



## 'We only need one to live'

**DESPERATE TO SAVE** an older member, a church ran an ad seeking a kidney donor. A thousand miles away, a young believer felt God prick her heart.

BY BOBBY ROSS JR. | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

### NEW BERN, N.C.

**S**am Birmingham needed a kidney. He desperately needed a kidney. His quality of life — his life itself — depended on it.

But the longtime Christian, who had always loved to fish and enjoy the water in this riverfront town near the North Carolina coast, was having trouble finding a donor.

A lot of trouble.

"It was getting really bad," said Birmingham, 78, a father of four and grandfather of 13.

"I was just worn out," added the U.S. Coast Guard veteran, who has been married to his wife, Jan, for 42 years.

"I couldn't do anything."

In the fall of 2019, Steve Hurst and Bob Markman, elders of the New Bern Church of Christ — Birmingham's home congregation in this community of 31,000, about 115 miles southeast of Raleigh — decided to take action.

"Bob and I got together one day and talked about the fact that we just couldn't let Sam die," Hurst recalled. "And we had *The Christian Chronicle* on the desk, and we decided we would get in touch."

The elders talked to Tonya Patton, then the *Chronicle's* advertising manager, and bought a quarter-page ad in the October



BOBBY ROSS JR.

**Sam Birmingham, left, with Steve Hurst, a leader of the New Bern Church of Christ.**



TED PARKS

Fred Gray, who received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, signs a T-shirt picturing him with President Joe Biden.

## Fellow alums honor Gray

**AT THE NASHVILLE** *Christian Institute's final reunion, graduates celebrate the accomplishments of Fred Gray, the civil rights attorney and preacher.*

BY TED PARKS | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

### NASHVILLE, Tenn.

**T**he two men were boys when they met. One, a preacher, would minister to churches for seven decades. The other, a preacher and attorney, would receive the highest civilian honor bestowed by the United States.

The preacher, Freeman Wyche, 92, served the Liberty City Church of Christ in Miami for more than 38 years. Attorney Fred D. Gray, 91, who represented Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and many other civil rights leaders, received the Presidential

Medal of Freedom at the White House this past summer.

Wyche and Gray — 1948 graduates of the Nashville Christian Institute — shared the program of what organizers characterized as the school's last alumni reunion dinner. Opened in the 1940s, NCI educated Black primary and secondary students from Churches of Christ in Tennessee and far beyond until its closure in 1967.

"This is one of the highest honors that has ever been afforded to me ... to introduce my friend, my cohort and my ... classmate," Wyche said.

He introduced Gray, the

evening's guest of honor, before about 200 people at Nashville's Schrader Lane Church of Christ, which hosted the recent dinner.

NCI alumni began gathering for reunions around 1978, said Harry Kellam, alumni president since 2016. The get-togethers were held every other year, mostly in Nashville but also in such places as Miami, Fla.; Valdosta, Ga.; Savannah, Ga.; Tuskegee, Ala.; and Cleveland, Ohio. The most recent previous gathering took place in 2018 at Lipscomb University. Over the years, the weekend events included a Saturday picnic, a Saturday dinner, Sunday morning

See NCI, Page 12

See KIDNEY, Page 30



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## For family, a heavenly day at the ballpark

ARLINGTON, Texas

In my family, major milestones include births, weddings, baptisms — and one's first time to attend a Texas Rangers game.

I've followed Rangers baseball — through pulse-pounding wins and heart-wrenching losses — for 40 years.

While interning with the MacArthur Park Church

of Christ in San Antonio in 2012, my oldest son, Brady, then a ministry major at Oklahoma Christian University, wrote a 91-page

summer devotional guide for teens.

I still chuckle at the intro to his devo No. 60 on listening to God: "Don't you hate it when you're talking to someone, and you can tell they're not listening? Some people are just naturally bad about this. It took me 18 years, but I learned to never ask my dad anything while the Rangers are on because he gets twice as into them as I do. Yes, that is actually possible."

Suffice it to say that even before the most amazing thing happened (seriously, stay tuned for an incredible story!), I was excited about my 15-month-old granddaughter's first Rangers game.

Brady and his wife, Mary, who live in the Oklahoma City area, were going on a minivacation to Dallas-Fort

See **BASEBALL**, Page 4

## Politics challenge Ohio church

**CONGREGATION** maneuvers multiple challenges as it seeks to win souls to Jesus.

BY BOBBY ROSS JR. | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

MARYSVILLE, Ohio

This one-time farm town about 30 miles northwest of Columbus is booming.

The century-old Marysville Church of Christ is not.

Even before the pandemic, the congregation in central Ohio struggled to increase its flock, much less match the area's rapid growth.

The past few years only exacerbated the numerical concerns as the congregation — like many Churches of Christ — grappled with COVID-19 restrictions, George Floyd's murder and the nation's political polarization.

"It's not just the debates that are going on and the differences in opinion," said Madison Darby, 27, a freelance editor whose husband, Bishop, serves as associate minister. "It's the emotional tension that seems to be really big in the country as a whole."

Minister and elder Jeff Darby, Madison's father-in-law, feels that tension, too, in this Republican-leaning city of 26,000. Nearly two-thirds of voters



BOBBY ROSS JR.

The Marysville Church of Christ stands to sing during a Sunday morning service.

supported former President Donald Trump in 2016 and again in 2020.

"It makes it tough. It really does," the 50-year-old preacher said of staying focused on kingdom matters. "We really strive not to engage in political things, especially something that is clearly not a Scriptural issue."

He'd rather focus on his congregation's mission field — the thousands of new homes and apartments that keep replacing Marysville's soybean and corn cropland.

"We are seeing astronomical growth," the Lipscomb University graduate said

See **MARYSVILLE**, Page 14

## Church endures knife attack — and media attacks

**CHRISTIANS COLLECT FUNDS** for medical needs of member wounded during worship in Central Europe.

BY ERIK TRYGGESTAD | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

Three members of a Church of Christ in Belgrade, Serbia, are recovering from stab wounds inflicted by a fellow church member just before Sunday worship.

But damage to the Central European congregation goes far beyond the bloodshed.

"The physical and emotional trauma is real, but it's just the beginning," said Gary Jackson, who helped plant the church along with Croatian minister Mladen Jovanovic in the mid-1980s.

Most of the 6.9 million people who live in Serbia identify as Eastern Orthodox, and Churches of Christ are

classified as a "sect," Jackson said.

The congregation has lost its meeting place since the attack, and Serbian media have characterized the church as a "new religious organization" that is "gathering sick people in order to manipulate them," said Goran Zarubica, a church elder who was injured in the attack.

For the past three decades, the congregation has helped refugees and people who struggle with addictions and mental illness, said Zarubica, who serves as national coordinator for

Operation Christmas Child, a ministry of Samaritan's Purse.

The attacker, Ilija Novakovic, had worshiped with the congregation for seven years.

"He had mental problems during his youth," Zarubica said, "and was brought to church on the recommendation of people we know, with information that he lacks love and friendship."

Although Novakovic had experienced conflicts at home and at work, he showed no signs of violence toward church members, Zarubica said. The day before the attack, church members spent more than two hours with Novakovic, praying that

See **ATTACK**, Page 17



Zarubica

# BASEBALL: Stranger's kindness makes game memorable

FROM PAGE 3

Worth. They invited me to join them and my grandchildren — Bennett, 4, and his toddler sister, Norah — at a Sunday afternoon game between the Rangers and the Detroit Tigers.

My wife, Tamie, who battles autoimmune diseases and did not feel like making the trip, made Norah a special outfit for the occasion: a red, white and blue swing top (the Rangers' colors) with ruffle trim, spaghetti straps and navy bloomers to match.

I drove down from Oklahoma the night before the game and spent time with my parents, then joined my sister, Christy Fichter, for worship Sunday morning at the Legacy Church of Christ, her home congregation in the Fort Worth suburb of North Richland Hills.

After worship, I headed to Globe Life Field about 20 to 25 minutes away. The Rangers' new air-conditioned ballpark in Arlington opened in 2020. I was already seated and enjoying a hot dog, nachos and Diet Coke when my son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren arrived.

We had upper-level seats along the first-base line. They were not the best seats in the ballpark. However, seeing wide-eyed Norah bounce up and down in our laps and take in the ballpark experience for the first time made me forget how far we were from the field itself.

But then we got an upgrade.

Here's how it happened: I noticed Brady talking to a woman I didn't recognize. I figured he knew her somehow. But after a few minutes, he came to me and asked if I wanted to watch the game from behind home plate.

He explained that the woman — Joyce Godwin — had spotted us with her binoculars and wanted to offer us better seats. She gave us lower-level tickets and \$100 each for us to "have a good time at the game." (I suddenly felt less guilty about the \$30 I spent for the aforementioned ballpark lunch.)

We took an elevator down to the new seats. They were spectacular.



Godwin



MARY ROSS

Norah Ross, held by her grandfather Bobby Ross Jr., attends her first Texas Rangers baseball game at Globe Life Field.

We watched the first few innings from there. I was so giddy I hardly noticed the scoreboard (the Tigers jumped out to a big, early lead).

But then Joyce texted Brady and asked if we'd like to change seats again. Some people didn't show up to watch the game in her luxury suite.

So we headed up to the suite. We found cushioned seats and free food (hot dogs, popcorn, cookies, brownies and more).

Already pretty full, I forced myself to eat Cracker Jacks on a white plate. I almost accepted a free ice cream sundae in a Rangers hat. However, my stomach protested.

During the game, I got to talk to Joyce about our shared experiences in journalism (she is starting a community magazine in Melissa, Texas, north of Dallas).

As for her ballpark benevolence, she explained that she's part of an effort, funded by anonymous donors, to provide great Rangers game experiences for veterans, active-duty military, first responders, children's charities and more.

On this Sunday, my family was

blessed to fall into the "more" category.

Reporter that I am, I researched Joyce a bit when I got home. I discovered a common connection between her and Melany Ethridge, a senior account executive with A. Larry Ross Communications in Dallas. That public relations firm works with faith-based clients, so I know Melany from my newspaper work.

"This is an amazing ministry for her," Melany told me, noting that Godwin is a longtime member of the First Baptist Church in Van Alstyne, Texas, where she is "almost like a second mom/grandma" to Griff Servati, the church's pastor of connections, care and communication.

Griff told me: "Joyce is a special person who always cares about others, and whatever is within her power to help, she will. My girls have been blessed to have her in their lives and are so much better because of it."

The giveaways started when Joyce worked for a newspaper in Prosper, Texas, the pastor said. She connected with first responders and had

a friend with extra Rangers tickets. That gave her the idea of rewarding those who serve.

"Joyce's heart, combined with her friend's generosity, turned into this beautiful giving opportunity you experienced," Griff said.

Melany's father, Darryl Pace, 82, served in the U.S. Air Force and worked 20 years as a Dallas police officer.

"We actually got to have the suite experience with Joyce a couple of years ago with my dad," Melany said. "She just has a heart for serving that community and sharing the love of baseball and enjoying a good time together with those who might not otherwise get to have such an experience."

What a wonderful day at the ballpark she provided for my family (despite the Rangers' 9-8 loss)!

My 15-month-old granddaughter won't remember it, but the rest of us won't ever forget it.

**BOBBY ROSS JR.** is editor-in-chief of *The Christian Chronicle*. Contact [bobby@christianchronicle.org](mailto:bobby@christianchronicle.org). Follow him on Twitter at [@bobbyross](https://twitter.com/bobbyross).

# Not-so-simple stewardship

**DECISIONS AND DEEDS** *from decades past can determine how closing churches preserve their legacy.*

BY CHERYL MANN BACON | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

**D**issolving a church or merging congregations can be complicated, not just emotionally or doctrinally, but financially and legally.

Unlike selling a home, where the seller completes the sale to a willing buyer and, after paying off any debts, can pocket the money, church property proceeds cannot be distributed to church members, leaders, founders or donors. And sometimes the decision about who gets what was made decades earlier.

That's just one of numerous legal issues closing churches may face, according to Mike O'Neal, chairman of Heritage 21 Foundation, who has worked with more than two dozen congregations in at least seven states.

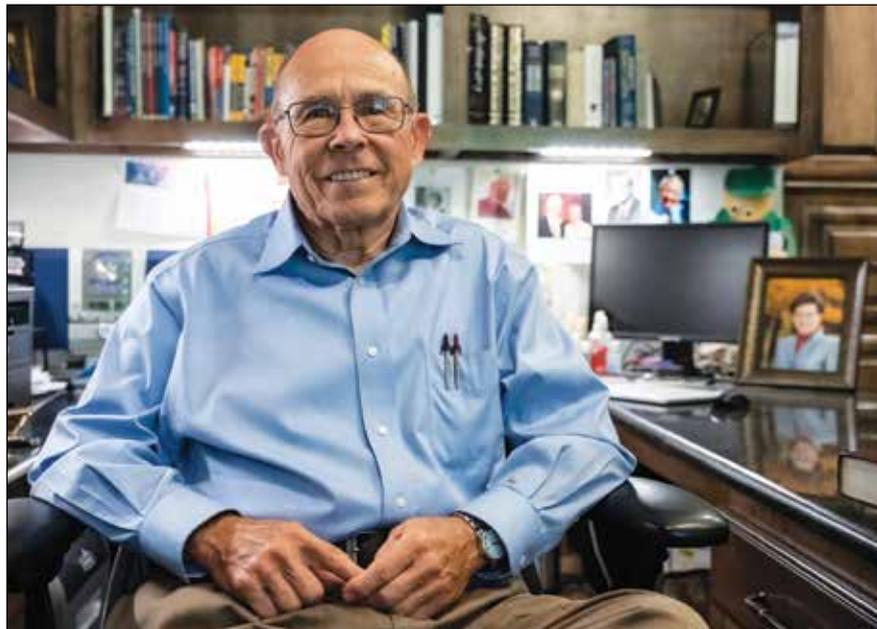
O'Neal, a member of the Memorial Road Church of Christ in Oklahoma City, earned his law degree from Stanford University and maintains a law license in California. Heritage 21 Foundation works to help struggling congregations make sound decisions about their future while protecting their resources.

"Federal and state tax laws dictate that proceeds of a church property sale must be used for nonprofit purposes," O'Neal explained. "They cannot go to a for-profit enterprise or to individuals."

Even that isn't as simple as it sounds, especially for churches that are unprepared or lack legal counsel.

## BEGINNING WITH BYLAWS

When O'Neal, a former Oklahoma Christian University president,



AUDREY JACKSON

**Mike O'Neal, chairman of Heritage 21 Foundation, poses for a portrait in his home office in Edmond, Okla.**

begins work with a church, he asks first to see the articles of incorporation and bylaws, "because sometimes

they were written 50 or 75 years ago, and sometimes they can't even find them and haven't really followed them."

Poorly drawn bylaws can have unintended consequences. O'Neal recalls a church in California being taken over by a large family because the bylaws only required a majority vote rather than a super majority (typically two-thirds).

"The church had declined to about 10 to 15 people," O'Neal said. "A very large family came in and placed membership and became a majority."

The newcomers may not be bad people, he added, but may differ entirely from the Restoration her-

itage. And the resulting changes may create a very different kind of church.

"There's no absolute protection," the attorney said, "but you can do a number of things that make it harder for a takeover by people who have nefarious intentions."

Bylaws determine who can serve as directors. Most states have few or no requirements. O'Neal typically recommends that directors and anyone who can vote be members in good standing for no less than 12 months.

Church members sometimes struggle with the concept of bylaws and electing directors because they fear that they somehow usurp spiritual church leadership.

"A concept I find extremely difficult to communicate is that the church corporate entity is not a substitution for church leadership," O'Neal said. "If there are elders at a congregation, then I usually provide

that elders trump whatever directors decide if there's a disagreement.

"Decisions about how the church spends its money, who it hires, how it conducts services — those are the spiritual side," he added. "We only have corporations because we want to protect the members from liability."

If a person is injured on church property and the church is not incorporated, every member is liable for whatever damages might occur, O'Neal explained. "I'm a great advocate for incorporating."

The IRS determines how proceeds of a church property sale must be used. But state laws, O'Neal said, dictate, "If you're incorporated, you have to act like a corporation."

That includes annual meetings, in which directors and officers are elected. They don't have to be sophisticated meetings but must comply with the standard ways corporations are required to behave. "Many churches have never done that," O'Neal said.

Bylaws should also specify how assets will be disbursed in the event a church dissolves.

But when bylaws are old, they may include restrictions that, depending on the congregation, are no longer relevant, desired or even legal, such as restrictions about race, instrumental music or other matters.

"Some states have passed laws saying those restrictions are no longer applicable if they violate other state laws," O'Neal said. "Many of those restrictions are to assure that assets are used by an entity that looks just like a church in 1950."

