Church, Charlotte, as pastor. Davis previously served as interim pastor at Berryhill, pastor of Woodlawn Baptist, Charlotte, and with Child Evangelism Fellowship. A native of New Jersey, Davis resides in Charlotte and has two sons.

Retirements

JON HOEY retired Dec. 31, 2019, after 20 years of ministry to the Neuse Baptist Association, La Grange, N.C. He began service Jan. 1, 2000, as the church and community ministries director and was promoted to DOM in July 2008. He and his wife, Gale, plan to relocate to Pennsylvania this spring to reside near their family.

PHILIP BEAVERS, pastor at South Oak Ridge Baptist Church, Yadkinville, announced his retirement after 41 years with the church. Beavers served on the General Board of the Baptist State Convention of N.C. and as moderator of the Yadkin Baptist Association. He earned his master's of divinity from Grace Theological Seminary and a doctorate of ministry from Southeastern Seminary.

L. CHESTER WATERS announced his retirement in December after 43 years of pastoral ministry. He has

served the Ridge Baptist Church, Gastonia, for the past 30 years. Waters previously served churches in Rock Springs, Rutherfordton; Webbs Chapel, Lincolnton; and Mt. Pleasant, Forest City. He is a graduate of Gardner-Webb University and worked on a master's degree through Southeastern Seminary. He lives in Dallas, N.C., and will be available for interim, supply and revivals. Contact him at (704) 689-2653 or email at lchesterwaters@gmail.com.

MICHAEL SMITH, director of missions for the Carolina Baptist Association (CBA), retired Dec. 31, 2019. Smith served as DOM for the CBA for 3½ years prior to his retirement.

Before his time with CBA, Smith served Fruitland Baptist Church, Hendersonville, for 25 years; Eagle Heights Baptist Church, Shepherdsville, Ky., for 3 years; and Oak Grove Baptist Church, Lake Toxaway, N.C., for 4 years.

He is a graduate of Fruitland Baptist Bible Institute, Mars Hill College, and earned a master of divinity and doctor of ministry from Southern Seminary.

Smith plans to continue in mission efforts in Europe and Central Asia, as well as serve local churches on a supply and interim basis. He and his wife, Kelly, will continue to reside in Hendersonville. He can be reached at pastormike53@att.net.

Pastors don't link world events to speeding up Christ's return

By AARON EARLS | LifeWay Christian Resources

Like everyone else, U.S. Protestant pastors may be closely watching the recent events related to Iran, but probably not because they think it has anything to do with the return of Christ.

Pastors are three times more likely to believe Christians can speed up the return of Christ by the spread of their faith than by backing certain geopolitical changes, according to a new study from Nashville-based LifeWay Research.

"While scripture specifically says we cannot know the day or the hour of Jesus Christ's return, we were interested in pastors' views on whether Christians can play a role in bringing about that return any sooner," explained Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research.

Around 1 in 8 Protestant pastors (12 percent) believe Christians can speed up the second coming of Jesus by supporting geopolitical changes mentioned in the Bible, with 5 percent strongly agreeing. Four in 5 pastors (80 percent) don't believe their support will have an impact on the timetable of Christ's return, including 61 percent who strongly disagree.

During heightened conflicts with Syria, a 2013 LifeWay Research study found many Americans were likely to link global conflict with end times.

Almost 1 in 3 saw the conflict as part of the Bible's plan for the end times.

One in 4 thought a U.S. military strike in Syria could lead to Armageddon. And 1 in 5 believed the world would end in their lifetime, including 32 percent of evangelicals.

"A large majority of pastors do not see biblical prophecies about future changes among nations as a roadmap for advocating specific international engagement," said McConnell.

In the most recent study of Protestant pastors, there is no significant difference between mainline and evangelical pastors regarding their views about international political affairs speeding up the return of Christ. There are, however, differences among other demographics.

