

# MISSION

**W**e believe that the South Central Conference Office exists to strengthen and support the mission and ministry of the churches in the South Central Conference. Therefore, the South Central Conference Church Ministries & Mission Development Department exists to assist pastors and their church leaders in leading their churches to become more Spirit-led and Mission-driven. We do this by providing pastors and their church leaders with ministry coaching and support in five fundamental areas of Church Development: 1) **Prayer**, 2) **Mission**, 3) **Spiritual Gifts**, 4) **Small Groups**, and 5) **Ministries**. When engaged sequentially, these become one fivefold strategy for leading churches to become more Spirit-led and Mission-driven.

## Rethinking Baptism:

## From Graduation to Initiation in a Covenant Community

*As our conference engages in Pentecost 2025, many may find themselves considering the proper time to baptize interests. To help address this subject, we are featuring an article by Dr. Gordon S. Jones, senior pastor of Riverside Chapel in Nashville TN.*

**I**n an age defined by individualism, the sacred practice of baptism risks being reduced to a mere personal milestone, the culmination of a solitary spiritual journey. Yet the biblical witness offers a

more expansive vision: baptism as the threshold into a covenant community bound by shared practices, beliefs, and mission. This perspective invites us to reimagine baptism not as a graduation ceremony but as an initiation rite, the doorway through which new believers enter the living body of Christ in the world.

### **The Challenge of Individualistic Faith**

The predominant culture of individualism has profoundly shaped

contemporary Christian practice. Faith is frequently framed as a private matter between the individual and God, with community participation seen as optional rather than essential. This individualistic lens transforms baptism into something akin to a spiritual achievement, a public demonstration of personal conviction rather than incorporation into a new social reality.

When converts are prepared

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# THE SCC CHURCH MINISTRIES & MISSION DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

## Rethinking Baptism, Continued from page 1

primarily for "graduation," they often receive instruction focused narrowly on personal beliefs and behaviors. Catechesis becomes a checklist of doctrinal affirmations rather than formation into a communal way of life. The result is a faith that remains largely private, disconnected from the transformative power of Christian community.

This individualistic approach manifests in a common sequence: believe, behave, belong. Prospective Christians are expected to first adopt correct beliefs, then demonstrate appropriate behaviors, and only then are fully welcomed into belonging. Baptism serves as the certification that one has successfully completed these prerequisites.

### The Biblical Vision of Initiation

Scripture presents a markedly different understanding. Throughout the New Testament, baptism functions not as the culmination of a solitary journey but as entrance into "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9). The early church recognized that to become Christian meant being incorporated into a new community with its distinctive practices and shared mission.

When three thousand were baptized at Pentecost, Luke immediately notes that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Their baptism marked the beginning of participation in communal practices that would form their new identity.



Similarly, Paul's language of being "baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13) highlights baptism's function as incorporation into a living community rather than merely symbolizing individual conversion.

### From "Believe, Behave, Belong" to "Belong, Believe, Behave"

Reimagining baptism as initiation rather than graduation invites us to reconsider the sequence of Christian discipleship. Rather than requiring full doctrinal alignment and behavioral conformity before extending belonging, the early church often reversed this order: belong, believe, behave.

New converts were welcomed into the community's life, where immersion in shared practices gradually shaped their beliefs and behaviors. This approach acknowledges that faith formation happens primarily through participation in community rather than solely through intellectual assent to propositions.

This isn't to suggest diminishing the importance of confession of

faith in Jesus's atoning sacrifice or acknowledgment of his lordship. (Actually, this was the only prerequisite.) Rather, it recognizes that such belief takes root and flourishes within the soil of community. When someone is baptized into the covenant community, they are embraced while still growing in understanding and practice.

This shift alleviates the spiritual guilt that often accompanies the graduation model, where newly baptized believers feel pressure to demonstrate perfect alignment between behavior and baptismal vows. Instead, the community becomes the context for ongoing discipleship, providing both support and accountability for growth.