He recommends language such as "upon dissolution remaining assets will go to another nonprofit entity that is related to or serves Churches of Christ or the Restoration heritage."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6



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“It has to be their choice,” O’Neal said. “You have to use language they are happy with. Churches are different — there’s no one way I do it.”

He has seen bylaws that say a state court can determine where assets go. And if a church does not have good bylaws or can’t find them, then a state court would decide. “And that’s not what any of us want.”

#### ‘THAT WAS A VERY GOOD STORY’

Conversely, churches that dissolve can plan for much good to be done with their assets to support ministries meaningful to the church members and perpetuate a congregation’s legacy.

When the Harvey Drive Church of Christ in McAllen, Texas, closed and sold its property, about \$600,000 went to provide scholarships at Abilene Christian University for students from the Rio Grande Valley and to provide an operational fund for diversity efforts at the West Texas university.

Jim Orr, executive director of ACU’s office of gift planning, said the gift was “a great example of a church closing its doors but using its resources to further the work of the church in some respects relative to diversity efforts.”

O’Neal recalled similar stories from his years as vice chancellor at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif. Church buildings given to the university were sold and proceeds used for scholarships for Church of Christ students.

When the Mountain Avenue Church of Christ in Tucson, Ariz., dissolved, it gave Heritage 21 Foundation, which O’Neal leads, property worth about \$1.3 million. After the property sold, proceeds went to support a campus ministry at the University of Arizona and a church camp. Remaining funds were given to Heritage 21 for church planting, including a congregation in Tucson.

“That was a very good story,” O’Neal said.

Sherri Statler, president of

**‘The reality is people are pretty sinful, and it’s easy to name things as theological when in fact it’s a power grab, and they may well be looking to advance power and position.’**

Joel Nichols, about deed restrictions



AUDREY JACKSON

#### Deeds from decades ago can influence decisions by churches that sell their property.

Christian Homes and Family Services, remembers a call from the grandmother of a child adopted through the Texas agency — a call that led to a \$50,000 check.

The woman had learned that her congregation, the Mainland Church of Christ in Texas City, had sold its property and that the proceeds were to be given to a nonprofit.

“She asked them to consider Christian Homes. ... I sent her a letter just telling her more about Christian Homes that she shared with elders at the church,” Statler said. “We got back a letter three months later with a ‘prayerfully considered’ check for \$50,000.”

Similarly, Mount Dora Children’s Home in Florida benefited from two of that state’s congregations — the Oxford Church of Christ and the Bradenton Church of Christ — after those churches closed, church relations officer Dave Hogan said.

#### DEALING WITH DEED RESTRICTIONS

Members may change restrictions in the bylaws to designate such good works. Modifying deed restrictions, which may limit who can use the property and for what purpose, can be more difficult.

Joel Nichols, interim dean of the

law school at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, is an ACU graduate and scholar on church and state issues.

He said that while “deed restrictions are going to feel super binding by people who are reading them — the realities of life are that it’s less likely someone will be able and willing to enforce them.”

In other words, he said, “Someone has to have legal standing to come in and enforce the deed,” and courts are reticent to become involved in church disputes, which Nichols thinks is a good thing.

If people believe a conflict is a theological issue, “we don’t want courts telling them how to believe, what to believe.”

But he added, “The reality is people are pretty sinful, and it’s easy to name things as theological when in fact it’s a power grab, and they may well be looking to advance power and position.”

Two very different congregations in vastly different circumstances are among many that have encountered challenges because of deed restrictions. One wound up in court. The other just ceased to exist.

The Otter Creek Church of Christ in Brentwood, Tenn., a suburb of Nashville, faced a deed restriction when it merged with the West End congregation in September 2020. West End’s membership had declined to a point where maintaining its large campus was unsustainable. West End leadership

approached Otter Creek about becoming one, and the property was acquired by Otter Creek, which uses instrumental music in its worship services.

With the property came a deed, crafted in 1943, that states the property owner must “work and worship only as required in the New Testament, rejecting all the innovations and inventions of devices of men, and instruments of music, and societies, other than the Church of Christ carrying out the work of God.”

John Mark Hicks, professor of theology at Lipscomb University in Nashville, said the language in such deeds originated in the previous century and at the time had less to do with what happens after a property is sold and more about control while it exists. The practice, which came to be referred to as “creed in deed,” originated in the 1870s when David Lipscomb and E.G. Sewell contributed to planting the Woodland Avenue Church of Christ where Sewell preached for many years.

“In the 1880s a group became the majority that brought in instruments and societies, and Sewell was forced out,” Hicks explained. “The intent of these ‘creed in deed’ restrictions was to prevent something like that from happening again — that the founder and community that began a church and invested in it ... could resist a hostile takeover.”



Hicks

Otter Creek filed suit to be relieved of the deed restrictions, arguing in part that no defendant could be identified, that the West End congregation already had abandoned the deed restriction when it purchased six additional plots of land for which no similar restrictions were included, and because it “had used in the past a sound system, projector screen, and projector in worship as well as musical instruments during some worship services,” to which no defendant had risen in objection.

Further complicating matters, only two-fifths of West End’s land was in the portion affected by the deed restriction.

A series of filings in Davidson County led to Chancellor Anne Martin ordering that notices be published for four consecutive weeks in an attempt to identify as the defendant “the nearest congregation of a Church of Christ to 3534 West End Avenue, Nashville, Tennessee 37205, whose members oppose and do not use innovations and inventions and devices of men, including instrumental music in their worship, or organized societies of any nature whatever,” and giving them 30 days after the last publication to file as defendant in the matter.

Weekly notices began running in *The Tennessean* on July 22, with the 30-day period to conclude on or about Sept. 5. As of mid-September, court filings did not reflect that any objection had been filed by a defendant to Otter Creek’s request.

Otter Creek ministers Joshua Graves and Eric Livingston declined to comment while matters are pending, but Graves said in an email that they hope it will be resolved by Thanksgiving.

#### ‘HISTORY CHANGES’

Nine hundred miles from Nashville, a similar yet painfully different scenario evolved.

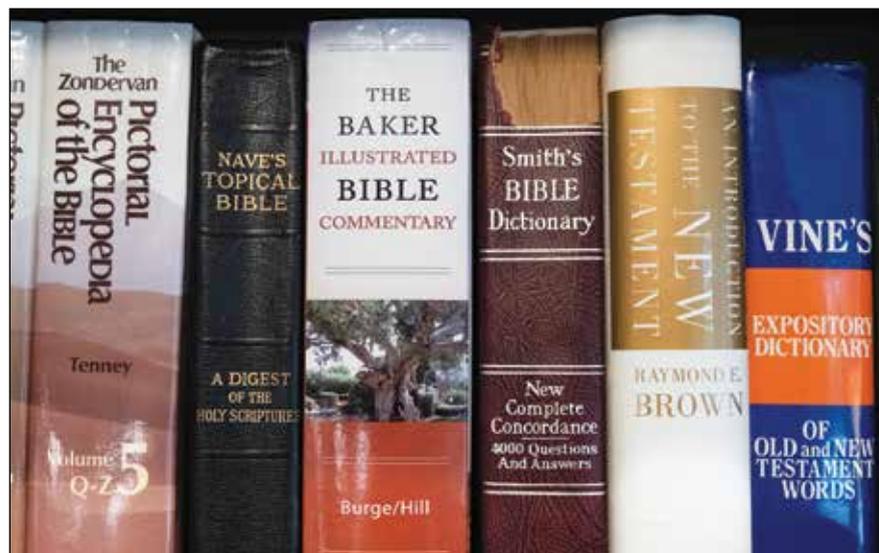
Edna, Texas, with its population of less than 6,000, is as different from Nashville as the two church properties in dispute.

The Peabody Street Church of Christ used to meet in a plain white building at the corner of Peabody and Third Street in Edna. The tiny South Texas town sits midway between Houston and Corpus Christi, just 30 minutes inland from the Gulf Coast.

While West End’s two-story brick building has more than 63,000 square feet and is valued on the tax rolls at over \$8.5 million, the Peabody parsonage and church building combine for less than 5,000 square feet and a market value of around \$100,000.

The story of Peabody Street first reached *The Christian Chronicle* in the late spring of 2021, and ultimately it inspired the “Where have all the churches gone?” series.

Membership had dwindled over time. The minister became ill and died. At some point in 2017, or 2019,



AUDREY JACKSON

Books rest on a shelf in the office of Mike O’Neal, Heritage 21 Foundation chairman.

or 2020, depending on which version of the story one believes, the church ceased to exist. Or it was taken over by a nearby congregation. Or something.

Eighty-plus years ago, before the congregation was Peabody Street, legal documents described it as the “Church of Christ (Colored).” That congregation was begun in the 1940s, originally meeting in the Masonic Hall.

According to retired Houston minister Bruce Brigham Sr., the church was built by his grandfather, Will Brigham, and his family after members of Robison Street Church of Christ required him to stand outside the building or sit under a tree rather than worship inside with White church members.

Sherrel Mercer, an elder at Robison, a nearby noninstitutional congregation, tells that same story and said some of its members worked “behind the scenes to acquire some property in the Black part of town” and arranged financing to sell it to the Black church.

Mercer said “individuals involved at that time were farsighted enough to realize that history changes, and included language in the deed that if the property ceased to be used for worship services, the ownership would be transferred to the nearest congregation of the Church of Christ,” which was Robison, he added.

Mercer said his grandfather’s construction company built the church,

and Black members fired the bricks. Brigham recalls hearing his grandfather talk about making bricks in his backyard.

Mercer maintains the Peabody congregation ceased to exist when it stopped having worship services in 2017, but because the minister was ill with cancer, Robison elders delayed transferring the property.

Brigham said he and the deceased minister had an agreement that he would move back to Edna and reestablish the congregation his grandfather began to serve the town’s Black community. Then a pandemic intervened.

But Robison elders said they were the rightful owners of the property because of the restriction in the 1946 deed to one of three parcels Peabody had acquired through the years. The other parcels contained no such restriction.

In November 2020, three former Peabody members who had placed membership at Robison signed over the deed to the congregation. Robison elders asserted in a court filing that the former members had the authority to make the transfer because all of the Peabody trustees listed on the original deed were dead, “except for one preacher who has lived in Houston for at least 40 years.”

In a letter to Brigham, the elders

cited a funeral meal served in the building as an example of how the Peabody congregation had allowed an activity that was “not Scripturally authorized.” They told Brigham not to enter the old Peabody Street property “at any time” and added, “We are changing the locks immediately.”

Brigham offered to buy the property back. Robison elders declined, saying, “There is no Scriptural reason to establish a racially separated congregation in Edna (or anyplace else) in the year 2020. You would be well advised to encourage your contacts in Edna who were once part of the Peabody Street congregation in the past to seek to join the brethren at Robison Street.”

Two of the five Peabody members who placed membership at Robison remain there. One died. Two moved away.

Mercer and his wife subsequently purchased the property from the Robison congregation. He said they are improving the property and plan to lease it. They also own the property of another defunct Edna congregation, the Apollo Road Church of Christ, where Mercer’s business is now located.

O’Neal has heard stories like Peabody’s before. And while he was quick to say he couldn’t evaluate all that happened there without more information, he said variations of the Peabody story, “some marginally better and some even worse,” are happening all over the fellowship.

Churches have a life cycle, he said, and leaders should make a plan while the church is still healthy. Stewardship of resources contributed by generations of faithful members requires leaders with foresight.

“One of the greatest tragedies unfolding before our very eyes is that these resources, which could be used to bless other ministries, are allowed to atrophy or be misappropriated,” O’Neal said. “Implementing good legal protections is not that difficult. I fear that our Father will hold us accountable for burying our talents.”

**EDITOR’S NOTE:** Mike O’Neal is the chairman of *The Christian Chronicle’s* board of trustees. His role with Heritage 21 Foundation is separate from his volunteer position with the *Chronicle*, and he had no role in this story except for the interviews he gave.



Mercer

# Do local churches have a natural lifecycle?

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PHOTOS VIA EASTGATE CHURCH OF CHRIST FACEBOOK PAGE

## First responders, firefighters and police officers honored by church

Members of the Eastgate Church of Christ in Siloam Springs, Ark., spent time with first responders, firefighters and police officers recently during a special appreciation Sunday service. The theme of the day was Phillipians 1:3, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you." The firefighters gave children tours of their equipment and fire engines in the parking lot before gathering inside for a meal with the congregation. "Just like Jesus is our Good Samaritan, these men and women work hard to be there for us," the church posted on its Facebook page.

### DELAWARE

**WILMINGTON** — Six million pounds of food. That's what Sue Maynard estimates the Greenbank Church of Christ has distributed to the community.

Maynard and her husband, Ed, have helped with the food program since it began 10 years ago, continuing the ministry work through a church merger in 2019 and the shutdowns because of COVID-19.

The first year the pantry opened, volunteers provided food for about 100 people in the community. The need doubled the following year.

In 2022, it swelled to 65 families per week.

Now the Greenbank church functions as one of the largest emergency food distributors in the Wilmington area, according to the Food Bank of Delaware, with which the church partners to meet U.S. Department of Agriculture food requirements.

"The good Lord has made it possible for us to do it, and I give him all the praise," Maynard, who coordinates orders for the program, told the *Wilmington News Journal*.

### OKLAHOMA

**MCLLOUD** — The McLoud Church of Christ's worship assembly was interrupted recently when its parsonage caught fire.

The blaze destroyed the home where the church's preacher,

Douglas Tibbits, lived with his wife, son, daughter-in-law and four granddaughters, KFOR-TV reported. The family lost most of its possessions.

Susan Tibbits, the preacher's wife, was home sick when the fire began — the family believes a pellet grill caused it — but she escaped and was able to notify church members. The Tibbitses' cat and dog also survived, though

11 puppies were killed.

By press time, a GoFundMe for Douglas and Susan Tibbits had raised nearly \$15,000. The money will help with emergency expenses and temporary living costs.

A separate fundraiser has been created for their son, Brandon, his wife, Rachael, and their four children.

**GOT NEWS?** Email items for the Across the Nation page to [audrey@christianchronicle.org](mailto:audrey@christianchronicle.org).



PHOTO VIA FACEBOOK.COM/FOODBANKOFDE

Volunteers with the Greenbank Church of Christ load food into grocery carts.



PHOTO VIA GOFUNDME.COM

Firefighters work to put out a blaze at the parsonage of the McLoud Church of Christ.

# 'Action on climate change ... is an act of love'

**CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS** encourage members of Churches of Christ to consider sustainable energy practices.

BY AUDREY JACKSON | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

**O**n her daily commute to New Orleans, Jaime Green can't help notice the land seems to be vanishing.

"I literally drive through town every day and think, 'Wow, the bayou is really high today,' but it's high every day," Green said. "It's never not high anymore."

Louisiana contains 40 percent of the nation's wetlands, but — battered by hurricanes and tropical storms that cause an ever-evolving coastline — it also accounts for 80 percent of environmental losses since the 1930s, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

The loss of the wetlands is just one way Green sees the Earth's climate changing. Green moved into the New Orleans area in 2008 after visiting on and off since 2005. Back then, extreme storms left just as quickly as they blew in. Now they settle over the city and rain for days, she said.

"The storm structure itself is different," Green said. "They come in and sit on top of us for such significant amounts of time. ... Even if you have a structure that could have maintained a Category 3 hurricane previously, it can't maintain for 24 to 48 hours."

Over the last 10 years, Green and her husband have worked on about 75 natural disasters with Churches of Christ Disaster Relief Effort Inc., based out of Nashville, Tenn.

Floods, hurricanes, tornadoes — Green has helped with them all.

But while she attributes the weather patterns and the frequency of natural disasters to climate change caused by human consumption, other Christians aren't so sure.

Rusty Towell is a professor of physics and director of the Nuclear Energy eXperimental Testing Laboratory at Abilene Christian University in West Texas. Towell believes the climate is changing — and has for all of recorded time.

But he is skeptical that humans are the cause.

"Certainly, there's good data that



PHOTO PROVIDED BY JAIME GREEN

Damage is shown to a home in Louisiana, where hurricanes have battered the coastline.

says the average temperature is a degree warmer over the last so many decades," Towell said. "We have great measurements from satellites over the last 30 to 40 years, and we're a degree warmer than we were 40 years ago on average. There's good data for that.

"But there's also good data that says CO2 concentrations vary seasonally, and it's varied overall in recorded history," he added, referring to carbon dioxide. "The real connection between CO2 concentration and global average temperatures



Towell

— the only thing that really connects — are computer models."

Towell advocates for more comprehensive research on the impact of human consumption and energy before making policies to address environmental issues. Many White evangelical Christians share his views.

