

Mission partnerships take shape at Ascent gathering

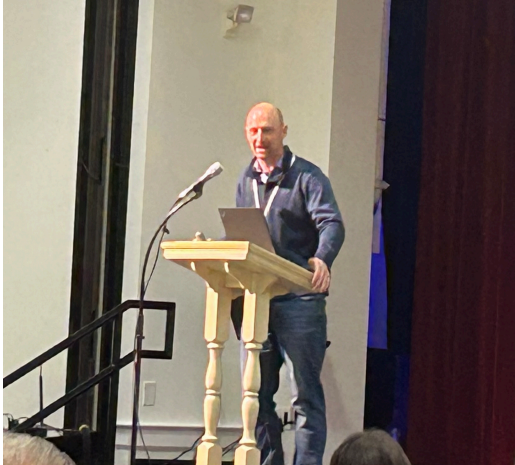
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(ALEXANDRIA, Va.)—A “movement” focused on reengaging North America with the gospel that has been brewing for almost a decade is beginning to take a more defined shape, and Texas Baptists have quite a few seats at the table.

Dennis Wiles, pastor of First Baptist Church in Arlington and chair of the Ascent council, welcomed around 200 invited participants—called curators—to the second formative gathering of Ascent.

When asked when the movement began, Wiles said he “would say it began when Jesus ascended into the heavens and gave the church this message and this mission.” However, the Ascent council, a group of eight at the time, first began conversations in 2016.

The initial group included Texas and Virginia Baptists, who felt like they’d lost their denominational home beyond their local and state affiliations—particularly the national and international missions agencies of their denomination.



Chris Backert provides background on the Ascent movement at the network's second curators gathering. (Photo / Calli Keener)

It became clear in the years of dreaming about this new network, a sense of disenfranchisement from denomination was not limited to moderate Baptists in two states, Wiles explained.

Centrists across denominational lines were finding themselves in a similar place of loss.

Wiles said he'd been praying God would use the gathering—this new group assembled from orthodox, centrist Christians from a variety of denominational backgrounds—to discern together what God is up to in this time.

And like the “200 sons of Issachar” in 1 Chronicles 12:32, “who understood the times and knew what Israel should do,” he hoped the curators would understand the times and know what it is God wants them to do to “re-evangelize North America, and ultimately take the gospel to the world.”

Chris Backert, senior director of Ascent, explained when the group who

envisioned Ascent began meeting to talk about a new way to cooperate for the gospel mission, they recognized the world was heading into a time of rupture.

They observed this era of upheaval was evident in social-political shifts and uneasiness. And the council began to wonder if this upheaval might be the sort of upheaval God sometimes uses to bring in a new season of revival in the church.

Starting with the gospel

Backert said they asked themselves: “What if we don’t start with the church? What if we started with the gospel?”

The early council decided to look at things from the perspective not of what does the church need, but of what does the gospel need in order to re-evangelize North America, “and we worked backwards from there.”

As they began to talk about that, “a great unity came around the idea that we really need a fresh evangelization, reengagement, awakening, whatever word you prefer. We really need a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit to see new generations come to faith in Christ all over North America. That’s the gospel need.”

COVID-19 slowed Ascent’s development but accelerated centrist believers’ sense of loss of ecclesial identity for the sake of the mission, Backert said. “People feel not home in their own home ... and yet we feel this need, we really want to re-engage North America with the gospel.”



Wissam al-Saliby of 21Wilberforce; Cariño Cass, executive director of Churches Ministry Among Jewish People; and Adria Nunez and Guillermo Leon who lead Church Planters/Network, discuss sowing the gospel amidst opposition. The panel was facilitated by Lee Spitzer, retired general secretary of American Baptist Churches USA. (Photo / Calli Keener)

Backert said coming out of the season of rupture exacerbated by COVID, “we’re in a season of realignment—and you can see this playing out all over the world—and we’re in a season of ecclesial realignment.”

The gathering of individuals of diverse ecclesial backgrounds with a common gospel goal “couldn’t even have been conceived of 10 years ago,” Backert noted, but “in 2025, it makes perfect sense.”

As in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, “the old alliances have died.” And in this time of realignment, “it’s time for new alliances that make sense for the days ahead,” he asserted.