### The Covenant Community: Shared Practices and Mission

The covenant community into which baptism initiates believers is characterized by distinctive shared practices. These aren't merely optional activities but constitutive elements of Christian identity:

**Worship:** Regular gathering to praise God, hear Scripture, and celebrate the Lord's Supper

**Discipleship:** Intentional discipleship processes that nurture faith development

**Service:** Practical engagement in discovering, developing and deploying spiritual gifts to meet the needs of both community and neighbors

**Witness:** Collective proclamation of the gospel through word and deed

Baptism initiates believers into these communal practices, which then become the context for ongoing discipleship. By participating in these shared activities, newly baptized Christians discover their place within the body and how their unique gifts contribute to the whole.

Equally important, baptism incorporates individuals into the church's shared mission. From the moment of baptism, believers join a community commissioned to be "Christ's ambassadors" (2 Cor. 5:20) in the world. This collective purpose provides direction and meaning that transcends individual spiritual aims.

### Implications for Contemporary Practice

Recovering baptism's initiatory dimension carries significant implications for church practice today:

**1. Baptismal Preparation:** Preparation should emphasize not doctrinal understanding but initiation into community bound by shared practices, beliefs, and mission.

**2. Baptismal Liturgy:** The ceremony itself should highlight not just individual profession but communal reception. The congregation's role in welcoming new members deserves prominence.

**3. Post-Baptismal Discipleship:** Intentional pathways of discipleship for integrating newly baptized disci-

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ples into the full life of the community, recognizing that baptism begins rather than completes the journey of faith.

**4. Community Expectations:** The responsibilities of new disciples mutual care, participation in shared practices, contribution to common mission should be clearly communicated and supported.

### Conclusion

Rethinking baptism as initiation rather than graduation offers a vital corrective to individualistic Christianity. It recovers the biblical understanding that the Christian faith is fundamentally communal that we are not merely individual believers, but members of a covenant people bound to God and one another.

When baptism functions as the threshold into this covenant community, it transforms our understanding of Christian identity. We discover that Christianity is not merely what we believe or how we behave as individuals, but who we are together—the visible body of Christ in the world, united in shared practices, beliefs, and mission.

This perspective doesn't diminish personal faith but situates it within

its proper context: the community Jesus established to continue his presence and work in the world. Through the waters of baptism, we find not just personal salvation but our place in God's family—a community that nurtures our growth, receives our gifts, and sends us forth in shared mission. ■



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**Author's Note:** This article explores the theological concept of baptism as community initiation rather than addressing specific denominational practices regarding baptismal mode, recipients, or other disputed aspects. The core principle that baptism incorporates believers into a covenant community with shared practices and mission can inform various baptismal traditions.



# Uncomfortable with Our Comfort

**H**ow comfortable are we? Right now, in our city, a mother has to tell her child there's nothing to eat. A war veteran, someone who once stood ready to give his life for this country, sleeps on the streets. Millions of children live in substandard housing, hungry, wearing dirty clothes, sleeping on couches, floors, or even outside. Elderly men and women go without necessities, unable to afford heat in the winter, air conditioning in the summer, or life-saving medications. Families struggle, broken by poverty, abandoned by a system that is ineffective. How comfortable are we? We live in nice homes, surrounded by excess, throwing away food because we don't like the taste or served ourselves too much. We have closets overflowing with clothes, shoes, and accessories. We call ourselves Christians, disciples of Jesus, yet pass by people trapped in cycles of poverty, addiction, and broken dreams—people who fit the Bible's description of "the least of these." I hope we are uncomfortable. Uncomfortable in our comfort, uneasy with our abundance, disturbed by our indifference. If the gospel has truly changed us, how can we stay unmoved? If repentance is real, why does our response seem so incomplete? We read the Bible, we feel convicted, we cry out to God for change, yet too often, our actions don't align with our beliefs.