White pastors (11 percent) are less likely to believe backing geopolitical events will hasten Jesus' second coming than African American pastors (20 percent) or pastors of other ethnicities (22 percent). Pastors 65 and older (16 percent) are more likely to agree than those 18 to 44 (9 percent). Additional education decreases the likelihood a pastor agrees that support from Christians of geopolitical events will speed up the return of Christ. Pastors without a college degree are more than twice as likely to agree than those with a bachelor's or master's degree – 22 percent to 10 percent.

Evangelism to bring about end times

In what Christians call the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20), Jesus tells his followers to "make disciples of all nations," which is often understood as a command to spread the faith to all distinct people groups.

Previously in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus connects

Speed up the Second Coming?

Among Protestant pastors

"Christians can speed up the return of Jesus Christ by supporting geo-political changes mentioned in the Bible."



"Christians can speed up the return of Christ by helping to share the Gospel with all people groups."



■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Not sure

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this occurring to His second coming. "This good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed in all the world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14 CSB).

Protestant pastors are split, however, on whether Christians can actually speed up the return of Christ by helping to share the gospel with all people groups. Close to 2 in 5 (41 percent) believe Christians can hasten Jesus' second coming through world evangelism, while around half (54 percent) disagree.

"The Great Commission was a task Jesus gave His followers to be doing while He is gone," said McConnell.

"Four in 10 pastors believe the pace of sharing the message of what Jesus has done will impact the timing of Christ's return. Presumably many of those who disagree would assert exclusively divine control over Christ's return."

Denominationally, Pentecostal pastors (66 percent) are the most likely to agree Christians can speed up Jesus' return by sharing the gospel with all people groups.

Those with no college degree (56 percent) are more likely to agree than those with a degree.

Pastors 65 and older are the age group most likely to agree (52 percent).

White pastors are more likely than African American pastors to disagree that the second coming of Christ can be sped up by global evangelism – 55 percent to 43 percent.

Immoral until the end?

Whenever the second coming of Christ may be, most Protestant pastors believe immorality will be more common until Jesus returns.

Almost 7 in 10 (68 percent) agree "culture will increasingly get less moral until Jesus Christ returns." Around a quarter (26 percent) disagree.

Evangelical pastors (80 percent) are far more likely to agree than mainline pastors (51 percent). Pastors 45 and older (71 percent) are more likely to agree than younger pastors (62 percent).

Again, education plays a role in pastors' likelihood to agree.

Those with no college degree (90 percent) or a bachelor's (81 percent) are more likely to believe immorality will increase until the return of Jesus than those with a master's (61 percent) or a doctoral degree (63 percent).

Baptist (86 percent) and Pentecostal (84 percent) pastors are more likely to agree than Church of Christ (67 percent), Lutheran (59 percent), Methodist (48 percent), or Presbyterian and Reformed pastors (45 percent).

"On the surface, the responses of most pastors could be described as feeling helpless regarding these specific aspects of the future," said McConnell. "Yet the persistence of their faith amidst a lack of control points to an even greater level of hope."

Methodology

The phone survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors was conducted from Aug. 30 to Sept. 24, 2019. The calling list was a stratified random sample, drawn from a list of all Protestant churches. Quotas were used for church size.

Each interview was conducted with the senior pastor, minister or priest of the church called. Responses were weighted by region to more accurately reflect the population.

The completed sample is 1,000 surveys. The sample provides 95 percent confidence that the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.3 percent. Margins of error are higher in subgroups.

Visit LifeWayResearch.com.

Floyd urges ‘full contingent of messengers’ at SBC 2020

By DIANA CHANDLER | Baptist Press

Each church should send the maximum number of messengers allowed to the 2020 Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) annual meeting in Orlando in June, SBC Executive Committee (EC) president Ronnie Floyd told Baptist Press (BP) Jan. 14.

“I want to encourage every Southern Baptist church to send messengers to our 2020 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in Orlando, Fla., on June 9-10,” Floyd said in advance of the opening of online registration Feb. 1.