Only 28 percent of White evangelical Christians said that human activity was warming the earth, while 33 percent said the Earth was following natural patterns, and 37 percent said there is no solid evidence that the temperature has changed at all, a 2015 Pew Research Center study found.

Christopher Doran, a theological

scholar who has published articles on the intersection of sustainability and faith, believes church members' skepticism and denial of the human impact on climate change stem from a crisis of identity.

"If all this science is right, do we really have to change our behavior?" asked Doran, who teaches at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif. "Do we really have to sacrifice? What does loving our neighbor around the world look like? Do I have to really give up my air conditioning? Is it really my fault that these things are happening? Those are pretty big questions of identity."

He points to what he sees as a major problem: "More younger Christians who do take (climate change) seriously are still within church homes who don't, and it's a struggle for them to keep their own faith if their parents or their church leaders are not taking climate change seriously."

With White evangelicals the least likely to believe in climate change of any Christian faith group, those like Doran often find their views among a minority. A member of the University Church of Christ Malibu, he believes that sustainability and environmental caretaking are also a matter of faith, not just science.

"If a society can't make a decision

about whether clean water, clean air or decent food for all people is a moral problem, we're just treating symptoms," Doran said.

"All of these things seem to suggest a massive inconsistency between the individual evangelically focused, personalized understanding of Jesus," he added, "rather than a more communal, corporate, global understanding where all things fall under the lordship of Christ, not just the things that are hot-button political issues at the moment."

## A GLOBAL CHALLENGE

But the resistance from Christians in regards to climate change isn't always as simple as partisanship issues.

Emily Stutzman, academic director of the Institute for Sustainable Practice at Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tenn., studies environmental sociology, examining how humans understand and collectively create meaning around their experience of the environment and the impact of their behavior on the environment.

The biggest challenge with convincing people of climate change, Stutzman said, is that many of the changes caused by people are often not immediately visible on a local level. However, over time the effects of climate slowly take place, as Green observed in the flooded bayous. This leaves impoverished and marginalized groups locally and globally more likely to be affected by pollution, extreme temperatures and severe weather.

"The poorest children in Nashville breathe the worst quality air," Stutzman said. "That's a direct result of pollution, not only that they didn't cause, but that was caused overwhelmingly by members of the wealthier neighborhoods. ... Some of the worst impacts of climate change fall on the poorest people in some of the most environmentally marginal situations."

Rather than viewing climate change solely as a responsibility of environmental stewardship, Stutzman urges Christians to view it in a more personal way: Loving one's neighbor.

“I do see my Christian faith spurring me on toward action, and toward the work that I do around climate change, because of Jesus’ command to love God and to love other people,” Stutzman explained. “Climate change is very much a challenge for people globally. Action on climate change, from where I stand, is an act of love — love for my global neighbor, love for my neighbors in Nashville.”



**Stutzman**

Kevin Withem, senior minister for the North County Church of Christ in Escondido, Calif., cautions against overgeneralizing on what Christians believe on climate change.

“I know of people who believe there’s climate change, but it’s not manmade climate change to the degree many believe it is today,” he said. “Then others believe there is no climate change. And some realize that climates change, but climate has always changed and always will.”

Both Doran and Stutzman acknowledge there is little an individual can do. One person using a Hydro Flask or eating less meat likely won’t have a lasting impact, Doran said.

That’s why climate scientists increasingly promote “collective efficacy,” which is how people involved in a broader social or communal movement can bring about positive change. Such social movements include churches and faith groups.

Churches, like commercial and industrial buildings, waste 30 percent of the energy consumed — often through automated control systems — according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Colby May, an ordained pastor and certified energy manager, specializes in energy efficiency, performing energy audits at over 2,000 commercial-sized facilities across the nation, including churches, seminaries, universities and schools.

His company, Energy for Purpose, has a specific goal: Identify and reduce energy waste in churches so they can redirect the reclaimed utility funds into missions and ministries.

“What I’m sharing with churches about being good stewards is being strategic and not just keeping everything on 24 hours a day, which is only going to impact climate change

even more,” May said.

May’s company charges churches about 2 to 3 percent of the overall utility costs per year and funnels 40 percent of its revenue into mission work, providing solar power to areas in India and that lack electrical grids.

But May’s own clientele has varied views on climate change and sustainability. While those focused on sustainability feel more responsible for their energy practices, even conservative churches see practical savings regardless of the sustainability impact, May said.

### ‘IT’S HARD TO DENY’

Yet Green, volunteering at disasters across the country and in her own city of New Orleans, struggles to understand how Christians can deny that the climate is changing due to human activity.

“It’s hard to deny it if you live somewhere like here, because you face it every single season,” she said.

Green said references to climate in the Bible — darkness at the crucifixion, storms on lakes, floods, earthquakes and droughts — and how the disciples and prophets responded are too often overlooked by Christians considering their role in the environment.

Her husband David, minister for the Church of Christ of Greater New Orleans, gives sermons three to four times a year on climate change and environmental responsibility. However, such sermons and conversations are uncommon.

“People here will definitely talk about the changes in the storms,” Jaime Green said. “They will talk about how the weather has changed, they’ll talk about the erosion of our coastlines, but they will not talk about why those things are happening. It’s a topic without being a topic.”

But while other Christians continue to debate the existence of climate change, Green watches the water rise in the bayous.

“We don’t worry about things that God is in control of — and he is in control,” Green said. “But we do take responsibility for things, and should have conviction about things that we do that are impactful to our environment.

“It’s not a matter of worry. It is a matter of being responsible in mitigating what we can.”

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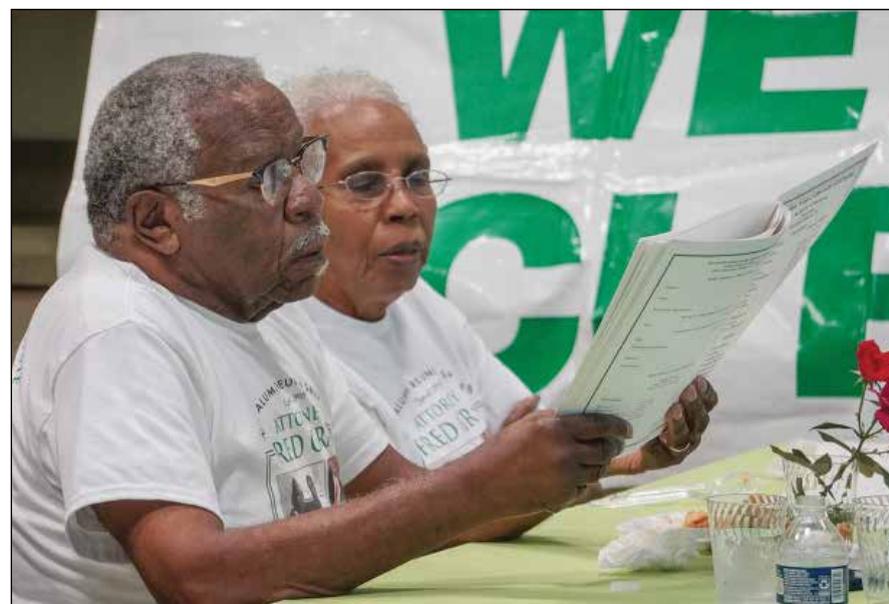
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At the Nashville Christian Institute reunion picnic, Andrew L. Carney Jr. and his wife, Annie Jean Carney, peruse one of the mementos displayed at the event.



Nashville Christian Institute alumni pose after a picnic at Hadley Park, a few hours before dinner at what organizers said would be the group's final reunion.

# NCI: Keeble's legacy shaped lives of believers, Black and White

FROM PAGE 1

worship and a “Down Memory Lane” session Sunday evening.

Explaining the decision to make this year's reunion the last, Kellam observed that some alumni live far away, and fewer attend. “We're just few in number and getting older,” said Kellam, who preached for the Eighth Avenue Church of Christ in Nashville until its closure about four years ago.

At one point, attendance hit 120, the alumni president said, but that number had dwindled to 40 to 45 — a figure threatened even more by the ongoing pandemic.

“We didn't have enough people to respond to have a banquet,” Kellam said about this year's initial planning. “We were just going to have a picnic, and we were going to worship together, eat together.”

## ‘IT'S EITHER NOW OR NEVER’

Kellam credited his fellow 1963 alumnus Alvin Hinkle, a member of the Sunset Boulevard Church of Christ in West Columbia, S.C., with the idea to proceed with a dinner and make it a tribute to Gray.

Event coordinator for the banquet, Hinkle said the change in plans came about a month before the reunion. The organizers wanted to both celebrate Gray's accom-

plishments and raise funds for the Tuskegee History Center, where Gray serves as board chairman and president.

“It's either now or never in terms of the NCI reunion,” Hinkle added. “We thought this would be a good gesture ... rather than just giving him honor with words.”

With the addition of a dinner to celebrate Gray, the guest list grew.

## HEALING OLD WOUNDS

At the dinner, program guests talked about NCI leader and well-known African American preacher Marshall Keeble, reconciliation after the controversial 1967 closure of NCI and the struggle for racial justice championed so long by Gray.

According to Keeble biographer J.E. Choate, NCI opened in 1940, offering adult night classes before becoming an elementary and high school. Keeble became the school's president.

NCI closed in 1967 when its majority-White board — with close ties to then-David Lipscomb College — decided to shut the doors. Enrollment had declined, and facilities were inadequate and salaries low.

The school's liquidated assets, the board determined, would fund a scholarship for black students at David Lipscomb College — a school with a history of segregation.

The closure and the decision about proceeds drove a wedge between many Black members of Churches of Christ and the college, now Lipscomb University. Gray represented NCI constituents and Black church members in an unsuccessful lawsuit against the college over the closure.

It would take almost half a century to heal the wounds. The efforts at reconciliation reached a public milestone when Lipscomb bestowed an honorary doctorate of humane letters on Gray during a gala dinner at the 32nd Thomas H. Olbricht Christian Scholars' Conference in 2012.

In 2016, Lipscomb renamed its Institute for Law, Justice and Society for Gray, who signed a memorandum of understanding that included Lipscomb establishing a Fred D. Gray Scholars program and collaborating to preserve and archive Gray's legal and religious papers.

The alumni dinner program included L. Randolph Lowry, the former Lipscomb president instrumental in restoring relations with Gray, as well as current President Candice McQueen.

Now Lipscomb's chancellor, Lowry spoke in personal terms of Gray's “graciousness.” Lowry saw the clearest demonstration of Gray's character not in the university wishing to grant him its highest academic honor

but in the attorney's response.

“The graciousness of that was not Lipscomb. The graciousness was Mr. Gray's accepting that degree,” Lowry told the audience.

Current president McQueen spoke of her family's admiration for Keeble, a famous Black evangelist who baptized an estimated 30,000 people before his 1968 death.

“He may have been one of the most influential preachers in my family's history,” McQueen said, tracing the love for Keeble to her grandmother.

“She had said to God, ‘If I have a son, he's going to be a preacher,’” McQueen recalled. The prayer granted, McQueen's

uncle was born, followed by her father 10 years later.

“She told me the story — as if it were yesterday, I can hear her,” McQueen said. “I want my two sons to be Church of Christ preachers, and they need to preach just like brother Keeble. They need to preach unity. They need to preach justice.”

## STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE CONTINUES

As closing speaker, Gray offered expressions of gratitude as well as encouragement to continue the



Keeble



Guests mingle before the recent Nashville Christian Institute alumni dinner hosted by the Schrader Lane Church of Christ in Nashville, Tenn.

struggle for justice.

“Let me talk to you about how grateful I am. It has taken 91 years for this to happen to me,” said Gray, expressing deep appreciation that his fellow alumni chose to honor him at their last dinner.

Gray shared key lessons from a lifetime of struggle for racial equality under the law.

“While we’ve made a substantial amount of progress, the struggle for equal justice continues. We need to recognize that racism and inequality are wrong and ... should be corrected,” Gray said. “That message needs to start at the top.

“You’re going to have to come up with a plan,” Gray continued, recalling Parks and the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott.

Problem identified, plan made and implementation begun, Gray urged personal participation in the fight. “When we become a part of executing the plan, then we’ll be on our way toward eliminating racism and inequality.”

Gray referred to a fellow civil rights leader whose name had come to mind earlier in the day as NCI alumni toured Nashville, visiting the site where their school had stood.

“We saw a street that was named after Rep. John Lewis, who has some relationship to education here, as I had some education here,” Gray said. Lewis, a Democratic congressman



Randy Lowry, chancellor of Lipscomb University, and Lipscomb president Candice McQueen speak at the NCI alumni dinner honoring Fred Gray.

from Georgia from 1987 to 2020, graduated from Nashville’s Fisk University in 1961.

Gray represented Lewis in legal actions following the future lawmaker’s participation as a Freedom Rider in 1961 to desegregate interstate transportation. Gray served as Lewis’ attorney again after he crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge on “Bloody Sunday” in 1965.

The civil rights attorney spoke of an emotional conversation with Lewis shortly before his death from pancreatic cancer in 2020. “We prayed, and we talked,” Gray



PHOTOS BY TED PARKS

said. Asking the congressman what he wished him to do, Lewis replied, “Keep going, keep pushing, and keep your record straight.”

#### A BITTERSWEET REUNION

To close the evening, Gray echoed Lewis.

“Keep going, keep pushing, keep the record straight — do it in a nonviolent manner,” Gray said, “and continue to do it until justice rolls down like mercy and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

NCI alumni reflected on what the school and the reunions had meant

to them.

Kellam credited alumni devotion to the school to its small size and the shared experience of a time of social change.

“I think part of it has to do with just the fact that we came together,” he said, “and we were able to have a good Christian relationship in terms of the smallness and the Bible study and chapel.

“Marshall Keeble ... was just a real father-like figure. He stayed there in the dormitory with us, and we all just kind of felt like a family,” Kellam added. “A lot of us were disappointed to know the school had closed ... and I think that was part of what caused us to miss it more. ... We didn’t anticipate it would go away.”

Alumna Pat Boatwright Ball attended NCI while her father, Otis H. Boatwright, was principal.

The final reunion made her sad.

“It’s almost like a loss of connection to reflect on the past,” said Ball, who has come to the biannual reunions for 20 years.

“Through the years ... I don’t know whether we appreciated what we had. We really had a model of good Christian education,” she added. “I’ve always reflected back on the fact that every situation that I have been in ... it always comes back to basic principles that I learned there.”

# MARYSVILLE: Ohio city is growing, but church is not

FROM PAGE 3

of the residential construction. “Literally within two miles of our church building is some of the fastest-growing population in the state of Ohio.”

## ‘FIELDS ARE WHITE FOR HARVEST’

Marysville is the seat of Union County, Ohio’s second fastest-growing county.

Major employers include a Honda assembly plant and the headquarters of the lawn-and-garden company Scotts Miracle-Gro.

As farmers and factory workers gather for Sunday worship, Darby likes to step down from the pulpit and stand by the tall windows that frame the red-brick church building.

The former middle school biology teacher, who spent over a decade as the Buckeyes for Christ campus minister at Ohio State University, emphasizes the soul-winning opportunities just outside the sunlit glass. “The fields are white for harvest,” Darby told *The Christian Chronicle*, repeating Jesus’ words in John 4:35. “It’s very much a common theme for us.”

But amid the turmoil over societal issues, the church has lost more members than it has gained.

Before the pandemic, weekly attendance averaged about 200.

Since then, that count has fallen to about 140 — a 30 percent drop.

“We had a little swell right before COVID where we were really rocking it,” said Darby, who has preached in Marysville since 2013. “Then COVID came and really rocked us, like it did a lot of churches.”



J. Darby

## DIVIDED BY POLITICS

Darby blames the post-COVID decline on a variety of factors.

For one, the church’s handling of the pandemic — which arrived in the U.S. in early 2020 — impressed some members as “cowardly and unfaithful.”

They did not like that the elders



BOBBY ROSS JR.

Clouds cover the sun rising over the Marysville Church of Christ on a Sunday morning.

moved services online via Zoom — and then outdoors with social distancing at the Union County fairgrounds.

By the time the congregation resumed normal assemblies, some disgruntled members had found new church homes.

“In the midst of all of this, we had a new idol come out, and I call it political idolatry,” said Melissa Cottrill, 55, whose husband, Scott, serves as one of the church’s five elders. “You had people taking a political view and making that religion. ... They’ll have to give an account to God.”



M. Cottrill

Equally disruptive, Darby — an adoptive father of three African American children — organized a video dialogue with Black preachers after Floyd was killed in Minneapolis police custody on May 25, 2020.

A half-dozen families left the church as a result.