True repentance requires transformation. In Luke 3, John the Baptist preaches a baptism of repentance. People, convicted by his message, ask, "What shall we do?" His answer is simple but profound: "Whoever has two tunics should share with



*If the gospel has truly changed us, how can we stay unmoved? If repentance is real, why does our response seem so incomplete?*

someone who has none; whoever has food should do the same." Repentance isn't just about sorrow, it's about action. A changed heart produces changed behavior. Jesus echoes this truth in Luke 18, when the rich young ruler asks, "What must I do to be saved?" His response? "Sell all you have and give to the poor." He wasn't saying wealth itself is evil, but that faith must bear fruit. Works don't save us, but they prove the authenticity of our faith. James 2 makes it plain: if someone is hungry or without clothing, and all you offer are empty words, "Go in peace, be warm, be filled," but do nothing to help, your faith is meaningless. Isaiah 58 takes it further, condemning worship that ignores justice and service, showing that true devotion to God includes caring for the suffer-

ing. As believers, we must bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Serving others isn't optional, it's essential. Ministry isn't just preaching or distributing literature. It's living faith through action. The character of the church isn't measured by how many sermons we hear but by how many lives we touch. A Christlike life is our most powerful testimony. We are called to radical generosity. Imagine if we truly lived out the gospel. If we saw every need as an opportunity to demonstrate Christ's love. If our community recognized our church not by its building or its programs, but by its compassion and service. Imagine if we lived each day seeking out ways to ease suffering, knowing that in serving others, we serve Christ Himself. There's still time. Time to make a difference. Time to impact this city. Time to step into the community and be the church.

So, I ask again: *How comfortable are we?* I hope uncomfortable enough to act. ■



Pastor  
**Troy Brand**, Co-Leader,  
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Ministry

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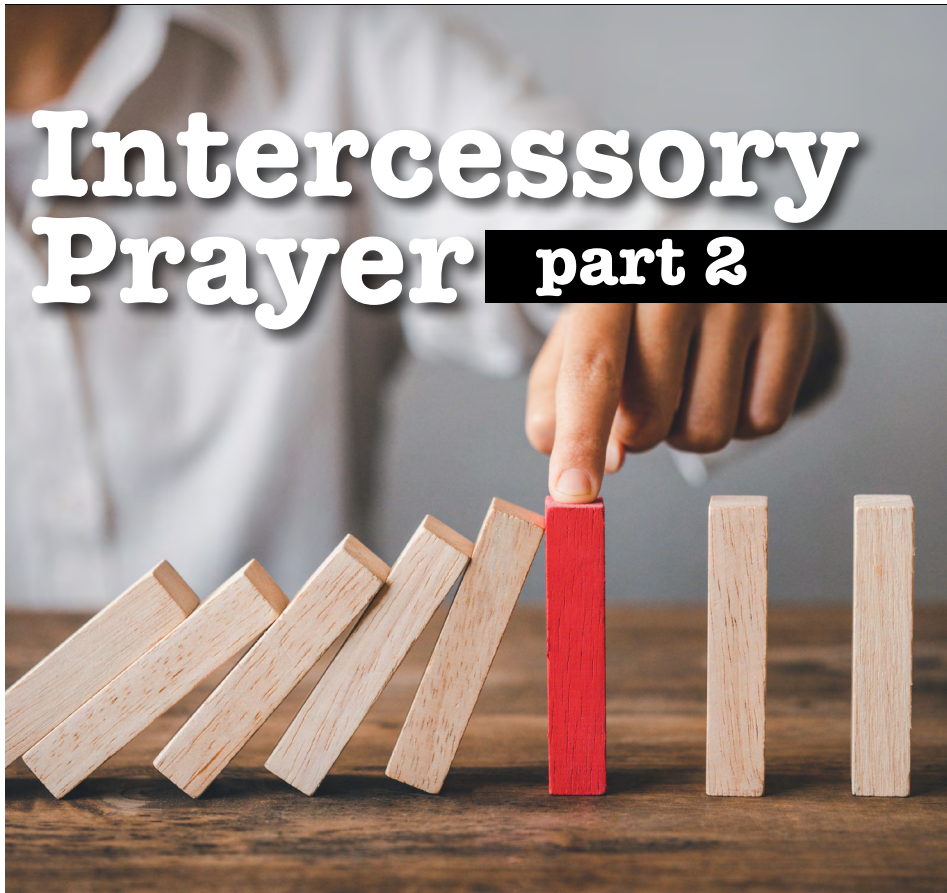
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# Intercessory Prayer

## part 2



*“Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them,”* Hebrews 7:25

*“He was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors,”* Isaiah 53:12

As we stated at the beginning, intercession is praying for others and their salvation. It's allowing God to do things that He would not do otherwise. The reality is that intercession is the ministry that God has given each of us. And intercession allows Him to bless the world in ways that He could not if we did not pray. Our prayers can change the lives of others and change the world.