“I am calling upon our pastors and church leaders from our churches to do all they can to bring their full

contingent of messengers to Orlando,” Floyd said. “This will be a historic convention that casts a big vision for our future together. I deeply believe the more people we can have attend our annual meeting each year, the more we will be able to mobilize our work together across the world as Southern Baptists.”

The meeting, themed “Gospel Above All. Always,” has already drawn a higher hotel registration to date than previous meetings, said William Townes, SBC EC chief financial officer. He tabulated hotel registration to date for SBC 2020 at 2,132, compared to 1,327 at the comparable time last year for SBC 2019.

“We are very pleased that current



hotel bookings are far outpacing the prior year,” Townes told BP Jan. 13. “Based on these strong reservation [numbers], we anticipate we will have between 11,000 and 13,000 church messengers represented with more than 15,000 attendees in total.”

Each church is allowed a minimum of two messengers, with other criteria determining an allowed messenger count as high as 12 per church. Hotel rooms and messenger registration is available at sbcannualmeeting.net. 

Models Continued from page 1

older and younger members; and were on mission to see their neighbors and the nations know Jesus.

“We’ve got to take the attention off ourselves and put it on those who need Christ in our community, across the state, across this country, across the world,” Blanton said.

“That’s kind of been our effort, and as people were willing to buy into that, God’s been blessing for His glory, through His people.”

Blanton stressed the importance of engaging younger families, couples and millennials to what was an older congregation.

“God began to allow us to turn the corner. If your church is incredibly old, you can’t do Titus 2. If your church is incredibly young, you can’t do Titus 2.”

The change came earlier than expected, Blanton said.

Within two years, he saw a hunger for God’s word begin to grow, especially in women’s groups and Sunday School classes.

The congregation prioritized inviting friends and family to small group settings.

“I think if we focus more on engaging people with the scripture in a smaller context, the sanctuary will take care of itself,” Blanton said.

The church’s children and student ministries also expanded in recent years.

A yearlong internship, in partnership with Fruitland Baptist Bible College in Hendersonville, N.C., the Carolina Baptist Association and the North American Mission Board (NAMB), grew out of the revitalization at Ebenezer.

The program is called “Plowmen,” inspired by Luke 9:62, and is open to students called to a revitalization or replant, Blanton explained.

“God began to start this process of sending us more individuals who cared about the season we were in and walking through, to help others prepare to do the same,” he said.

Because Ebenezer is only about four miles from Fruitland, the internship offers practical, hands-on experience for students at a local church.

They have access to resources provided by NAMB; are involved in pastoral ministry and shepherding assignments; and participate in staff gatherings and one-on-one meetings with church leaders.

Students examine case studies of “hurting and dying churches” throughout North Carolina and the Southeast and have an opportunity to attend the Timothy+Barnabas retreat at no cost.

Some interns from past cohorts have since accepted calls from churches to pastor them through revitalization. 



STEVEN BLANTON

Arkansas disaster relief volunteers rescue elderly women from burning home

By TESS SCHOONHOVEN | Baptist Press

On the morning of Jan. 16, two Arkansas Baptist Disaster Relief (ABDR) volunteers found themselves responding to a real-time disaster.

ABDR, a subsidiary of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention (ABSC), primarily focuses on giving aid to communities struck by natural disasters. While volunteers were working on repairing a roof damaged from recent tornadoes in the southeast Arkansas region, they noticed smoke billowing up just a few houses down the street.

Suspecting the house was in danger, two volunteers left repairing the roof to investigate. After being informed by a neighbor that inside the burning house were two elderly women, the volunteers entered the house to find and remove the victims.

Howard Moose, one of the volunteers at the scene said they had to act quickly to rescue the women. “We just didn’t have time to think about it,” Moose told Baptist Press. “We were there and we were working next door and we saw the house on fire and we heard a lady screaming and we just went in and did what we had to do.”

It was completely black from smoke inside the home, Moose recalled. But miraculously, the smoke lifted for just the right amount of time for Moose and another volunteer to find the victims.