“I would say, ‘Help me understand why you’re upset about this. Have I done something wrong? Is there

something Scripturally wrong?’”

Darby said. “And it really just came down to the fact that they were angry that it was brought up. ... I don’t know how many times I heard, ‘Well, I never owned slaves.’”

Like its surrounding community, the Marysville church is predominantly White.

“Marysville seems to me to be a fairly traditional small rural town in Ohio,” said John Green, director emeritus of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron. “But that area around it is becoming more urban in that it’s part of this growing Columbus metropolitan area.”

## EASIEST WAY TO GROW

As member Jillian Bryant sees it, the easiest way for the Marysville church to grow would be to embrace partisan politics.

The 35-year-old mother of three likes to listen to Christian podcasts. An idea from a recent one



Bryant

resonated with her: “The quickest way to shrink a church is to stay in the faithful middle with Jesus.”

“I was like, ‘Oh, my word,’” Bryant said.

She still remembers a sermon series Jeff Darby preached at the fairgrounds pavilion in the fall of 2020.

“Basically, I had goosebumps,” she said. “He said, ‘Hey, whoever wins the election doesn’t matter. Jesus is our king. We are ambassadors here on Earth. And our kingdom is heaven.’”

As the YMCA of Central Ohio’s senior vice president for housing and healthy living, Sue Darby — the Marysville preacher’s wife — helps provide places for the homeless to live.

In her view, COVID-19 exposed “the glaring misstep of aligning Christianity with political action.”

“We were so politically driven during COVID — masks, no masks,” Sue Darby said. “Jesus did not come on this earth to die for any kind of earthly kingdom. ... And I think COVID really showed that to the churches.”

Member Sarah Showalter, 25, works in agriculture, teaching dairy farmers how to better manage livestock using technology.

The church can’t say “God is love” and then take sides on politics, said Showalter, the niece of elder Maurice Eastridge.

“If we pick a side, if we say, ‘Hey, gun control, this is what we want,’ then the people who don’t believe that ... we are isolating them,” Showalter said.

## WHAT IS — AND IS NOT — SCRIPTURAL

Avoiding politics in the church is not as simple as it might sound.

As Jeff Darby readily acknowledges, “There’s always going to be a disagreement about what is and what is not clearly a Scriptural issue.”

In the case of racial strife after



S. Darby



Showalter

Floyd's death, he said, "We were very intentional about crafting statements that proposed understanding, reconciliation, forgiveness, compassion, empathy. ... We always made statements that were supportive of the best principles of both sides."

After the U.S. Supreme Court recently overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 decision that legalized abortion nationwide, church leaders did not applaud or condemn the ruling.

"Instead," Sue Darby said, "the elders were like, 'OK, that decision was made by the world — by the government. What is the most loving thing we can do right now? What does that mean? Well, that means there's going to be hundreds of thousands of kids going into the foster system. We're going to need to do adoption. We're going to need to help women.'"

Throughout the recent difficulties, the elders have tried to demonstrate unity despite differences, Jeff Darby said.

"I think that's a big part of what we've been seeing God do in our church family," he said. "Those who have remained are not homogenous. ... Those who have remained are willing to take the lead of the leadership to say, 'We're going to be family.'"

#### THE WAY FORWARD

After years of upheaval, Scott Cottrill, a 56-year-old business consultant, is ready to focus on the future.

While smaller in number, the members who stayed represent a dedicated core, the church elder said.

"We're friendly. We're warm. We're connected," he said. "And I feel like there is a very strong relationship and base there. The question is, how do we grow from that base?"

Elder Josh Fairchild, a 49-year-old arborist, echoed Cottrill.

"A visitor never comes here without several people welcoming them," Fairchild said. "It's just, I still struggle with — I know numbers aren't everything, but how do we get more in the church?"

From hosting an annual fall festival to organizing food trucks and activities in its parking lot, the church welcomes hundreds of neighbors via community outreach events.

Even though those efforts have not translated into church growth, the elders said they remain committed to sharing the Gospel.



BOBBY ROSS JR.

Adam Showalter visits with preacher Jeff Darby after a Sunday service.

The pandemic reinforced the need to consider less traditional methods, the leaders said, and be willing to engage uncomfortable topics, from women's roles to gender identity questions.

"We'll continue to press forward and be a light to this community to bring people to Christ," said Eastridge, an animal nutrition professor at Ohio State. "How many in number? I don't know. But we're seeking, and I think that's the key thing."

Laurie Belville, a Marysville member for 27 years, prays the church will remain focused on God — and steer clear of partisanship.

"It goes back to not making it political," the grandmother of six said. "Jesus paved that path clearly. He said it was about reaching out and serving and loving."



Fairchild



Eastridge



Belville

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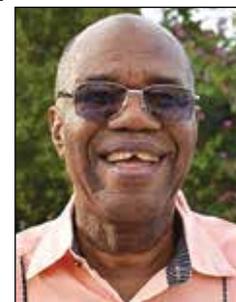
## SPOTLIGHT

## Minister had Hope for Haiti

**PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti** — The son of a voodoo priest, Jeantyard Elmera became a follower of Christ and a father figure to thousands of young people in this Caribbean nation.

Elmera, 67, died Sept. 13 in New Jersey. The longtime minister for the Delmas 28 Church of Christ in Port-au-Prince had traveled to the U.S. to undergo a corrective procedure on his eyes and suffered a heart attack.

“He was probably one of the most influential preachers that we’ve ever had in Haiti with Churches of Christ,” his long-time ministry partner and friend Ken Bever told



HOPE FOR HAITI'S CHILDREN

Jeantyard Elmera

*The Christian Chronicle*. “Many people say ‘he was my father’ in Haiti because they didn’t have fathers.”

Elmera played a key role in the launch of Hope for Haiti’s Children in 1995, said Bever, the nonprofit’s president. The ministry began with 13 children and has since expanded to serve more than 3,000 children in 10 communities with education, medical care, food programs, spiritual training and orphan care.

Elmera hosted an evangelistic TV program and led the Delmas School of Theology, which has trained more than 120 ministers. The minister was instrumental in the planting of at least 60 congregations in Haiti and some 8,000 baptisms, Bever said.

“We will all deeply miss our brother,” Bever said, “but we thank God for his life and his tireless efforts to train leaders who are already following in his footsteps — working daily with our U.S. team to manage our Haiti operations.”

**WEBSITE:** [hopeforhaitischildren.org](http://hopeforhaitischildren.org)



Deacons named in Soweto: Chaka Ndou, Cyril Tshinyani, Takalni Phaseana, Fani Masondo and Meshack Tshikhsi.

## After long lockdowns, South African church appoints its first deacons

BY AUDREY JACKSON | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

### SOWETO, South Africa

Joyful hymns filled the meeting place of the Tshiwelo Church of Christ as five men and their wives gathered before the congregation for a deacon installation ceremony. It was a moment years in the making.

The church’s minister, Songezo Gwanya, started teaching classes on church leadership in 2019. The congregation, which was founded by believers from the northern South African state of Venda, had grown for 60 years without deacons or elders. But in recent years the church had nearly doubled in size, and Gwanya saw the need for members to take on more active roles in leadership.

The minister and prospective leaders read through the Bible for a year, preparing for elder and deacon appointments.



PHOTOS BY AUDREY JACKSON

Tshiwelo church members pray for their newly installed deacons.

The church installed two elders in December 2019 and scheduled the deacon installation for early 2020.

Then came COVID-19. One week before the installation, the South African government locked down the country. Congregational meet-

ings were banned. Restrictions later were eased and then tightened as new variants of the virus surged across the country. The ceremony was postponed — twice.

During the long lockdowns, church members and the prospective deacons raised new questions about church leadership. So Gwanya and the men resumed their Bible studies.

“Already, they were serving the church,” Gwanya said of the new deacons. “That is why the church is appointing them.”

The 214-member church is small compared to the Johannesburg metropolitan area it serves. But the congregation has plans to reach its 1 million neighbors.

“The church must be a light in a community; it must be a beacon of hope in the community,” Gwanya said. “People must know that if they come to the church, they will get Jesus.”

# ATTACK: 'No one hates him,' elder says

FROM PAGE 3

God would help him overcome his struggles.

The next day, Sept. 4, the church planned to eat lunch together after worship and distribute what was left to people in need. But before the service began Novakovic entered the building with an 11-inch military-style knife and "went after the people that had helped him the most," Jackson said, "the leaders who had been the ones to embrace him."

Zarubica was stabbed in the chest and ruptured his Achilles tendon as he struggled with the attacker.

Another church member was stabbed in the arm. The worst injuries were suffered by Alberto Dias, who was stabbed twice in the stomach and arm as he and his fellow church members subdued Novakovic, who was arrested by police. Four hours later, after police had investigated and cleared the scene, the church members took the Lord's Supper and prayed for Novakovic.

"No one hates him," said Zarubica, who underwent surgery to repair his tendon, "and everyone is sorry for the damage he caused to the church and the physical injuries to the brothers."

Dias spent a week in the hospital and underwent two surgeries.

A native of the African nation of



Dias

Guinea-Bissau, he has been a steadfast member of the congregation for nearly three decades, Jackson said. Dias is now recovering at home but faces medical bills in excess of \$6,500.

Jackson, now an instructor of missions at Harding University in Searcy, Ark., helped to launch a support fund for Dias through the Garden Ridge Church of Christ in Lewisville, Texas.

After the attack, as church members anxiously waited for ambulances to arrive, some expressed concern that Dias would bleed to death, Zarubica said.

Dias replied: "My wounds are nothing compared to what Christ suffered for me. If this is because of him, I don't mind dying."

The church has found a small, temporary meeting place, Jackson said. Meanwhile, the congregation has endured unwanted media attention and accusations of manipulation, alcoholism and operating without a license. The church has been legally registered in Serbia for nearly 40 years, Zarubica said.

"It's hard," the church elder said of enduring the attacks, "even though we know that it is not because of us but because of Christ."

**FUNDS FOR ALBERTO DIAS'** medical bills may be sent to Garden Ridge Church of Christ, 102 N. Garden Ridge, Lewisville, TX 75067. Note checks for "Belgrade Church." Funds may be sent through Cashapp to \$4Gospod.

## Ukrainians, Iranians share testimonies

**ATHENS, Greece** — This European capital, where Paul once proclaimed the Gospel at Mars Hill, has become a refuge for Christians fleeing persecution in the Middle East and the war in Ukraine.

Alexander and Irina Piletsky, who spent 51 days in the meeting place of the Mariupol Church of Christ as their city was devastated by bombs and gunfire, traveled from their temporary home in Poland to teach at a Christian camp



Piletsky

sponsored by the Glyfada Church of Christ in Athens. Alexander Piletsky, a minister for the Mariupol church, spoke to 65 Ukrainians at the event, said Glyfada minister Dino Roussos, who also spoke at the camp.

The Glyfada church also serves refugees from countries including Iran and Afghanistan. An Iranian convert, Ibrahim, shared his testimony during the camp.

"May the Lord protect these amazing servants of the church," Roussos said, "and continue to bless the wonderful work they are doing for the glory of God."

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HAYLEY LITTLETON

Ron Edwards, seated by his wife, Anne, wipes a tear during a tribute recognizing him on his retirement as the Roosevelt Drive Church of Christ's full-time preacher.

# Tears at a military church

**CONGREGATION THAT** *trains members for service around the world honors its retiring minister.*

BY BOBBY ROSS JR. | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

JACKSONVILLE, N.C.

**F**ifty years after preaching his first sermon, Ron Edwards jokes that he knows the secret to ministry.

Change churches every three years.

Actually, Edwards — who is retiring from full-time preaching — spent the past 37 years serving the Roosevelt Drive Church of Christ in this military community about 120 miles southeast of Raleigh. Given the transitory nature of Marines and Navy sailors, it just *seemed* like his home church kept changing.

"I'm the only guy that the congregation moves, and I stay," Edwards, who will turn 81 in October, said with a laugh.

Within a few years of moving to Jacksonville in 1985, Edwards said he came to recognize — and embrace — Roosevelt Drive's role as a "training congregation."

The faces change at this church near Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune and Marine Corps Air Station New River.

The mission does not.



Edwards

"I saw that if we did a good job here training these 18- to 25-year-old people who were used to Mommy and Daddy doing everything ... and if we prepared them for Uncle Sam to send them somewhere, they'd be an asset when they got there," Edwards told *The Christian Chronicle*. "So that's what kept me here."

## WORSHIP ABOVE THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

On a recent weekend, a contingent of those former members returned to Roosevelt Drive.

They came back — to the place where they developed talents in teaching, preaching, singing, giving and making potluck dishes — to

celebrate the congregation's 70th anniversary and honor Edwards.

"When we moved down here, we didn't have our family," said Jennie Hull, who was just 18 when she and her husband, Allen, then a 21-year-old Marine, lived in Jacksonville for four years in the late 1980s. "This became our family."

Fellow Christians welcomed the young couple into their home for Thanksgiving.

Edwards took Allen Hull fishing. "We were in a Bible study with Ron and his wife, Anne, and they became our second parents," Jennie Hull said. "The church here

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20



Jennie Hull, with her husband, Allen, at the Roosevelt Drive Church of Christ's 70th anniversary homecoming.

**CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19**  
just has a special place in our heart. Our first baby was born here."

Now members of the Bridge Street Church of Christ in Chillicothe, Ohio, the Hulls drove 550 miles to attend the homecoming event.

"There's a lot of faces here that we don't know," Jennie Hull said. "But there's a lot of older people here that were so influential."

Mark and Dianne Howe, members of the Salem Church of Christ in Illinois, traveled even farther — 900 miles — for the anniversary celebration.

Like the Hulls, they did so because of what Roosevelt Drive meant to them when Mark Howe was stationed at Camp Lejeune in the 1980s.

"When we came here, we were automatically made a part of the family," Mark Howe said. "We were put to work. There wasn't any. 'Well, we'll see how you do.'"

The future church elder remembers Ron Edwards coming to him and telling him the congregation needed a song leader the next week.

"I'm like, 'I've never led singing

before in my life,'" Mark Howe said.

But Dianne Howe's father had taught songleading for years, she said. "So in a week's time, she taught me how to lead singing," Mark Howe said. "And I started leading singing here."

Anne Edwards, meanwhile, encouraged Dianne Howe to develop her leadership talents.

"She said, 'I saw a real shy, timid girl, but I knew there could be more than that,'" Dianne Howe recalled. "It gave me a lot of confidence to be able to talk to people and use my talents. Before I left here, she had me speaking at ladies' days and things like that."

#### 50 YEARS OF PREACHING

Marines and sailors from Newport, N.C., started the Roosevelt Drive church in 1952.

Seven decades later, the 150-member congregation is split about 60-40 between the military and civilians.

All six of the church's elders, including Ron Edwards, spent at least a brief time in the service.

"It helps in a military congregation if you've got somebody who



Past and present members attend the anniversary and retirement event hosted by the Roosevelt Drive Church of Christ in Jacksonville, N.C.

understands a little bit about the military," Edwards said.

A native of eastern North Carolina, Edwards — baptized at age 12 — grew up working in tobacco fields. He enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in 1962. That same year, he married Anne, his high school sweetheart. In the military, he served four years as an air traffic controller.

From 1966 to 1972, he worked for Western Auto in Florida. But then Frank Lott of the Post Street Church of Christ in Jacksonville, Fla., persuaded Edwards to attend Sunset International Bible Institute in Lubbock, Texas. At age 30, Edwards preached his first sermon on June 11, 1972.

In the decade after finishing Sunset's two-year curriculum in 1974, he worked with a domestic mission team in Pennsylvania, preached for the Kinston Church of Christ in North Carolina and served as a missionary to Trinidad and Tobago, a dual-island Caribbean nation near Venezuela.

The Roosevelt Drive church — which had supported Edwards' work in Trinidad — hired him as its preacher in 1985.

Given Edwards' commitment to

global evangelism, the church's leaders agreed he could take two weeks a year for short-term mission trips. He returned to Trinidad nearly every year — a practice he believes helped focus Roosevelt Drive members on the Great Commission.

Closer to home, Edwards helped make Vacation Bible School a weeklong event and spearheaded the church's involvement in Lads to Leaders. He encouraged donations for Bibles for China and support of Agape of North Carolina, a ministry focused on foster care, adoptions and counseling services. He coordinated disaster relief efforts after a half-dozen hurricanes.

But much of his influence can be seen in individual Christians.

Marge Tredwell, 90, is one of the congregation's longtime civilian members. "You taught me how to be a Bible class teacher," Tredwell told Edwards as family, friends and fellow Christians paid tribute to him. "I'm still teaching. I'm not going to give it up until they tell me, 'Mrs. Marge, go home.'"