We begin to lift up others in prayer so that the Holy Spirit can permeate their hearts and change their minds toward God. God needs our prayers

to aid in His work, not because He is not powerful enough without us, but because He has voluntarily limited Himself to allow humanity to participate in the salvation of the world. The birthplace of intercessory prayer is in the heart of God! Just think, if church members were to intercede for the world, what a change there would be. Souls would be won to the kingdom of God and we could hasten His soon coming!

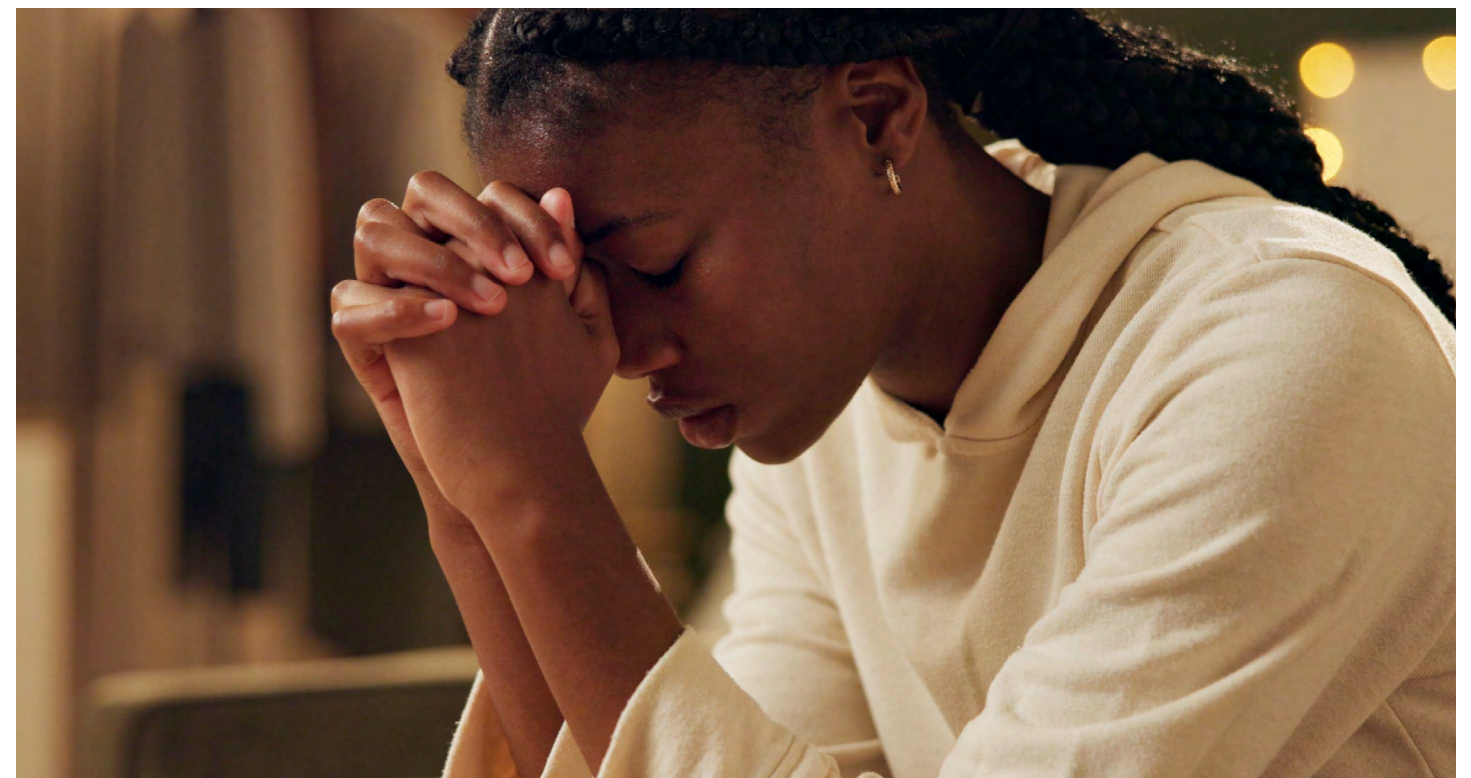
Ellen White asserts that, “As we seek to win others to Christ, bearing the burden of souls in our prayers, our own hearts will throb with the quickening influence of God's grace; our own affections will glow with more divine fervor; our whole Christian life will be more of a reality, more earnest, more prayerful,” *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 354.