“For a brief moment the smoke did clear,” Moose said. “No explanation other than divine intervention.”

One of the women also used a wheelchair, but had been unable to retrieve it and exit because of the smoke, even with the help of the other occupant. Moose said the woman who could walk on her own was trying to help the other victim, but was quickly succumbing to the smoke. In the moment of clarity, the volunteers were able to successfully remove the women from the house and then quickly reenter to rescue the occupants’ dog.

The dog, found on the back porch, was unconscious and required mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, ABSC said in a release. 

Explainer Continued from page 1

According to EIT's Statement of Principles, the group advocates for a solution that respects the God-given dignity of every person, protects the unity of the immediate family, respects the rule of law, guarantees secure national borders, ensures fairness to taxpayers, and establishes a path toward legal status and/or citizenship for those who qualify and who wish to become permanent residents. In 2013, a resolution at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention drew directly from the EIT Statement of Principles.

Who is part of EIT?

Several evangelical organizations serve as the formal "heads" of the coalition, including World Relief, the Assemblies of God, the National Association of Evangelicals and the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC). Numerous individuals, while not a part of the coalition itself, have also joined EIT's Statement of Principles as signatories. This includes Southern Baptist leaders Jason Allen, Danny Akin, Ronnie Floyd, Kevin Ezell, J.D. Greear, Johnny Hunt, Bryant Wright, Jack Graham, Fred Luter, James Merritt and many others.

What is the ERLC's role in EIT?

The ERLC frequently participates with coalition groups on issues important to Southern Baptists. ERLC's work with a coalition does not signify agreement with the other coalition members on every issue.

As such, the ERLC continues to work with other members of EIT to advocate for a solution to immigration reform.

The ERLC originally partnered with EIT under the leadership of then-president Richard Land, partly in response to the Southern Baptist Convention's 2011 resolution, "On Immigration and the Gospel," which called for a just and compassionate solution to immigration reform. Messengers to the 2018 SBC annual meeting likewise passed a resolution "On Immigration," and current ERLC president Russell Moore has remained part of the coalition, advocating for immigration reform as stated in both the 2011 and 2018 resolutions.

Does George Soros fund EIT or the ERLC?

No.

Some accusing EIT, or member groups of EIT, as being "Soros-funded" point out that EIT is support-

ed by the National Immigration Forum (NIF), and that an organization chaired by George Soros had awarded grant money to the NIF – which is true.

However, the grant in question represented just 2 percent of National Immigration Forum's overall budget, and further, EIT has never received or utilized any money from either George Soros or a Soros foundation.

Additionally, the ERLC has never funded or been funded by EIT or NIF.

Ali Noorani, executive director of the NIF confirmed this in a statement to Baptist Press: "Quite simply, there has never been a single penny from George Soros that has gone toward the work of the Evangelical Immigration Table."

Likewise, ERLC has never received funding from Soros.

The fact-checking website *Snopes.com* published a piece in December 2019 debunking this same Soros charge aimed at another evangelical organization. The article describes the Soros accusation as consisting of "convoluted connections," claims the charges, "stretch and distort the existing facts," are "factually insupportable" and "simply false." 

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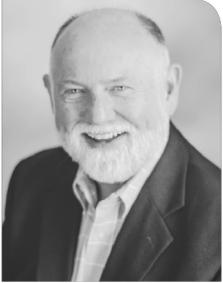
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BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

What is God's Answer to Suffering?

February 2

Focal Passage: Job 40:1-8; 42:1-6

I know little about computers. However, what I do know is helpful to me. For example, I know that if I press the power button, the computer will spring to life. Of course, there are times when what I am trying to do will not work. Something is wrong, and I do not have enough information to fix the problem. Is it something I did? Is it something the manufacturer failed to account for?