"But please don't tell me to go home," she added as the audi-

ence laughed. "Please let me continue to spread God's word."

#### 'I CAN'T PREACH FOREVER'

Over the years, Edwards said he frequently told the church's leaders, "I don't want to be here one day longer than you want."

About two years ago, his fellow elders asked about his plans for the future. "Well, I know I can't preach forever," he replied.

Not long after that, the elders shared their desire for his retirement to coincide with the 70th anniversary event.

"Who gets a two-year warning?" Edwards said. "Most of the time, (the preacher is let go) Sunday evening after he said the wrong thing Sunday morning."

Edwards will remain an elder, and he will keep teaching a Sunday Bible class. He plans to continue doing short-term missions, as his health allows.

He might consider assignments as an interim minister at other Churches of Christ.

"I wouldn't mind filling in ... between a long-term man and hiring the next one," Edwards said of that potential role. "Sometimes, that next guy



In a "memory room" at the Roosevelt Drive Church of Christ, a display recounts the life and experiences of Ron Edwards, the congregation's longtime minister who is retiring.

coming in after a favorite son — it's hard for him to measure up."

But he doesn't expect that to be the case at Roosevelt Drive. The congregation's new full-time preacher will be familiar: Jim Bender and Edwards have given the sermons on alternating Sundays the past four years.

Bender is a former Marine helicopter pilot who first attended Roosevelt Drive while stationed at Camp Lejeune from 1983 to 1991. Back then, he and his wife, Becky, served as the church's unpaid youth group coordinators.

During that time, Jim Bender said he learned how to evangelize by going on Bible studies with Edwards.

"I had kid patrol, pet patrol," Bender said. "Anything that was distracting to the study, I kept to a minimum, so Ron could do his work and stay in the Scriptures and keep them on track."

After leaving the military, Bender enrolled at Sunset and became a minister himself. According to church leaders, he is one of at least 25 former Roosevelt Drive members now in ministry.

Bender spent 12 years as a church planter in San Diego before

Edwards called and asked him to return to Roosevelt Drive as the involvement minister in 2006.

Joining Bender on the ministry staff as Edwards retires will be Robin Vick, a former missionary to Scotland. Vick and his wife, Chrissy, who grew up at Roosevelt Drive, are both graduates of Sunset and Harding University in Searcy, Ark.

An emotional Bender served as the emcee for the ceremony honoring his longtime mentor. Bender prayed that the occasion would be worthy of Ron and Anne Edwards' 37 years of service to the congregation.

To recognize the couple, the church plans to construct an outreach center named after them.

"They went well above and beyond," Bender said. "They decorated classrooms and bulletin boards. They set up ladies' days and men's retreats."

"Ron and Anne Edwards taught many of us the Gospel and lived the Gospel," he added. "They trained us to share and teach the Gospel to others and fulfill our part, individually and collectively, in the Great Commission."



Church member Terry Walker, a retired Marine gunner, leads "Anywhere With Jesus" during the congregation's homecoming event.



Retiring minister Ron Edwards poses for a photo with his wife, Anne.

PHOTOS BY HAYLEY LITTLETON



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# Why are some Christians so angry?

**AHEAD OF VOTING,** *believers urged to focus not on the donkey or the elephant – but on the Lamb.*

BY BOBBY ROSS JR. | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

**C**hris McCurley has noticed something. “People are angrier than ever,” he said. That includes many Christians, said McCurley, who preaches for the Oldham Lane Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas.

“I believe it’s a combination of things: COVID, politics, etc.,” he said. “I think we would all be better off if we ... turned off social media, opened our Bibles, got on our knees and kept ourselves busy with kingdom work.”

Dan Cooper, elder and retired minister for the Pitman Road Church of Christ in Sewell, N.J., shares McCurley’s concern.

“Both COVID opinions and political expressions have created greater division,” Cooper said.

Among Americans in general, growing shares of Democrats and Republicans “now describe those in the other party as more closed-minded, dishonest, immoral and unintelligent than other Americans,” a recent Pew Research Center survey reveals.

In 2016, 47 percent of Republicans and 35 percent of Democrats said those in the other party were a lot or somewhat more immoral than

other Americans, according to Pew. Today, 72 percent of Republicans and 63 percent of Democrats hold those same negative views, the latest survey indicates.

Christians who identify with both major parties risk “mistaking the City of Man for the City of God,” according to Ben Peterson, a political scientist at



SHUTTERSTOCK ILLUSTRATION

Abilene Christian University in Texas.

“I think we ought to be proclaiming the Gospel and inviting people to submit to the lordship of Christ in the fullness of that, and that involves behavioral and social implications,” Peterson said in an interview.

“Maybe that leads us to tend to vote a certain way, and I don’t think that’s a problem,” he added. “But I do think there’s a danger with sort of overidentifying with a particular party, and that certainly seems to be happening to some degree.”

In light of the rancor, *The Christian Chronicle* asked a few ministers how they are — or are not — addressing politics ahead of the 2022 midterm elections.

Here are some of their responses:

## Have you noticed any increased tension or turmoil in your congregation?

“People are more volatile and aggressive. People are much more

opinionated and expressive with those opinions.” — **Jeff Dunn, Huntsville Church of Christ in Texas**

“People are more easily offended when members of the congregation do not agree with their political ideas.” — **Jake Perkins, Canadian Church of Christ in Texas**

“It was building for a while, and then the elders and I started working very hard to remind members what our purpose is as a church. We made public statements that we are to love our fellow brothers and sisters and not let politics come between us. After a while, we finally got back to loving each other despite our political differences.” — **Jim Dillinger, Rochester Church of Christ in Indiana**

“We had people leave due to masks and due to the racial/social

justice. I was personally accused of being a socialist because I would not come out and condemn Democrats. To some, we went too far with masks, vaccines (which we never required, only encouraged) and social justice. To others, we did not go far enough with social justice.” — **Roger Woods, Walled Lake Church of Christ in Michigan**

“COVID restrictions caused problems on both sides in terms of how we assembled. We followed local guidelines, which some thought were too restrictive (and they formed a house church), while others did not come for a long time because they thought we were not restrictive enough.” — **Glenn Hawley, East Hill Church of Christ in York, Neb.**

“Things are different. I do not know of a congregation that hasn’t experienced some turmoil. People have strong feelings, especially concerning issues we deem as political. Unfortunately, we have made nearly every issue a political one. ... I encourage Christians not to look at everything through a political lens but instead look at things through the lens of Christ.” — **Scott Elliott, La Grange Church of Christ in Texas**

“The tension seems to exist between older Christians (over 40) and younger ones (under 40). They seem to have very different perspectives on most issues. It seems very difficult for them to see the issue from the perspective of the other. That will be a crucial first step in bridging the generation gap.” — **Tim Tripp, West Side Church of Christ in Russellville, Ark.**

See **POLITICS**, Page 24



McCurley



Peterson



Elliott

# POLITICS: As midterm elections near, ministers offer advice for Christians

FROM PAGE 23

## How are you as a preacher navigating the ongoing political division?

"I have been increasingly disheartened by the toxic partisanship, polarization and rancor I've seen from Christians over the last few years. I am beginning to lean more and more in the direction of what David Lipscomb described in his book 'On Civil Government.'" — **Wes McAdams, McDermott Road Church of Christ in Plano, Texas**

"I try to steer clear of the rocks and the shoals. I believe the Gospel touches everything and so I steadfastly stay away from the specific struggles of the moment and attempt to address related issues from whatever text is being addressed. If I sense my own bias heating my teaching, I will release it until I can pick it up again without burning anyone." — **John W. Moore, East End Church of Christ in East Hampton, N.Y.**

"It's been difficult, but we primarily say that Jesus reigns regardless of who is in office. We have members on both extremes of the political divide. Generally, I side with David Lipscomb, (who said) that as far as the church is concerned, the government is going to do what it is going to do, but we should stay focused on the kingdom of God." — **David Shaner, Bellevue Church of Christ in Washington state**



Shaner

"I work hard at being neutral in the pulpit on politics and encourage members to remember we are citizens of heaven above any other allegiance." — **Jim Dillinger, Rochester Church of Christ in Indiana**

"Some days are better than others. I have learned to keep to the subject and be careful with my application. In other words, I let God through the Word and Spirit do the convicting."

— **Roger Woods, Walled Lake Church of Christ in Michigan**

"I preach love and unity within the challenging and divisive political climate. I instruct Christians how to love and treat with respect those with whom they disagree." — **Tim Tripp, West Side Church of Christ in Russellville, Ark.**

"I am striving to encourage our spiritual family to pray for insight and direction. We are Christians who need to be concerned about God first and then vote according to what spiritual direction we should have as his children." — **Britt Farmer, Aledo Church of Christ in Texas**

"I teach about character and being like Jesus. I do not address political division." — **John Dobbs, Forsythe Church of Christ in Monroe, La.**

"I am navigating the current political division by keeping us focused on our kingdom citizenship. While most of the congregation identifies as Democrats, we do have some Republican members. I encourage the church to look at the world around us from the perspective of the Lamb, instead of the perspective of donkeys and elephants. We encourage members to be engaged in their communities, which includes participating in civic processes of voting and even protest. We encourage them to do so in a way that honors God and reflects kingdom values." — **Lamont Ross, Marsalis Avenue Church of Christ in Dallas**



Ross

"I try to reason through issues using the word of God as my guide. I try not to make an issue political, but I try to make our will fit God's will. On one occasion, I admitted to the congregation my failure to pray for the president. I stated that our failure to pray for him could be the very reason there's so much conflict and turmoil in government." — **Edward Cribbs, Oakland Church of Christ in Southfield, Mich.**

## What, if anything, are you saying from the pulpit?

"That we need to not allow it to divide or discourage. Kingdom pursuits should be our focus. Politics typically corrupts. We are in the redeeming business. ... Only Jesus saves." — **Danny Dodd, Levy Church of Christ in North Little Rock, Ark.**

"Simply, I am telling the congregation to not divide along lines of political affiliations as we are ultimately under the leadership of Christ. I am also teaching us to accept brethren of different political views as there is no way to reconcile opinions of the brotherhood. In doing so, we just cause more division." — **Anthony Norwood, Henry Street Church of Christ in Gadsden, Ala.**

"Vote the way you believe God would vote." — **Britt Farmer, Aledo Church of Christ in Texas**

"As a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, I do not address politics. Only insofar as the character of Jesus, fruit of the Spirit and praying for all world leaders to touch the hem of that garment." — **John Dobbs, Forsythe Church of Christ in Monroe, La.**



Dobbs

"I try to focus a lot of attention on Christian virtues, like the fruit of the Spirit and the Sermon on the Mount. Even if the worst thing people believe about their political opponents is true (and it's probably not), they are still called to love them, be kind to them and be gentle in their approach toward them. I also try to focus a lot of attention on kingdom loyalty that supersedes national loyalty." — **Wes McAdams, McDermott Road Church of Christ in Plano, Texas**



McAdams

"Jesus reigns over all. We need to stand up for what is right regardless of politics. I do encourage people to be careful in using social media so as not to be influenced by what you hear. It is so easy to not understand what is really going on. We need to let our light shine even when darkness reigns. Then your light will ... be clearly evident." — **David Shaner, Bellevue Church of Christ in Washington state**

"Our allegiance to Jesus is more important than any election." — **Scott Elliott, La Grange Church of Christ in Texas**

"Don't allow your politics to supersede your faith." — **Edward Cribbs, Oakland Church of Christ in Southfield, Mich.**

"I will talk about some of the social issues as social issues, not political issues." — **Jim Dillinger, Rochester Church of Christ in Indiana**

"I'm reminding our folks that our kingdom is not of this world. While we may have a vested interest in politics, we must avoid making it an idol." — **Chris McCurley, Oldham Lane Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas**

## What advice do you have for fellow preachers and fellow Christians?

"Preach Jesus. He didn't come to build a nation. He came to build a church." — **Jake Perkins, Canadian Church of Christ in Texas**

"Ground the discussion thoroughly in the biblical context. This is primary. Let the Bible speak to it first. Then honestly understand that we will have differences — and that is all right — while understanding our bond in Jesus is stronger than any political party affiliation." — **Danny Dodd, Levy Church of Christ in North Little Rock, Ark.**

“I recommend that preachers preach the Word. It is not our job to preach CNN, Fox News or MSNBC. ... In preaching the Word, you will sound like a Christian from the pulpit. Some days that may sound like a Democrat. Some days that may sound like a Republican. The man of God stands in the tradition of the prophets of God who spoke truth, even when it was unpopular.” — **Lamont Ross, Marsalis Avenue Church of Christ in Dallas**

“Do not be a participant in the name calling, the spreading of untruths (lies) and adding to the divisive, polemic rhetoric. ... When you disagree with a policy, person or law, you have the right as a U.S. citizen to express your opinion, as do those with whom you disagree. Yet as a Christian, we should avoid degrading those with whom we disagree. As children of God, we must lead a return to civil dialogue. Remember our life here and now is not about the elephant or the donkey but about the Lamb.” — **Scott McCown, Central Church of Christ in Tuscaloosa, Ala.**

“Teach the word of God. People devoted to doing the Father’s will should not be entangled with divisive rhetoric and/or divisive politics.” — **Edward Cribbs, Oakland Church of Christ in Southfield, Mich.**



Cribbs

“Keep politics in its place. I personally feel that Christians should be involved in the political process. However, we can quickly move from involvement to idolatry. Our faith should saturate everything we are and everything we do. Therefore, Christ should shape our political views and how we respond to those who disagree.” — **Chris McCurley, Oldham Lane Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas**

“Let your congregational gatherings be a refuge from the divisive political polarization. When you hear something that you disagree with, move the conversation to Jesus and away

from the corruption of our political system.” — **John Dobbs, Forsythe Church of Christ in Monroe, La.**

“Leave it alone! Preach the Gospel, and strengthen the congregation from a biblical standpoint only. We are not here to promote the agenda of political parties. This is nothing but divisiveness.” — **Anthony Norwood, Henry Street Church of Christ in Gadsden, Ala.**

“We all need to pray more and post less. While I do not agree with Andy Stanley on many issues, I believe his book ‘Not in It to Win It’ is definitely worth the time to read it.” — **Dan Cooper, Pitman Road Church of Christ in Sewell, N.J.**

“We are called to preach the kingdom, not the nation. While advocating and voting have their places, our greatest influence in this world will be through reaching individuals with the Gospel and letting Christ change them.” — **Glenn Hawley, East Hill Church of Christ in York, Neb.**

“Our kingdom is not of this world. As long as we look for salvation from Washington, a political party or our own country, we will fall short. We need to be about the business of pointing people to Christ.” — **Jeff Dunn, Huntsville Church of Christ in Texas**

“Keep your political view out of the pulpit. Deal with social issues fairly as both parties have important things that Christians need to be committed to. ... We are Christians, not Republicans or Democrats.” — **Jim Dillinger, Rochester Church of Christ in Indiana**

“Like Paul, I believe our preaching must be ‘nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified.’ But that message, if preached faithfully, will challenge political idolatries, the fleshly desire to win at all costs and the rampant fear and animosity. Many of our brothers and sisters are being emotionally manipulated by social media and cable news on a daily basis. They need constant reminders that ours is ‘a kingdom that cannot be shaken.’” — **Wes McAdams, McDermott Road Church of Christ in Plano, Texas**



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For more information, interested couples should contact **Paul Schandavel**, Director of Child and Family Services, at 870.239.4031, ext. 124. Resumes can be emailed to [pauls@childrenshomes.org](mailto:pauls@childrenshomes.org) or mailed to the address below.

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# Federal lawsuit filed over arrests of five Christian school educators

BY AUDREY JACKSON | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

**F**our former employees of Midland Christian School in Texas and a current employee who says he was demoted from his assistant principal role filed a federal lawsuit Aug. 30 against the City of Midland and three police officers.

The “Midland Christian Five” — as the lawsuit characterizes the plaintiffs — “are five career educators who responded reasonably, appropriately, and with integrity to a locker room incident involving horseplay among members of Midland Christian School’s high school baseball team,” according to the civil petition filed in U.S. District Court in Midland.

“The Defendants are law enforcement authorities who — in a remarkable abuse of power — arrested these educators as retaliation for the educators asserting their Constitutional rights while complying with their professional duties and federal law,” the lawsuit alleges. “To make these false arrests, the Defendants lied and omitted material facts about the Midland Christian Five’s actions in sworn affidavits.”

The Midland city attorney’s office did not respond to a request for comment. Midland Christian School declined to comment.

Detectives accused the employees of failing to report a student’s alleged sexual assault on campus in January, but a Texas grand jury declined to indict the educators in May due to the lack of evidence to take the case to trial.