Backert explained Ascent is a voluntary, or “opt-in” network—“a

cooperation of the willing”—but with the framework of a covenant to provide stability. The guiding covenant comes from the [Capetown Commitment](#) of the Lausanne Movement.

Based on the “connectionalism” that led to conventions, conferences, dioceses or other forms of association, Ascent aims to provide a common future for previously disparate groups—cooperating to re-evangelize North America and beyond.

“We’re trying to walk and work together for the sake of the Great Commission,” Backert said.

But Ascent is not going to look like what has been seen before, because it’s composed of individuals who may share a common future, but who do not share a common past, Backert said.

Texas connections



Craig Curry of Plano speaks at the Ascent curators gathering at First Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va. (Photo / Eric Black)

Texas Baptists participated in or moderated several panel discussions,

highlighted the ministries they lead and led breakout sessions. Those sessions were treated as “task force” opportunities both to discuss how curators’ ministries currently meet needs in the subject area under discussion and to envision how Ascent can continue developing and/or supporting ministries.

Wissam al-Saliby, president of Baptist World Alliance-connected [21Wilberforce](#), spoke about the organization’s work to advocate for religious freedom during a panel about “sowing the gospel in the face of opposition.”

Al-Saliby noted sowing the gospel brings persecution. The good news is “churches are present, active and engaging all over the world,” he said, but with that comes challenges of persecution, as well as lower-level forms of discrimination and opposition.

In India in 2023, conflict among tribal groups in Manipur claimed the lives of 200 Christians, destroyed 300 churches and left 28 missionaries without salaries, he noted. The violence there and similar violence in other countries has led to “a hardening of the church’s heart towards the Muslim population,” and that’s also opposition to the spread of the gospel.

Al-Saliby explained 21Wilberforce was founded 11 years ago in Texas, to work with churches “to address the plight of religious persecution” and advocate for religious freedom for everyone, “because either everyone has religious freedom, or no one has religious freedom,” he noted.

Additionally, the organization seeks to strengthen the transfer of advocacy knowledge to locals around the globe so they can advocate for religious freedom in their contexts. Al-Saliby urged Ascent curators to be sure to factor in the mission work being done locally to fight for religious freedom, as the movement continues to take shape.

Todd Still, dean of Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary,

moderated a panel discussion on sowing the gospel through preaching and developing preachers of the gospel.



Mark Goodman, Ashley Berryhill and Kevin Nderitu participate in a panel on sowing the gospel through the local congregation at the Ascent curators gathering in Alexandria, Va. (Photo / Eric Black)

Kevin Nderitu, executive pastor of District Church in Washington, D.C.; former Texan Mark Goodman, lead pastor of Rabbit Creek Church in Anchorage, Alaska, a congregation [recently removed](#) from the Southern Baptist Convention; and Ashley Berryhill, director of Global Engagement at First Baptist Church in Arlington, participated in a panel discussion on “sowing the gospel through the local congregation.”

Cindy Wiles, of First Baptist Church in Arlington, director of the [Restore Hope](#) mission organization; Jim Ramsay of TMS Global; and Jennifer Lau of Canadian Baptist Ministries participated in a panel on “sowing the global gospel ... beyond the local congregation.”

John Upton, retired executive director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, facilitated the discussion on how to do global missions responsibly—out of love, with humility and with a “round table” approach,

based in mutuality that breaks down barriers between local and global missions.

Other Texans who presented included: Rand Jenkins, chief strategy officer with Texans on Mission/On Mission Network; Arthur Jones, pastor of St. Andrews Methodist Church in Plano; Craig Curry, pastor of First Baptist Church in Plano; and Bruce Webb, pastor of First Baptist Church in The Woodlands.



Carey Sims explains the work she will be leading with Junia Network. (Photo / Calli Keener)

Carey Sims of Cliff Temple Baptist Church in Dallas will be project lead for the Junia Network, a yearlong Ascent cohort initiative offering a place for women in ministry to share, learn and resource one another.

The initiative is named after Junia, who Paul affirms along with her husband in Romans 16:7 as being “in Christ” before he was and outstanding among all apostles.

The gathering also included a celebration service recognizing curators who had been ordained or licensed by their churches during the past year and anointing ministers who had assumed new ministry roles. Several current Texas Baptists and others who previously served in Texas were among those recognized or anointed.