Job's life seemed to work well for him. Yet, in a moment, he lost everything. The reader has insight into the heavenly scene where God offers him to Satan for testing, but Job and his companions do not. While his friends implore him to repent of sins he has not committed, Job maintains his innocence. In the end, God never explains himself but rather appeals to His nature and character.

God's answer to suffering can come through vindication and relief but not always. However, it is forever true that in our pain God offers Himself. There is much we will never understand about the trial, but our knowledge that God is sovereign and just and lovingly works all things for His glory and our good should bring us much comfort. James 1:2-4, 12 calls us to "count it all joy," because the trials we face will produce endurance and maturity in us and in time the blessing of eternal life.

I don't know everything about this computer, but the experts who built it do. I cannot do everything I want to do on it. That's OK. It is here and per the manufacturer's intention, it is still working for my good.



CASEY SHORT
Pastor, Pinetops
Baptist Church

Does God Really Understand My Pain and Suffering?

February 9

Focal Passage: Isaiah 53:2-12

As a pastor, there are times when people come to you for counseling regarding problems and situations you have never faced personally. What do you say to the parent who has lost a child when you have three healthy kids at home?

What do you say to the wife whose husband has abandoned her for another woman when your spouse has always been faithful?

Those conversations are hard and require much wisdom from scripture. Often, I can sympathize with others but struggle to enter their suffering experientially. Some find this problematic and re-

fuse to be comforted. "How can you help me if you don't understand?"

One great comfort for the believer in pain is that God has entered our suffering experientially in Jesus. Christ chose to suffer emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually, just like us, not only on the cross but throughout His earthly life and ministry in order that we might be saved.

Hebrews 2 teaches that His suffering was appropriate because by His becoming like us, we become like Him. Friend, in your trials and temptations, look to Jesus who, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross. He has walked where you are walking and as a result, He guarantees that He has prepared something better for you in eternity. He has not promised to remove the trial, but He has promised to walk with you through it.

EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Loved

February 2

Focal Passage: Deuteronomy 6:1-13

As I drove along the highway in the middle of nowhere, a song came through the scrambled radio signal for a brief second. One line stood out in the static: "Son, one day you will inherit the world mankind has made." I have never heard that song again, and I have not been able to locate that song based on the one lyric I once faintly heard.

Indeed, we have inherited a world that is broken by sin. Our first parents made a decision to rebel against God that would forever change the course of human history. When the serpent tempted Eve to eat of the fruit, he framed God's original command in such a way that questioned God's intent.

In Deuteronomy 5, Moses reminds the people of God's law. God's law is forever fixed, unchanging and not

open to alteration. The commands are specifically for our flourishing as God's special creatures.

This kind of flourishing is the blessing promised by Moses to the Israelites as a result of obedience.

Moses expressed the heart of the law with passion. Moses commended the people to love the Lord with all their hearts, souls and strength.

Loving God with our whole being leads to obedience. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, (Romans 8:29) and that alone should give us the motivation to be obedient. Remembering and rejoicing in His faithfulness was the motivation for the Israelites to be obedient, and should be for us as well.



WILL MATTHEWS
Student Pastor, Immanuel
Baptist Church, Clinton

Revealed

February 9

**Focal Passage:
Deuteronomy 18:15-22**

Revelation leads to responsibility. My wife learned that the hard way one morning as she pulled her contact lenses from her eyes, yowling about the pain. I grabbed the bottle and noticed that the cap was red, which was different. I examined the bottle, and there it was: "Warning: This could burn your eyes."

Turns out, my wife had purchased contact cleaner, not solution. The difference is huge! One contains hydrogen peroxide, which consequently burns, and the other is a saline solution.

Deuteronomy 18 emphasizes responsibility with regard to revelation. The Levitical priests were mediators.

In addition to the priests, God gave the people a prophet – someone to speak for the Lord. He would relay God's special revelation to them so the Israelites would know the will of God. Jesus is both our ultimate mediator and prophet. His presence in our lives allows us to approach God, even while we are unworthy of doing so. What we need to know about God can be found in Jesus, for He is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15).