*The Christian Chronicle* previously covered the arrest and exoneration of the educators, who worked for one of Texas’ largest Christian K-12 schools. Midland Christian is associated with Churches of Christ.

The lawsuit — filed by former superintendent Jared Lee, former principal Dana Ellis, former assistant principal Matthew Counts, former athletic director Greg McClendon and former head baseball coach Barry Russell — accuses

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS MIDLAND-ODESSA DIVISION	
JARED LEE, DANA ELLIS, MATTHEW COUNTS, GREGORY MCCLENDON, and BARRY RUSSELL,	\$
Plaintiffs,	\$
v.	\$
CITY OF MIDLAND, JENNIE ALONZO ROSEMARY SHARP, and CAMILO FONSECA	\$
Defendants.	\$
Civil Action No. 7:22-cv-185	
JURY TRIAL DEMANDED	
PLAINTIFFS' ORIGINAL COMPLAINT	

SCREENSHOT OF LAWSUIT PETITION

The lawsuit was filed in federal court.

investigators for the Midland Police Department of carrying out a false, biased campaign, including the arrest of the plaintiffs on school grounds during the week in front of news cameras that the police arranged to be present.

Four of those arrested never returned to work with the school, while the lawsuit says Counts was demoted. He is listed on the school’s website as an assistant football coach for middle school athletics and a seventh- and eighth-grade history teacher.

The filing also accuses a detective of swearing to false information in an arrest warrant affidavit — most seriously that school administrators knew of a sexual assault and failed to report it, which was later found to be untrue.

The educators seek compensatory damages for the “deprivation of liberty, reputational harm, public humiliation” and “for mental and emotional distress.”

The plaintiffs’ attorney, Rusty Hardin, said in a press release that it was one of the most egregious cases of irresponsible police action he had witnessed in decades of practicing law.

“What happened here is that Midland Police had tunnel vision,” Hardin said in the release. “They heard a false, unreliable report from a parent based on schoolhouse gossip and went with it.”

Hardin, a prominent lawyer in Houston, recently represented NFL quarterback Deshaun Watson and has defended several other famous clients such as televangelist Joel Osteen.

The case is Jared Lee et al. v. City of Midland et al., No. 7:22-cv-185.



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### MARS HILL BIBLE SCHOOL Presidential Search

Mars Hill Bible School is searching for the next President to lead the education of Mind, Heart, Body and Soul of its more than 750 students. Mars Hill Bible School is a private, co-educational school that encompasses TK-12th grades and a robust preschool program. The mission of MHBS is to encourage academic excellence and raise up committed, Christ-filled servant leaders who will make a difference in their own neighborhoods and around the world. MHBS operates with full accreditation from the Alabama State Department of Education and Cognia.

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 searchcommittee@mhbs.org

or  
 Lori Tays at 256-767-1203 ext. 2008.

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# Milestones

Showcase the lives of your loved ones — birth and wedding announcements, anniversaries, memorials, honors for longtime ministers and workers and more. Contact [milestones@christianchronicle.org](mailto:milestones@christianchronicle.org) for rates and more information.

## Anniversary



### Lewis and Sue Randolph 70 years

Eleanor Sue Traw met Dr. William Lewis Randolph at Freed-Hardeman College in Henderson, Tenn. They married on Sept. 7, 1952, in Richland, Mo., with W. J. Stanley officiating.

While starting a family, Lewis and Sue lived in Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio, Michigan and California before settling in Dallas in 1968. Lewis was a Church of Christ minister and an educator for 47 years, retiring from the Irving Independent School District in 1999. After raising her girls, Sue worked for Richland College in Dallas for over 20 years. After retirement, Lewis and Sue moved to the Waco area.

The Randolphs have four daughters: Kay Randolph of Dallas, Tammy Horner of Waco, Awilda Acuff of College Station and Karen Nix of Austin. They have nine grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren, all living in Texas.

A family celebration was held at the Crestview Church of Christ in Waco on Sept. 3.

## Birthday

### Fred Arnold, 90

Fred Arnold, of Greenville, Texas, will celebrate his 90th birthday on Oct. 20. Fred has dedicated his life in service to his Lord. For 50 years he served the Harrison Street Church of Christ in Batesville, Ark., as a teacher, deacon, elder and song leader. For 30 years he led local nursing home services. He loves and enjoyed



serving shut-ins, ensuring that their physical and spiritual needs were met. For the last eight years he has served the Creekside Church in Greenville, always anxious to serve when called upon. Fred has been married to his wife Betty for 63 years.

## Honored

### Arnis and Connie Pape



Arnis and Connie Pape were recently honored for 25 years of ministry with the Westport Road Church of Christ in Louisville, Ky. Growing up in Texas and Colorado, Arnis went to Abilene Christian University in Texas and earned undergraduate and graduate degrees studying under outstanding professors like Ian Fair, John Willis, Carroll Osburn, Charles Siburt and others.

Arnis met Connie, who was also reared in Texas, at ACU. In the summer of 1997, they moved from Texas, where Arnis had previously preached, and he became the preaching minister for the Westport Road church. They have been married 38 years and have two children: a daughter, Ann; a son, Daniel; a daughter-in-law, Brittany; and two sweet grandchildren, Emily and Jack, with whom they sit in church every Sunday morning.

The biggest reason for the longevity of his ministry in Louisville, Arnis believes, is the genuine love that the congregation has for each other and for him and his family. Through the years, there have been many unexpected acts of kindness and generosity.

Five years ago, to celebrate 20

years of ministry at Westport Road, Arnis and Connie were given a trip to Israel to visit the Bible lands. Four-week sabbaticals are also given every five years which allow for extended study and continued personal spiritual growth. The one thing that has kept the congregation together and at peace is the love and unity that has enabled the church to navigate successfully all the many challenges and changes that have taken place. Arnis especially appreciates being blessed to work within a supportive team of forward-looking shepherds and gifted fellow ministers.

He has been encouraged by the church's growth in diversity—racially, politically, socially, and economically. There were also successful back-to-back three-year fundraising campaigns that raised more than three million dollars to fund much needed expansion and improvements to the church facilities. At the same time, mission work in Haiti, Mexico City, and Panama has continued, as well as a strong emphasis on congregational and community support and service.

According to Arnis, God continually provides new opportunities and challenges “to love as Jesus loves, serve as Jesus serves, and share His good news.” This enables him to feel like he is “starting a new and fresh job ... 25 years just doesn't seem possible!”

## Memorials

### Charles E. Morris and William A. Morris

Charles Elihu Morris died Aug. 13, 2022, in Montgomery, Ala., after a lengthy illness. He was 97. His brother, W.A. “Al” Morris, died 16 days later on Aug. 29 in Clarksville, Tenn. He was 94.

The brothers attended Harding College (now University) in Searcy, Ark. Charles Morris served in the U.S. Navy



Charles Morris

in World War II and taught high school Bible, math and social studies at Georgia Christian School in Valdosta, Ga., and Mars Hill Bible School in Florence, Ala. He served as a part-time minister for Churches of Christ in Alabama, Georgia and Florida. He was preceded in death by his wife of 44 years, Edna Hodge Morris. Survivors include two sons and two grandchildren.

Al Morris spent his career in education and served as chair of the elementary education department at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, Ky., from 1969 to 1990. He served as an elder of the Richmond Church of Christ for 10 years. Al and his wife, Doris, were married for 69 years before her death in 2018. They have five children, eight grandchildren, and 10 great-grandchildren.



Al Morris

## Cynthia Thompson

Cynthia Antoinette Lundy Thompson, 68, passed away July 20, 2022. She was born in Savannah, Ga. Cynthia was a devoted Christian, mother, and grandmother. She taught Sunday school at Liberty City Church of Christ in Savannah. She also was involved in women's Christian ministry. In 1986 she and her boys moved to Winston-Salem, N.C. They were welcomed and worshiped with the Carver Road Church of Christ. Cynthia participated in the Carver Road Acappella Song Group. She also taught Sunday school and was quite active in Vacation Bible School. She was very instrumental in bringing new members to the church.



**MEMORIAL GIFTS:** *The Christian Chronicle* appreciates gifts received in memory of Lynn Barnes, Robert McDaniel, Meemaw Washam and James N. Winston.

## NEWSMAKERS

**APPOINTED:** Andrew Baker as president of the National Christian School Association by the board of trustees. Baker will continue in his administrative faculty position at Harding University in Searcy, Ark. **James W. Carr**, former senior vice president and executive vice president of Harding University, to the board of directors of 21Wilberforce, a Christian human rights organization.



Baker



Martin

**HONORED:** Helen G. Martin for eight years of service on the Warren County school board in Kentucky. Her son, Zack Martin, is minister for the Cedar Springs Church of Christ in Louisville, Ky.



Neill

**HIRED:** Stephen Bailey as director of strategic growth for Made in the Streets, a ministry that serves children in Nairobi, Kenya. **Kelly Neill** as the lead minister for the Bentonville Church of Christ in Arkansas. **Chris McCurley** as the preaching minister for the Walnut Street Church of Christ in Dickson, Tenn. **Sam Dilbeck** as minister for the University Church of Christ in San Marcos, Texas.



McCurley



Garland

**Michael Whitworth** as preaching minister for the Newport Avenue Church of Christ in Bend, Ore. **Cliff Hand** as youth minister for the Hilldale Church of Christ in Clarksville, Tenn. **Wesley Garland** as preaching minister for the Warners Chapel Church of Christ in Clemmons, N.C. **Charles Abernathy** as preaching minister for the Washington Street Church of Christ in Fayetteville, Tenn.



Abernathy

### Preacher/Minister - Buckeye/Goodyear, Ariz.

**West Valley Church of Christ** is accepting applications for vacant full-time ministry position. We are a congregation of approximately 50 post pandemic in need of a minister to feed the flock with solid Bible-based teaching and leadership. Preferred candidates will be willing to share The Word with all ages in one of the fastest growing population centers in N. America; a family man with a stable marriage whose wife is a strong supporter of his ministry, who has a solid understanding of God's Word and is highly motivated to share with all ages. Preferred candidates will have a Biblical Studies or Preacher's Training degree. Strong communication skills are a must. Presentations utilizing PowerPoint are needed. Our children are our future. We want to reach younger families where possible. Interested, qualified individuals may submit resume, recent videos of sermons, and references via email or mail.

**West Valley Church of Christ • PO Box 67, Buckeye, AZ 85326**  
**wvchurchofchrist@gmail.com • (623) 695-5623**  
**J.Seal (623) 932-2494 • G.Cope (623) 277-0776**

### Family/Youth Ministry

The **University Church of Christ** has an opening for a full-time youth and family minister. We are located on the north side of the University of South Alabama at **5651 Zeigler Boulevard, Mobile, AL 36608**. All interested candidates are asked to submit a resume to:

**Richard Jay (elder)**  
**richard.jay@spireenergy.com**  
**(251) 281-7550**

### Local Missionary - Bellevue, Wash.

The **Bellevue Church of Christ** in Bellevue, Wash., is active in foreign missions, but now we are seeking to extend this focus more to the local mission in Bellevue. We are seeking a proactive, people-oriented (extroverted) person with strong communication skills for an active local missionary role in the Bellevue area. The primary functions of this person are to: seek and save the lost through the formation of relationships and spiritual development; help the Bellevue Church to grow numerically by developing a strong local missionary focus; and utilize technology to reach and develop an internet community. Although the primary focus of the person, as a local evangelist, is to reach out to all people groups about Jesus, it is expected they will also have an evangelistic focus on youth and young adult outreach and development.

The area is a multi-ethnic, diverse community. The Asian community makes up 38% of the city of Bellevue with the surrounding area having similar demographics. Other ethnicities are also prevalent in the area.

**elders@bellevuechurchofchrist.org** or **office@bellevuechurchofchrist.org**  
**(425) 454-3863 • www.bellevuechurchofchrist.org**

### Full-time Preacher/Minister - St Marys, W. Va.

**George Street Church of Christ** is a small congregation of 50 to 60 people. We are seeking a full-time pulpit minister/evangelist. Candidate must be knowledgeable of the scriptures, sound in his sermons and Bible classes, and willing to help grow our congregation. We are looking for a minister with a passion to serve and a desire to promote growth in relationships with the Lord and with one another and to provide outreach to the lost. We seek someone whose purpose is to glorify God in word, worship, and our daily lives. If interested, please contact:

**Paul Miller • millerj@marietta.edu • (740) 525-6253** or  
**Eric Little • Eric.R.Little@gmail.com • (304) 299-4127**

### Full-time Minister - Escanaba, Mich.

Seeking full-time minister for our 55-member congregation. Preaching, teaching, and outreach responsibilities. Also assisting in hosting Let the Bible Speak TV Ministry: [www.letthebiblespeak.net](http://www.letthebiblespeak.net). Compensation includes moving assistance. Please send cover letter, resume, and video samples of lessons to:

**escanabacoc@gmail.com**  
**Church of Christ**  
**P.O. Box 751**  
**Escanaba, MI 49829**

### Pulpit Minister - Urbana, Ill.

The **Dublin St. Church of Christ** is seeking a pulpit minister who is capable of preaching, teaching and defending the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are a small congregation of about 20 members and are willing and ready to go to work spreading the Word of God. All interested candidates must send a cover page, resume, references (including current congregation), and video or electronic copy of one sermon. Please send all responses to:

**dublinsearch23@gmail.com.**

### Full-time Minister - Salem, Ind.

The **Salem Church of Christ** in Salem, Ind., is looking for a full-time minister, and the position will be available January 2023. We are a congregation of around 50 members who desire to grow spiritually and numerically. The candidate's responsibilities will be preaching, teaching class, and preaching sound doctrine with outreach potential. We currently are without elders and deacons. Please send resume and link to recent sermon, lessons, or teaching to:

**air2jqw@gmail.com**  
 or call: **812-525-2682**

### Full-time Minister - Fort Wayne, Indiana

**East Chestnut Church of Christ** is seeking a full-time minister. Our congregation has approximately 100 members and is looking for a minister who will meet the following obligations: preaching sound doctrine, interacting with our sister congregations in the area, and sharing the Gospel in the Fort Wayne area. Brothers who are interested in applying should have the following characteristics:

**Essential qualifications:** • Ministerial experience (5 years minimum) • Bible-based teaching (sound doctrine) • Ability to defend the faith (active within the community). **Preferred skills/abilities/status:** • Effective communication skills for all age groups (youth to seniors) • Established leadership ability • Vision for growth and progression in the congregation with short-range and long-range plans • Spiritual insight to our various ministries • Married. **Salary and benefits** will be commensurate with education and experience. Potential candidate can send a cover letter and resume to:

**eastchestnutchurch2@yahoo.com** with subject "Minister application"; **East Chestnut Church of Christ, ATTN: Selection Committee, 3601 East Chestnut St, Fort Wayne, IN 46803, (260) 426-5051**  
*East Chestnut Church of Christ "Know The Lord, Grow the Community, Show the Harvest"*

# KIDNEY: Young believer felt God prick her heart

FROM PAGE 1

2019 print edition, mailed to nearly 135,000 subscribers nationwide.

The ad ran at the top of page 31. “Sam Birmingham needs a kidney,” it said, adding in parenthesis, “(We only need one to live.)”

The text-heavy ad featured a small black-and-white photo of Birmingham.

It begged fellow Christians to help.

“It’s not often that we have an opportunity to deliberately step in and save someone’s life, but here is one of those occasions,” the New Bern church elders wrote. “If you have it in your heart, we ask you to carefully read this and pray over your decision to donate one of your kidneys. As time is short to help in this way, please use the contact information below to start the process. But first, here are a few things you should know about Sam ...”

The elders told about Birmingham’s father, a World War II hero and former New Bern elder. They told about Birmingham knocking on doors to share the Gospel, teaching Bible classes at church and ministering to a nursing home next door to the building. They told about Birmingham and his wife opening their home to two young granddaughters when their daughter died of cancer.

“Sam and Jan have lived sacrificial lives and are truly good, godly Christian people who are in need of your help,” the ad continued. “The Elders of the New Bern Church of Christ sincerely ask you to volunteer for this worthy effort.”

The elders noted that the donor’s expenses would be covered. They gave details for contacting Birmingham’s transplant coordinator, Linda Ipock, at Vidant Medical Center in Greenville, N.C.

Patton, who served as the *Chronicle’s* ad manager for 10 years, said the ad — not the first one the paper had run in search of a kidney donor — moved her.

In fact, Patton, a member of the Memorial Road Church of Christ in Oklahoma City, had tested years earlier to see if she might donate a



PHOTO PROVIDED BY MELISSA MCFERRIN

Melissa McFerrin two days after surgery at Vanderbilt University Medical Center.

kidney to a stranger.