The grace of God will flow to us, through us and for us as we intercede for others. It will give us power

to fight the devil with prayer! But intercession is much more than merely praying for others. Interceding is engaging in actual battle. The battle is with the forces of evil! The apostle Paul admonishes us to put on the whole armor of God, because “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places,” Ephesians 6:12. The apostle was a person who prayed and interceded for others. He did not believe prayer to be some kind of psychotherapy that would make him feel better. He believed that, through prayer, he could touch the heart of God. He was convinced God would work miracles through prayer.

Moses believed in prayer and what God could do for His people! Look at Exodus 32:11-14, “And Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, LORD, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand? Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it forever. And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.”

Moses intercedes for the children of Israel. He had interwoven his life into their lives. They were one. From the book, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 319, “As Moses interceded for Israel, his timidity was lost in his deep interest



and love for those for whom he had, in the hands of God, been the means of doing so much. The Lord listened to his pleadings, and granted his unselfish prayer. God had proved His servant; He had tested his faithfulness and his love for that erring, ungrateful people, and nobly had Moses endured the trial. His interest in Israel sprang from no selfish motive. The prosperity of God's chosen people was dearer to him than personal honor, dearer than the privilege of becoming the father of a mighty nation. God was pleased with his faithfulness, his simplicity of heart, and his integrity, and He committed to him, as a faithful shepherd, the great charge of leading Israel to the Promised Land.”

In his intercession for them, he pleads three things with God. First, he pleads the Lord's integrity. Israel was still His people and he had done so much for them. He would not give up on them now. God's name was at stake. Second, he pleads the Lord's honor. If God destroyed them, what would the surrounding nations think of Him? They would rejoice and their accusations would prove true, that instead of bringing them into the

wilderness to serve God, He brought them there to destroy them. Third, he pleads the Lord's word or promises. God had promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that He would give them the land of promise, flowing with milk and honey. God's word was now at stake. Would He renege on what He said? Because of his interceding for the people, God turned from His wrath and spared the people.

In Ezekiel 22:30, God sought a man to stand in the gap, but found none. No one interceded for the people and their sins! This text lets us know that intercession is God inspired. The Bible says in Ezekiel 33:11,

“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?”

Abraham interceded for Sodom, asking the Lord to spare the righteous if there could be found at least ten righteous people. He begins asking God to spare the city if 50 people could be found. He finishes with ten. The Lord says yes, He would spare them. Ellen White writes,

“Love for perishing souls inspired Abraham's prayer. While he loathed

the sins of that corrupt city, he desired that the sinners might be saved. His deep interest for Sodom shows the anxiety that we should feel for the impenitent. We should cherish hatred of sin, but pity and love for the sinner. All around us are souls going down to ruin as hopeless, as terrible, as that which befell Sodom.” *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 140.

Our prayer must not be self-centered. It must arise not only because we feel our own need as a burden which we must lay upon God, but also because we are bound up in love for our fellow men that we feel their need as acutely as our own.

The apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2:4,

“Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”

Intercessory prayer is giving God the opportunity to step into the lives of people that we want to see saved in God's kingdom! ■



Pastor  
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# UPPER ROOM REVIVAL IN SMALL CHURCH MISSION-DRIVEN SPIRIT-LED CHURCHES



It has been my honor to work with some small congregations in the southern regions of our conference territory in relationship to the **Mission Driven Spirit -Led Initiative** as well as preparing for a **Pentecost 2025 Evangelism** explosion. We started a unique journey with three churches (one two-church district in Mississippi and one church in Alabama). I want to highlight how small churches are uniquely positioned to be agile, close-knit, and personal — the perfect environment for an **Upper Room** movement to erupt and lead to a community-shaking evangelism explosion.