Moses explained to the people that a prophet's legitimacy would be validated when what they spoke came true (Deuteronomy 18:20-22).

God gave the Israelites priests and prophets so they would be obedient to the law. Scripture allows us to live godly lives and equips us to do good works (2 Timothy 3:17), and as believers we are responsible to be obedient to that revelation.

News

Continued from page 6

Faith Comes By Hearing and Voice of the Martyrs, led LifeWay Christian Resources' media relations efforts for several years and worked as a national radio show and TV producer and executive.

Wilke holds a degree in public relations from Murray State University in Murray, Ky., and has traveled to more than 40 countries for the military or missions projects. He is the father of two elementary school-aged daughters and is a member of Long Hollow Baptist Church in Gallatin, Tenn.

Schoonhoven joins the EC as a full-time staff writer, where she will report on breaking news and

cover relevant cultural topics for both BP and *SBC Life*. Her writings have appeared in numerous publications including *Facts & Trends*, *Leader's Edge Magazine* and *Pursuit Magazine*.

Formerly a freelance writer and intern at LifeWay, Schoonhoven holds a bachelor's in public relations and strategic communications from California Baptist University in Riverside, Calif., where she also wrote and served as editor-in-chief of the campus newspaper, *The Banner Online*. Currently she is a worship leader and band member at Immanuel Church in Nashville.

Cochran will serve as director of digital content for the EC. Raised in Raleigh, N.C., and a 2012 graduate of North Carolina State University, Cochran will use his passion and skills in digital and social media to further the SBC's communications efforts online.

Cochran has been married to Caitlyn since 2014, and they have a 10-month-old son, Theo.

He is currently a member of The Summit Church in Raleigh and will be part of Proclamation Church, a new church plant in Nashville, upon his relocation. 

CLASSIFIEDS

Pastor

Berea Baptist Church of Pembroke, North Carolina, is prayerfully seeking to fill the position of **Senior Pastor** who is a spiritually mature leader and has a vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ. Candidates must have demonstrated ability to effectively communicate the Word of God through a solid, biblically based teaching and preaching ministry and a passion to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. If, after considering this position, you believe that you feel called to be considered for the senior pastor, please mail/email your résumé with a cover letter stating why you are interested in this position to: The Pastoral Search Committee @ PO box 387 Pembroke, NC 28372, or to bereachurch@bellsouth.net. All resumes must be received or postmarked by February 21, 2020. Late responses will not be considered. Your résumé will be reviewed by the Committee to determine if they believe you possess the desired qualifications for the Senior Pastor position. If so, the Committee will contact you to discuss next steps. Thank you for taking the time to consider the Senior Pastor position at Berea Baptist Church.

Pastor. Center Cross Baptist Church, Asheboro, NC, is actively searching for our next **full-time Pastor**. We are a small, rural, conservative church located in central NC. Our church membership is a community of believers who worship in a traditional format and are members of the SBC, BSCNC and Randolph Baptist Association. Applicants should be licensed and ordained by a Southern Baptist church and have seminary/Bible college training. We are looking for a man called by God to provide strong and loving leadership as our congregation seeks God's will. After prayerfully considering this position, interested applicants are asked to send a résumé, including references and sample sermons, to ccbcpulpitsearch@gmail.com. Résumés should be received by February 15, 2020.

Gatesville Baptist Church is seeking a **full-time pastor**. Interested applicants may submit résumés via e-mail: pastorsearch.gbc@gmail.com or via mail: Gatesville Baptist Church, Attn: Pastor Search 201 Court St. Gatesville, NC 27938, by March 15, 2020.

Calvary Baptist Church in Lincolnton, North Carolina, is prayerfully seeking a **full-time pastor**. We are a conservative body of believers who enjoy a traditional to blended style of worship. We are affiliated and support the SBC, BSCNC and the South Fork Association. We adhere to the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message. Applicants should have a minimum of five (5) years pastoral experience with some degree of Bible college and/or seminary training. Send résumés: Calvary Baptist Church, c/o Pastor Search Committee, 493 Calvary Church Road, Lincolnton, NC 28092, or pastorsearchcalvarylincolnton@gmail.com.