But she worried that the New Bern ad might be too wordy to catch readers’ attention.

“You hated to encourage them to cut anything out,” said Patton, who left the *Chronicle* earlier this year to focus on her family and ministry interests. “And knowing that these were people who were not making money from this — this was truly an out-of-pocket, we-want-our-brother-to-survive thing — you kind of let it go.

“And then to see the connection made,” she added, “there is nothing like being on the front row — literally on the front row — and watching God’s kingdom respond to a request and deliver.”

## ‘HE NEEDED SOMETHING THAT I COULD GIVE’

When the ad ran, Melissa McFerrin, 30, lived in Searcy, Ark. — roughly 1,000 miles west of New Bern.

Her husband, Clay McFerrin, worked as a recruiter for Harding University’s Graduate School of

Business.

“We did get *The Christian Chronicle* at the house, and so when it came every month, I’d read it,” said Melissa McFerrin, a 2014 graduate of Freed-Hardeman University in Henderson, Tenn., where she majored in Bible missions.

“And really, the only way that I can describe it is that God pricked my heart that this was something that I could help with,” she added. “I had a brother in need, and I’ve been blessed with very good health all my life. He needed something that I could give.”

As she read the ad, tears streamed down her face.

McFerrin talked to her husband about it, and he supported her desire to check into it.

“There’s a variety of testing and procedures to go through prior to (donating a kidney), so we had plenty of time to think about it and pray about it and know that it was something we wanted to do,” she said.

Donor compatibility is established

through blood tests that look for matching blood types and antigens, according to Columbia University’s Department of Surgery. The overall health of the potential donor is also important.

Currently, 90,000 people are on the national transplant list for a donor kidney, according to [donatelife.net](http://donatelife.net).

“It’s pretty intense,” McFerrin said of the process after her initial blood tests. “I had an MRI, EKG, chest X-ray, blood work. They take 12 vials of blood, do all sorts of things on it. I don’t even know what all they look for.”

That comprehensive testing began in February 2020.

But then came the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020.

Suddenly, hospitals across the U.S. halted “nonessential” surgeries. As coronavirus cases raged, Birmingham’s kidney transplant was put on hold. In November 2020, Markman, 73, one of the elders who worked to save Birmingham’s life, died of complications from the coronavirus.

“Bob was another good, godly man,” said Hurst, his fellow elder. “We miss him a lot.”

## GENEROSITY AND FAITH

After a year’s delay, McFerrin remained intent on giving Birmingham one of her kidneys.

In February 2021, she resumed the testing process.

“I essentially had to re-up my testing,” she said. “So I did all the same things again.”

Eventually, she was confirmed as a match, and the surgery was scheduled for Sept. 15, 2021.

She felt a mix of joy and gratefulness.

“I’m a fixer by nature,” she said. “So this was a problem with a solution that I could effect, and that feels good. ... But I know for a fact — an absolute certainty — that it was very, very little me and very, very much God because we were a match, and the timing worked out.”

McFerrin still marvels at all the unlikely details that came together.

“Here I am several states away, and

there he is," she said. "And we've got the age difference and his sensitivity with the antibodies. But it did work. I happened to read that ad, and I can see God's hand throughout all of this."

### 'A BIG, BIG THING'

By the time of the surgery, the donor and her husband had moved to Iron City, Tenn. — just north of the Alabama state line.

That's closer to where Birmingham lives but still 750 miles away.

The couple attend the Chisholm Hills Church of Christ in Florence, Ala. Melissa McFerrin serves as the executive administrative assistant to Kirk Brothers, the president of Heritage Christian University in Florence. Clay McFerrin is Heritage's director of institutional and church research.

News that Melissa McFerrin planned to donate her kidney to a stranger surprised Felicia Plunket, a fellow Chisholm Hills member.

"You hear about people donating kidneys to family members," said Plunket, a mother of two adult daughters. "But to donate it to a perfect stranger is, to me, just so hard to do."

Giving a kidney at such a young age and having faith God will take care of you "is a big, big thing," the 52-year-old Christian added. "I was really impressed by that."

A kidney transplant qualifies as major surgery.

McFerrin's surgery occurred at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tenn., and then her kidney was flown to North Carolina for Birmingham's transplant.

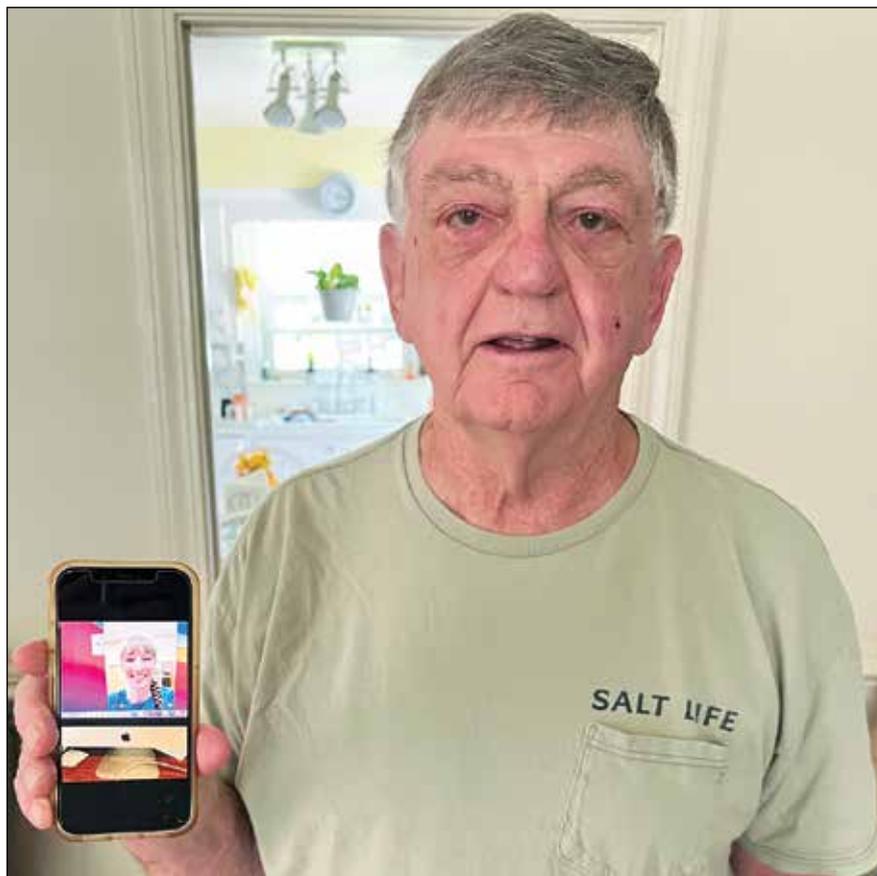
McFerrin spent two nights in the hospital and then headed home with her husband.

"You have to be careful for several weeks about not picking up heavy things because the surgery involves a number of incisions in the abdominal area," she said. "They give you lots of medicine to keep from coughing or vomiting or anything that would clench those muscles."

McFerrin didn't need to worry

**'You hear about people donating kidneys to family members. But to donate it to a stranger is, to me, just so hard to do.'**

**Felicia Plunket**, church member



BOBBY ROSS JR.

**Sam Birmingham took a screenshot of donor Melissa McFerrin during a video call.**

about cooking.

"I had the most amazing outpouring of support from our congregation at Chisholm Hills," she said. "The congregation banded together, and they made a plan, and everybody brought us food and prayed for us and talked to us."

She returned to work a week after the surgery.

A year later, the incision scars provide the only indication of the surgery.

"Except for the scars, I would never know that I'd done it," she said. "I feel I'm probably the healthiest I've ever been. Clay and I exercise regularly, and we're active, and I have not had any major impact on my level of activity or anything as a result."

### A NEW CHANCE AT LIFE

For Birmingham, the transplant changed everything: It gave him a new chance at a healthy life.

He said he's humbled that about two dozen *Chronicle* readers — not

just McFerrin — inquired about the possibility of donating a kidney after seeing the ad.

"The nurses and the doctors who worked on me at the hospital were just fantastic, I'm telling you," Birmingham said. "They did a really good job."

"And I'm just so, so thankful that I had the opportunity to get that kidney," he added. "I tell you, I don't think I'd be here right now if I hadn't got it."

For years, Birmingham has served as the cook at a "pig pickin'" event for Christian men in eastern North Carolina. Now, he's able to assume that role — which involves barbecuing a whole hog — once again.

"Sam has been a pillar in the church for a long, long time," Hurst said, sitting beside Birmingham on the transplant recipient's living room couch. "We just could not stand the thought of losing him without giving it a good fight."

### 'I WANT TO KNOW THE NAME'

Unless a donor has a preexisting relationship with the recipient, medical officials protect the giver's

identity.

So for months, Birmingham didn't know who gave him the kidney.

After the surgery, he wrote a letter of thanks to his donor. He gave it to his nurses and asked them to make sure she received it.

"But the catch is, they couldn't give it to her until it had been at least 90 days after the transplant," he said. "So after the 91st day, I started on them again. I said, 'I want to know the name of that person. I want to be able to connect.'

"And they said, 'Well, we'll have to see if she wants to talk to you.'"

Finally, they gave him her name and telephone number.

"I called her, and we talked for a long time," he said. "Oh gosh, I was just so thankful. It's unbelievable what a difference it's made. I was just telling her how much I appreciated her."

"She told me, 'Well, I read the article that was written, and it touched my heart enough to know that I had to do something.'"

After talking on the phone, Birmingham and McFerrin later visited face to face in a video conversation. The *Chronicle* did not receive news of the transplant until earlier this summer, via an email from McFerrin.

"The story is not about us," she said in that message, "but about the love and prayer of Christian family who have walked beside us — and about the God who orchestrated it all."

"Maybe our experience, with its amazing blessings on both sides, will encourage another to listen to God's prompting in his or her heart and change someone's life forever."

Birmingham and McFerrin still have not met in person.

They made plans to meet earlier this year during a layover in Charlotte, N.C., as McFerrin and her husband returned home from a mission trip to Peru. But flight changes scrapped those plans.

"I would love to meet him," McFerrin said. "We just haven't been able to yet."

When it does happen, she anticipates an abundance of tears and prayers. And a hug.

A very special hug.

**BOBBY ROSS JR.** is editor-in-chief of *The Christian Chronicle*. Contact [bobby@christianchronicle.org](mailto:bobby@christianchronicle.org). Follow him on Twitter at [@bobbyross](https://twitter.com/bobbyross).

## EDITORIAL

# Don't reduce Scripture to partisan arguments



**T**hank you for remembering us.”

That was the message we received, over and over, as we reached out to Christians in Russia for this month's front-page story.

Since the war in Ukraine began in late February, we've shared stories of grace under fire — from the besieged Eastern European nation and from countries that have experienced an influx of refugees. We've seen Churches of Christ show love and mercy to the most vulnerable. We're proud of our Ukrainian brothers and sisters and thankful for all of those who have stepped up to serve.

But we haven't written much about our brothers and sisters in Russia — during the war and, to be honest, for much of the past decade.

During the Cold War, brave missionaries and ministries including Eastern European Mission planted gospel seeds in the communist world, smuggling tiny Bibles across the border. As the

Iron Curtain fell, a new generation of missionaries found fertile soil in the former Soviet Union. In eastern Ukraine — and across the border in Russia — the message took hold and thrived.

**'In a way, what's happening now in Russia feels more dangerous than the Soviet threat.'**

But the atmosphere changed in Russia as Vladimir Putin stoked the fires of nationalism. The Russian Orthodox church has become a sort of state religion, and other faith groups often are viewed with suspicion.

In a way, what's happening now in Russia feels more dangerous than the Soviet threat. The Russian president has weaponized the language of faith and morality, positioning his war as a crusade against the liberal West.

We half-expected our Russian brethren to be caught up in the rhetoric, the propaganda.

Instead, there was a feeling of sincere thanks that we were reaching out at all.

This is Putin's war, a missionary

to Russia stressed, and we err when we lump all Russians into the same heap. He cited blistering attacks made by Ukrainian Christians on social media that label Russians as “pampered darlings” and “miserable cowards” who flee to their borders rather than flooding to the Kremlin to depose their ruler.

Some Russian Christians have relatives in separatist-held eastern Ukraine who have endured shelling by Ukrainian forces. Firing shots across Facebook doesn't help.

The missionary likened the status of Churches of Christ in Russia to the apostle Paul's house arrest described in Acts 28. Despite arriving in Rome as a prisoner, Paul lived in his own rented house and “proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ — with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31).

“The church in Russia has done wonderful works,” the missionary said, “and continues to do so since the war began — orphans ministries, helping battered women, singing schools, online education of

leaders, huge children's camps — despite the limitations.”

“While the churches in Russia are not under arrest or illegal (depending upon the local authorities and local Orthodox church) it's like they are quasi-legal. But the Gospel is unchained and they are mostly unhindered in preaching Jesus. People are coming to Christ and the Kingdom is expanding in spite of this.”

The missionary concluded, “Thanks for remembering and writing about the church in Russia.”

“Remembering” is a big deal. As we consider our brothers and sisters in Russia, we're reminded of another kind of captivity described in Scripture. Genesis 8:1 tells us that “*God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded.*”

Send your wind, your Spirit, your *ruach*, Father. Change the hearts of Cold Warriors and heal our land. Bring peace to your people. — **Erik Tryggstad, for the Editorial Board**

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## FROM OUR READERS

# Readers debate ministerial crisis

As a fellow minister's child, I applaud you for highlighting this important issue facing the Lord's church ("Our ministerial crisis has arrived," Page 31, September).

Your first suggestion (develop future ministers from childhood) should be read as a call to action for elders, deacons, ministers and parents. We must be purposeful in the Christian development of our young people, and it should begin with looking at ourselves in the mirror. Are we setting the proper examples for children to crave the Lord's ministry?

**MATTHEW GUY** | Fort Mill, S.C.

John Edmerson's piece on the ministerial crisis was an interesting article with interesting suggestions.

But my personal question: Is it really where the problem lies?

We have professionalized ministry, taking responsibilities away from individual members and handing them over to trained professionals.

We seem to have lost the idea of "the priesthood of all believers." Ads for ministers now read like those for any other profession with degree requirements, wage statements (commensurate with experience), etc.

We now have headhunter agencies with focus groups. Our congregation went through the process of hiring a new minister. Our school district had just gone through the process of hiring a new superintendent. There was no difference in the process!

**RUDY SCHELLEKENS** | Muscatine, Iowa

Regarding John Edmerson's third point (increase scholarships at colleges and universities associated with Churches of Christ), Faulkner University in Montgomery, Ala., now offers full-tuition scholarships to undergrad Bible majors.

Faulkner strives to be part of the solution. I appreciate your support and help to spread the word about this opportunity to train ministers.