In the Fall of 2024, **Pastor William C. Jordan** of the TriCity SDA Church in Prattville, AL and **Pastor Clarence Norman** of the Morning Star SDA Church/Port Gibson 1st SDA Church in Vicksburg and Port Gibson, Mississippi respectively agreed to hold a joint Upper Room Revival using Dennis Smith's book on The Baptism of the Holy Spirit led by yours truly. These three churches met on Wednesday evenings for 12 weeks. The results were amazing.

Here are some things that came out of this Upper Room Revival Experience. We learned to:

## 1. Cultivate a Hunger for God's Presence

Small churches can experience a transformative **Upper Room** moment by developing a collective hunger and thirst for God's presence. This means prioritizing **prayer, worship**, and the **Word** above programs and routines.

The early church gathered continuously in prayer and unity before Pentecost. These three churches were encouraged to set aside time for **focused, corporate prayer** and to wait on the Lord together.

## 2. Embrace Unity and Expectation

One of the most critical dynamics of the Upper Room was unity. Believers were in one accord, expecting God to move. These small churches were encouraged to nurture relationships,

resolve conflicts, and pursue spiritual unity. When believers come together with expectation and a shared purpose, they create an atmosphere ripe for the Spirit's outpouring.

## 3. Teach and Prepare for the Power of the Holy Spirit

Many believers are not walking in boldness simply because they have not been taught. So, we encouraged openness to the gifts of the Spirit and laid a biblical foundation for Spirit-filled living.

## 4. Make Room for the Supernatural

We allowed the Holy Spirit to move during services by creating space for **testimony, prophetic words, healing**, and **spontaneous prayer**. We encouraged the churches to remove rigid structures that may restrict the

flow of God's Spirit. When people encounter the supernatural in truth and love, it sparks a passion to share Jesus and a burning desire to participate in evangelistic endeavors.

## 5. Send People Out Intentionally

Pentecost wasn't just **about power**; it was **about purpose**. The Spirit empowered the believers to witness. Small churches should equip every believer to be a witness in their sphere of influence. Practical evangelism training, neighborhood outreaches, and local missions can be catalysts for explosive growth.

## 6. Use of a Prayer Walk Focused Strategy

Prayer walks in and around the community can connect the church's heart to its mission field. As members begin to intercede for their neighbors by name, hearts soften and divine opportunities for evangelism arise. The Holy Spirit often uses intercession to break spiritual barriers.

## 7. Encourage Personal Testimonies

All members may not be preachers, but they can be powerful witnesses when they share their own story. We encouraged the members of each of the churches to know, practice, and

share their testimony in 2-3 minutes. A personal encounter with Christ becomes a compelling evangelistic tool when spoken with humility and boldness.

## 8. Foster a Culture of Obedience

The **Upper Room** experience came after Jesus instructed His followers to wait in Jerusalem. **Obedience preceded outpouring**. In this revival we emphasized the importance of obedience to the Spirit's leading, even in small decisions. This obedience allows a church to remain on the Spirit-led track. A church that listens and acts is one that grows.

## 9. Keep the Fire Burning Through Discipleship

Our Upper Room experience ignited the flame, but we realized that discipleship fans it into growth. New converts from an evangelism explosion need to be nurtured and trained. We reminded them that as small churches they must build a structure of follow-up, mentorship, and community.

## 10. Trust God for Increase in His Way and Time

We reminded these churches that the **power is in the seed**, not in the

size of the church. Small churches focused on Spirit-led obedience can trust God for supernatural outcomes. It's never about **numbers**; it's about **obedience, surrender**, and **mission**. The early church started with 120 members; but those few members turned the world upside down through the Holy Spirit.

This Upper Room Revival led to two major evangelistic explosions. The first took place in March of 2025 in **Vicksburg, Mississippi** where I had the privilege to be the revivalist and Pastor Norman the lead administrator. The second meeting took place in April in **Prattville, Alabama** where Pastor Jordan was both organizer and revivalist. These two revivals welcomed 20 new believers to God's church. All of this was a result of three small churches that were willing to be **Mission Driven and Spirit-led**. ■



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