Full-time Pastor. Beulah Baptist Church in Sunbury, NC, is seeking a full-time pastor. Expected personal characteristics include gifted teacher, social compassion with visitation, an interest in growing our youth, and adherence to the Southern Baptist Faith and Message (2000). Beulah has a strong history of mission involvement and lengthy pastor tenure. Seminary graduate and 5 years of experience preferred. Email résumé, letter of interest/statement of faith and links to sermons to beulahbaptistsearch@gmail.com or mail to Beulah Baptist, P.O. 101, Sunbury, NC 27979, by February 29, 2020.

Church Staff

Arlington Baptist Church, Rocky Mount, NC, is seeking a **Part-Time Youth & Children's Director**. They are responsible for designing, coordinating and overseeing a comprehensive youth and children's ministry program focused on building young disciples for Christ. Areas of focus include group building, worship, discipleship, mission, and outreach. They will serve as an engaging spiritual leader and role model with a strong biblical background. Email résumé to personnel.arlington@gmail.com; (252) 937-7729; www.abcsbc.com.

Pastor of Senior Adults is needed by FBC-Clayton. This is a part-time position. MDIV degree is strongly preferred. Salary \$27,000-\$30,000. Should be ordained or in process. Require twenty five (25) years experience in a ministerial or people oriented leadership role (with specifications). Use this link for complete description <http://fbcclaytonnc.org/first-baptist-resources/baptist-church-jobs/>.

Corinth Baptist Church of Elizabeth City, NC, is seeking a **part-time Music Director**. Requirements: Music degree and/or experience in conducting/leading traditional and contemporary worship. Attend staff meetings to coordinate all worship services including the creation of multimedia worship content and order of service. Salary range: \$16,500-\$19,500. Email résumé to: music@corinthbaptist.com.

Mount Moriah Baptist Church in Raleigh, NC, is seeking a **part-time Children's Minister**. Qualified candidates should be energetic individuals who desire to make disciples of children through creative programs and personal engagement with families. This position will require coordination with the weekday preschool director. We have an enrollment of 70 children, birth-5th grade. Résumés may be emailed to resume@mmbc.life or mailed to 3000 East Garner Rd., Raleigh, NC 27610, Attn: Personnel.

Miscellaneous

Tour host Wayne & Joy Brown cordially invite you to join them for "two trips of a lifetime in one!" **The Holy Land and Germany including the magnificent and world-famous Oberammergau Passion Play**; Thursday, July 23, 2020-Monday, August 3, 2020; all inclusive: air transportation from JFK in New York, breakfast and dinner daily, first class hotels, ground transportation, all entrance fees, taxes, tips and gratuities. To receive a descriptive brochure with the complete itinerary and additional information, please call or text the Browns: 843-796-0397; Or, you may request by writing: Wayne & Joy Brown, PO Box 70777, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina 28572. Email: wayne@wayneandjoybrown.com.

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Open Doors: Technology advancing Christian persecution

By DIANA CHANDLER | Baptist Press

The use of technology is advancing and strengthening Christian persecution, Open Doors CEO David Curry said Jan. 15 in releasing the ministry's 2020 World Watch List of the 50 countries where such persecution is most severe.

"Christian faith is under attack and the methods of that persecution are becoming more sophisticated, and thus pose a greater threat," he said, "because they have the ability to oppress on a massive scale now, and I think it's a blueprint for others."

In China, ranking 23 on the list, the government has widely installed surveillance cameras and employs facial recognition technology to track Christians more than ever, punishing them for their Christian lives.

"Clearly Iran [ranked 9] is interested in this technology," he said, "and you can imagine how, in the hands of an Islamic regime, this could be a massive tragedy for Christians, for Jews and for others."