**WILLIAM COOPER** | Montgomery, Ala.

### Youth and Outreach Minister - Christoval, Texas

**Christoval Church of Christ** is seeking an evangelistic-minded minister to help us impact the community through study, outreach, and transformation. Under the supervision of our lead minister, the minister's primary responsibility is to develop, coordinate, and implement the youth and outreach ministries. In addition, the role will include responsibility in the following areas: service times, outreach, social media, and youth/family. We are seeking a man with strong Biblical knowledge, excellent communication, the gift of evangelism, and a servant heart. Call or email for further information:

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### Full-time Youth Minister - Ovilla, Texas

The **Ovilla Church of Christ** is seeking a full-time Youth Minister with a passion for discipling young people with the gospel. The young adult male candidate needs to have a heart for working and relating well with youth between the ages of 12 to 18, their parents, and other adult volunteers in the church. We are seeking someone who has an excellent knowledge of the scriptures and is able to teach the young people God's Word and how it relates to them in their lives. A degree from a Christian university is preferred but not required. Ability to lead singing is a plus. We are a congregation of about 125 families with an active youth group of about 25 teens. We are a "bedroom" community in the DFW area, about 25 miles south of Dallas, Texas. Interested applicants should contact:

**Michael Elrod, Minister** • Cell: 972-515-9689 • Email: [melrod55@gmail.com](mailto:melrod55@gmail.com)

or contact one of the elders: **Steven Grosshuesch, Huey Hamilton, or Johnny Knight** at the church: 972-617-7447

### Full-time Minister - Detroit, Mich.

The **Wyoming Avenue Church of Christ**, located in Detroit, Mich., is searching for a dynamic, scripturally sound, and spiritually led individual to fill the position of full-time minister. The new minister will continue the work of our present Minister of 45 years, Dallas Walker, Jr. Our new minister will work closely with our Elders and Deacons to enrich the congregation, help develop a more youth-based ministry, and spread the gospel to the surrounding community. Our congregation is approximately 400 members strong and has a wide-reaching online audience through Facebook and YouTube. For the last 60 years, we have been a "growing, peaceful congregation striving to serve God and mankind." We do provide a competitive salary plus benefits package and will help with moving costs. If you feel you are the right person to help us fulfill our mission and would like to apply, please send your resume to:

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**Wyoming Avenue Church of Christ** • 20131 Wyoming Avenue • Detroit, MI 48221

Attention: Minister Search Group

### Full-time Minister - Oklahoma City, Okla.

The **Way Community Church of Christ** is seeking resumes for a full-time minister. Candidates must be doctrinally sound with a minimum of four years (FT/PT asst.) preaching experience, committed to teaching the Word of God, equipping members to serve the cause of Christ, and setting in order things the congregation is lacking, including elders and deacons. Interested candidates must submit their resume with references (mentor/endorser) and cover letter to:

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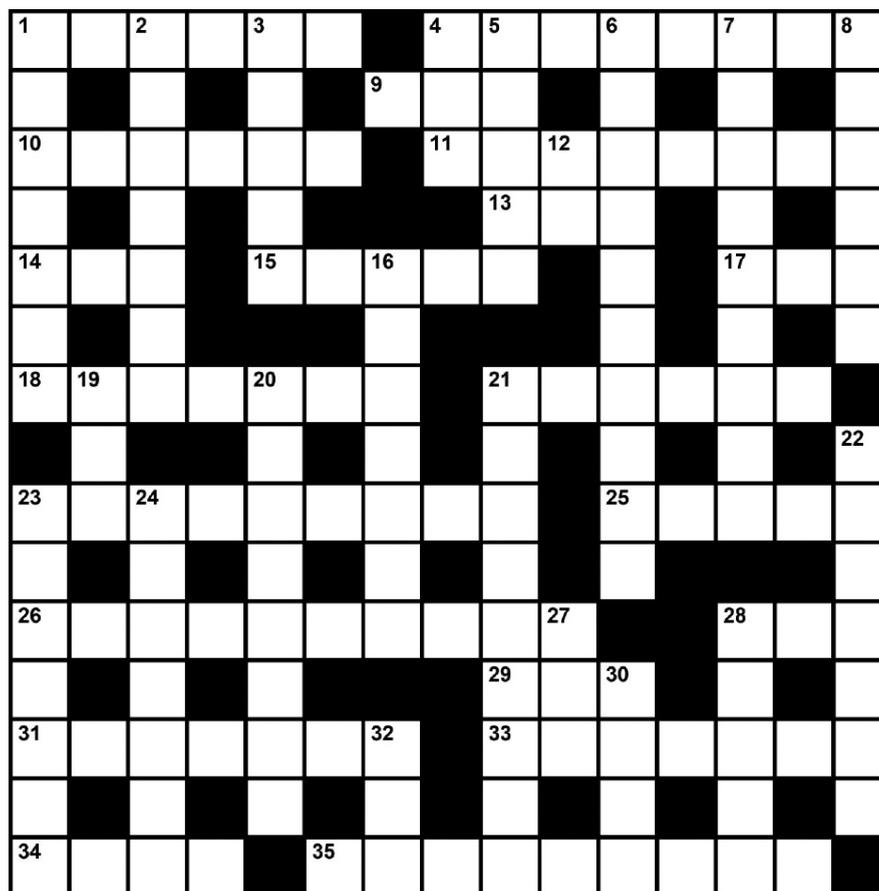


# The Christian Chronicle Crossword

By Myles Mellor | [www.ilovecrosswords.com](http://www.ilovecrosswords.com)

## ACROSS

- Bible book about Hadassah.
- "You also were with that \_\_\_\_\_, Jesus,' she said" (Mark 14:67, New International Version).
- Medical expert, in slang.
- Chariot-of-fire prophet.
- "A king delights in a wise servant, but a \_\_\_\_\_ servant arouses his fury" (Proverbs 14:35, NIV).
- Arrival time, for short.
- It flows from a pen.
- Fatigued.
- It becomes a chicken.
- Epistles.
- Center.
- "It is \_\_\_\_\_ to have zeal without knowledge, and the one who acts hastily makes poor choices" (Proverbs 19:2, New English Translation).
- Antiquated.
- "... the younger son gathered together all he had and traveled to a distant country, where he \_\_\_\_\_ his estate" (Luke 15:13, Christian Standard Bible).
- Learn.
- Brazilian city where the Christ the Redeemer statue is situated.
- New Testament writing.
- "Remember this O Lord, the enemy has scoffed. And a foolish and \_\_\_\_\_ people has spurned your name" (Psalm 74:18, Amplified Bible).
- Indian dish.
- "I am about to send my messenger, who will clear the way before me" (Malachi 3:1, NET).



- instead of his son (Genesis 22:13).
- Praise and glorify.
- Words of rejection.
- Suffered quietly.
- "Now the spirits gathered the kings and their armies to the place that is called \_\_\_\_\_ in Hebrew" (Revelation 16:16, NET).
- Made weaker.
- Funeral speech.
- \_\_\_\_\_ work.
- "... the God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself \_\_\_\_\_, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Peter 5:10, NET).
- Historic time period.
- "From \_\_\_\_\_ I have been fashioned, from the beginning, from before the world existed" (Proverbs 8:23, NET).
- "However, there is a God in heaven who reveals \_\_\_\_\_" (Daniel 2:28, NET).
- It was burned in the temples.
- "I will make nations of you, and kings will \_\_\_\_\_ from you" (Genesis 17:6, NET).
- Give sustenance to.
- Lower the lights.

## BIBLE BOWLING

### Name that psalm

THERE ARE 150 PSALMS in the book of Psalms. Match the following psalm numbers with the clues below: 2, 8, 14, 19, 22, 23, 42, 51, 117, 119.

- Longest (176 verses).
- "As the deer pants for the water"
- "Create in me a clean heart ..."
- "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
- "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name!"
- "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"
- "The law of the Lord is perfect"
- "The Lord is my shepherd"
- "Why do the nations rage?"
- Shortest (two verses).

FROM THE THREE words given, identify the book of the Bible.

- Beginnings, Abraham, Joseph.
  - Jeremiah, Sorrow, Jerusalem.
  - Paul, Letter, Onesimus.
  - Preacher, Meaning, Vanity.
- ANSWERS, crossword solution on Page 38.
- "So Simon Peter went aboard and pulled the net to \_\_\_\_\_." It was full of large fish" (John 21:11, NET).
  - Reveal.
  - Mother of all the living.

## DOWN

- Book after Lamentations.
- Where a ram was caught for Abraham to offer as a sacrifice

# Word Find: The gospel of Luke

By Betty Hollister | The Christian Chronicle

BETHLEHEMARYAEUGOGANYSLAWFULDDNIKNAMUANREPACAPRORMNGORMOORGEDIRBORMPIRRREIEESIRAHPARABLEIEETEESSELISTENINGIALVDP LATJSNHDISEASESSTEERT EREELEIOTYBTIHCAGOGU SENCPRAMPMPHNHTLYAFYRSDTTAONMISRAGLOEIFSDTESYEERIAHDEIEIRDGLOSEISULRDGHCEHRSFSJSLNPESREINERARHAACILEGNAEIMSOLREIRAGIHFULLYRUJNIYEHIEVBRUACATCHTERAZANRLTTBATASEELILAGNIZITPABUNIELIZABETHSUTNADNETTAE THEOPHILUSSSNOITARENEG

Find the following words from the Gospel of Luke. The unused 32 letters form a statement about the purpose of the book. (Find the answer on Page 34.)

- ABRAHAM
- ANGELIC
- ANNAS
- APPEARED
- ATTENDANT
- AUTHORITY
- BAPTIZING
- BARREN
- BETHLEHEM
- BLAMELESS
- BLESSED
- BRIDEGROOM
- CAPERNAUM
- CATCH
- COLLECTORS
- DISEASES
- EDGES
- ELIZABETH
- ENEMIES
- ENTER
- EYESIGHT
- FREEDOM
- FULLY
- GABRIEL
- GALILEE
- GENERATIONS
- GENTILES
- GRAPES
- HEAVENLY
- HUMILITY
- INJURY
- ISAIAH
- LAUGHED
- LAWFUL
- LISTENING
- LYING
- MANKIND
- MARY
- MESSAGE
- NAZARETH
- PARABLE
- PHARISEE
- PRAISING
- REJECTED
- REVEALED
- SABBATH
- SCRIPTURES
- SYNAGOGUE
- TEMPLE
- TETRARCH
- THEOPHILUS
- TIBERIUS
- VIRGIN
- WORSHIPS
- WRITTEN
- ZECHARIAH



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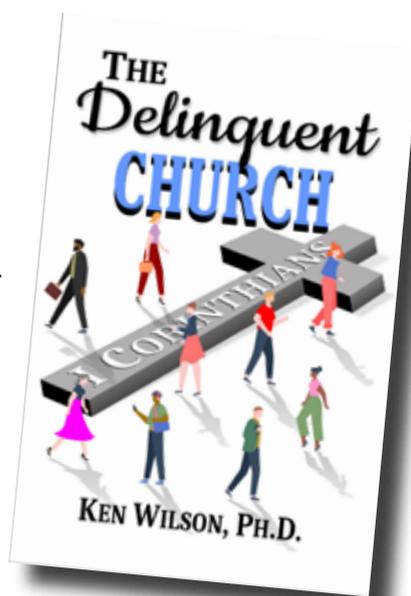
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by Ken Wilson, Ph.D.

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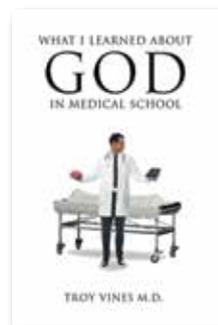
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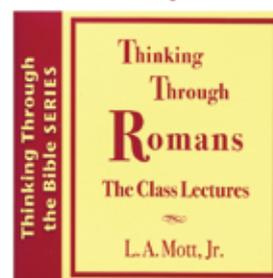


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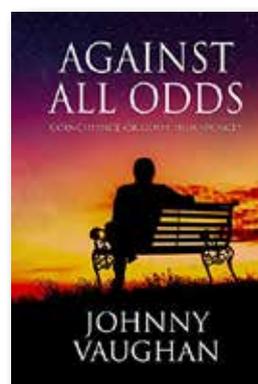
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by Johnny Vaughan

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## NEW AND NOTEWORTHY

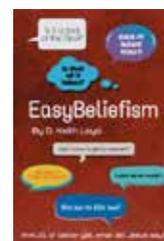
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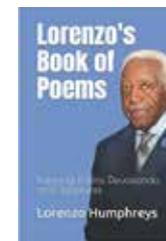
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# New book explores where Churches of Christ fit

Churches of Christ struggle to express our place in Christian heritage. Are we Catholic? No, but we believe in one apostolic church. Are we Protestants? Not exactly, but that seems closer to the mark. Are we the first-century church restored after a 17-century hiatus? We often say so, but it feels like amnesia to pretend the intervening years never happened.

This question is the riddle Leonard Allen tackles in his latest book, **"In the Great Stream: Imagining Churches of Christ in the Christian Tradition."** Allen, dean of the College of Bible and Ministry at Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tenn., brings his extensive knowledge of church history to the task of articulating a historically meaningful identity for the Churches of Christ. He began this discussion in "Discovering our Roots: The Ancestry of the Church

of Christ" (1988).

Allen's repertoire is deep and wide. "In the Great Stream" draws from church historians such as Jaroslav Pelikan, Thomas Oden and Everett Ferguson as well as philosophers like Charles Taylor. The result is three nuanced conclusions: First, Churches of Christ do not neatly fit into the historical Protestant category. Second, we cannot ignore the historical context of our identity. And third, we must embrace our larger Christian heritage to maintain any identity.

Allen portrays "tradition" as a living voice rather than an iron shackle. Christian tradition (or orthodoxy) is equally threatening to both conservative and progressive voices among Churches of Christ. For conservatives, Christian history reminds us that the status quo developed a few decades ago is merely a blip in the two millennia story of Christianity. It is hard to insist on "the way we have always done it"

when "always" accounts for only 3 percent of the total. For progressives, history reminds us that orthodoxy has stood largely unchanged in its core tenets until now. Thus it is hubris to redefine Christian thought radically and cancel the faithful voices of the past.

By way of critique, I would mention that Allen is narrowly focusing on the earliest centuries of church history. Like the old motto Anglican theologians often recite, Allen is influenced by one canon, two testaments, three creeds, four general councils and five centuries. Medieval Christianity is a difficult period, but it seems unfair to root our heritage in Irenaeus and Tertullian ("near the head of the stream") without hearing Aquinas, Anselm and Francis.

That said, I wholeheartedly recommend "In the Great Stream" to anyone wanting a better grasp of the shape our identity might take. Taking a look at our past will give us courage and insight into the murky future of Christianity, specifically Churches of Christ.

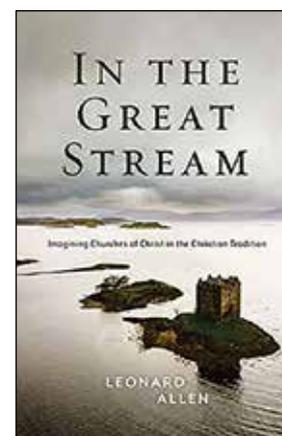
As Allen explains, our churches must learn to be confessors of the ancient faith. "Such confession, in a culture of lightness where truth is mostly private and personal," he writes, "is deeply counter to the dominant spirit of our times and deeply formative to our faith."

**BENJAMIN J. WILLIAMS** is the senior minister for the Central Church of Christ in Ada, Okla. A contributor for *We Speak* ministries, he specializes in Christian worldview, apologetics and faith-science dialogue.

## In Print



Benjamin J. Williams



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**Oct. 3 Getting to the Root of Forgiveness Virtual Workshop.** See mkt.com/robnic-enterprise.

**Oct. 4-7 Abundant Living Retreat.** Branson, Mo. See abundantlivingseniors.com.

**Oct. 13-14 ACU Summit.** Abilene, Texas. See acu.edu/summit.

**Oct. 14-16 United Sisters Symposium (USS) — The Lion King, Daniel Chapter 6.** Torrance, Calif. See empoweredincorporated.com.

**Oct. 14-30 Gospel Chariot Missions U.S.A. Tour.** Various cities. See gospelchariot.org.

**Oct. 18-20 KERYGMA at OC.** Edmond, Okla. See bit.ly/3QwgUE4.

**Oct. 21-22 24 Hours of Prayer Worldwide Zoom Event.** See eventbrite.com/e/24-hours-of-prayer-2022-tickets-411740937227.

**Oct. 21 Mission Resource Network's United Pursuit Dinner.** Irving, Texas. See www.mrnet.org/events/2022/missionsdinner.

**Oct. 24 Christian Homes & Family Services Lifemark Dinner.** Tyler, Texas. See christianhomes.com.

**Oct. 25 Christian Homes & Family Services Lifemark Dinner.** Abilene, Texas. See christianhomes.com.

**Nov. 4-6 The Agape Conference.** Little Rock, Ark. See theagapeconference.org.

**Nov. 6 Edmond Church of Christ's Centennial Celebration.** Edmond, Okla. See edmondchurchofchrist.com.

**Nov. 13 22nd Annual Churches of Christ Orphan Sunday.** See orphanslifeline.org/orphan-sunday.

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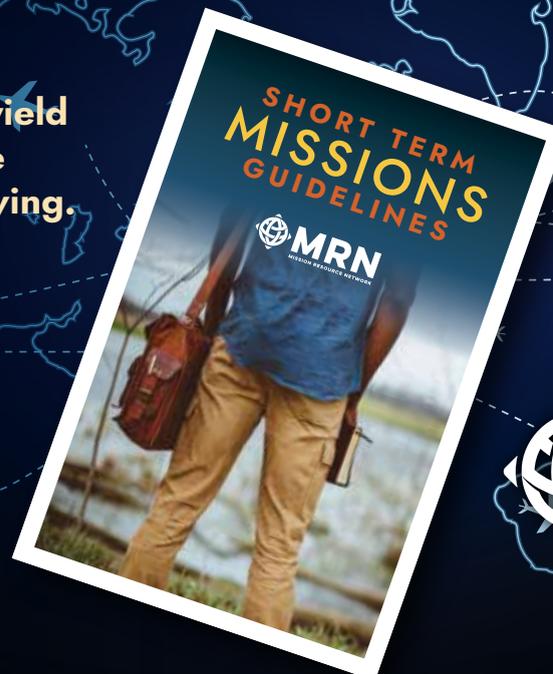
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