In other persecution trends, violent Islamic

extremism is spiking in sub-Saharan Africa, with Boko Haram, militant Fulani herdsmen and the Islamic State of West Africa Province especially active in 12th-ranked Nigeria; radical Islam is spreading violence and fear in Southeast and South Asia with "completely unexpected atrocities" including Easter attacks on churches and hotels; Christianity is on the verge of disappearing in 15th-ranked Iraq and 11th-ranked Syria.

The World Watch List annually grades countries on Christian persecution, based on violence and systemic pressure in five spheres of Christian life: the church, community, family, private life and national involvement.

Open Doors counted 260 million Christians who experienced high levels of persecution in the 50 countries studied; 2,983 who were killed for their faith, and 3,711 who were detained without trial, arrested, sentenced and imprisoned. Attacks on churches and Christian buildings totaled 9,488.

Christian persecution "is worse in every theater around the world," Curry said, but he reported

hope despite the trends and spiking numbers.

"I think there's hope in that Christians are building community even in the midst of this persecution, and people, even at high government levels, are talking about it, recognizing that this is a problem," he said, crediting the United States government with advancing the global conversation. "I think that's a good sign; there's still a lot to be done."

He encouraged Christians to share the persecution list available at OpenDoorsUSA.org, to read the report's stories of individual persecution, and to pledge to pray weekly for the persecuted church at ODUSA.org/pledge, which offers an app with prayer requests and reports of answered prayer.

North Korea tops the list for the 18th consecutive year, where the 300,000 Christians in the country of more than 25 million people are persecuted under Communist and post-Communist oppression.

Rounding out the top 10, in descending rank, are Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Eritrea, Sudan, Yemen, Iran and India. 

Two SEBTS international partnerships celebrate graduation ceremonies

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At Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS) students are equipped to serve the Church and fulfill the Great Commission. This training also reaches across the globe by training local believers who are leading in seminaries, Bible colleges and conventions across six continents.

This past fall, SEBTS celebrated seminary graduates in Ukraine and Uganda through Southeastern's Global Theological Initiatives (GTI).

"GTI is an important component of Southeastern's goal to be a Great Commission Seminary," said SEBTS President Danny Akin. "It focuses on training leaders as disciple makers who impact their respective mission field by training leaders. John Ewart has done an incredible job in overseeing this program and extending its influence literally around the world. We have a global vision for theological education. GTI is helping us fulfill that vision."

Uganda Baptist Seminary (UBS) is Southeastern's longest-running partnership with GTI (since 1988). On June 29, 2019, UBS held its commencement ceremonies in its Jinja headquarters. Four SEBTS students from four different African countries received their Master of Theological Studies. These four students were handpicked by UBS to pursue a mas-

ter's degree at SEBTS with the hope of pursuing leadership within the country's seminaries and Bible colleges upon graduation.

On August 31, 2019, Ukraine Baptist Theological Seminary (UBTS) held its commencement ceremonies in its Lviv headquarters. Akin charged students to run their Christian race with endurance as seen in Hebrews 12:1-3. SEBTS conferred degrees upon 15 graduates who received a Master of Theological Studies. These 15 students are an ideal example of the kind of graduates this GTI partnership hopes to produce – students who are already leading and teaching in Bible schools across the country.

Yaroslav Pyzh, president of UBTS, desires to see the seminary as a central hub from which students can be equipped to be an influence for Christ throughout Ukraine. Southeastern shares that hope and commitment.

GTI is currently training leaders who serve in approximately 20 countries around the world with the goal of developing national, indigenous leadership who are capable of equipping other leaders within their context. On February 29, 2020, SEBTS will host the Southeastern 5K in downtown Wake Forest, N.C., to benefit the work of Global Theological Initiatives. To be a part of this great event or to donate, go online to sebts.edu/5k and get registered now.

To learn more about GTI, visit

sebts.edu/academics/gti.

(EDITOR'S NOTE – SEBTS news

and information specialist Lauren Pratt compiled this report.)



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