

OUR JERUSALEM: A COMMUNITY EXEGESIS

One of the first lessons I learned in seminary was on how to interpret the Bible. The technical term for this process is “exegesis.” According to the rules of exegesis, the interpreter looks for what the text gives and does not impose a perspective on the text that the text does not support (which is called “eisegesis”). The distinction is important because of how it listens to a text for what it has to say instead of telling the text what it should mean.

It’s not just Bible texts to which the rules of exegesis apply. Exegesis helps us interpret other things, including communities. Indeed, one of the key competencies good ministers should develop is an understanding of the surrounding community in which their church is located. In the same way that every church is different, so every community is different. Recognizing the uniqueness of a ministry setting goes a long way toward responding to it in effective ways.

God’s call is a breath-taking (and breath-giving) thing. It usually comes when we least expect it and often at a time in life when we are busy doing the last thing God asked us to do. You see this quality throughout Scripture from Abraham to Moses to the first believers in the book of Acts.

My call to Mountain Brook Baptist Church fits that profile to a “T.” I was situated in a happy and fulfilling place of service where I could wind up my pastoral career on a stable foundation of ministry accomplishments that had taken seventeen years to construct. Life was good. Work was rewarding. Family was content. Looking back, I should have known that the God who always likes to disrupt our status quo was about to do something that would move me to look to Him for guidance and strength yet again.

I had known about Mountain Brook Baptist Church since my college days at Montevallo. The church was a familiar landmark on the many weekend trips to Birmingham and the old Eastwood Mall. I knew that under the leadership of Dr. Dotson M. Nelson Jr., the church was considered a “flagship” fellowship among Alabama Baptists. It had seemed to be a congregation that took being church most seriously.

I had also known Dr. James D. Moebes in my “previous life” as an Alabama Baptist pastor in Elba and Madison. Dr. Moebes and I had served on a couple of boards and committees in state Baptist life, so when he called me to invite me to preach the Holy Week services one year, I thought it would be nice to see how the church had developed. One visit turned into another, and then another. I reconnected with old friends like Bob Baker and Marvin and Helen Robbins, and made a host of new ones that continue to bless me to this day. I quickly came to see that the church was a vibrant church with a promising future.

That’s why when approached by the Senior Minister Search Committee upon Dr. Moebes’ retirement, I was open to the possibilities of a new challenge in a new setting—one that joined commitment and capacity in ways few churches could ever know. When the church extended a formal call to Judy and me in November of 2011, we were so excited about coming that we forgot to join the church that first Sunday we were here!

Now, after seven years as your senior minister, I’ve never been more excited about pastoral ministry. The prospects of leading a church to realize God’s vision for a new day is a gift that every pastor would be blessed to receive. Thank you, Mountain Brook Baptist Church, for the privilege of serving as your pastor. Join with me in continuing to be open to our breath-taking (and

breath-giving) God, whose surprises are always better than we could have planned for and whose favor is always more than we deserve.

Dr. J. Douglas Dortch Jr.



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Judy and Doug Dortch

WE’VE A STORY TO TELL
75th Anniversary Memories of Mountain Brook Baptist Church

HE FOUND MORE EXCELLENT WAYS

For 20 years, 1996–2016, Dr. Alvin G. Pelton showed Mountain Brook a more excellent way to be the church of Jesus Christ.

Alvin and his wife, Lennie, came to Mountain Brook Baptist Church from the First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Alabama. He was at the peak of expertise—already a well-known minister of education and administration. In considering a call to serve at Mountain Brook Baptist Church, he saw an “opportunity beyond belief” to serve with excellence. God made him a pioneer.

As Dr. Alvin G. Pelton arrived, “Dreams of Faith” was a strategic planning process led by Tom Merrill, a retired military general and management consultant. Alvin, as chair of the church council, escorted the dreams into reality. Three big ideas emerged: direct missions around the world, contemporary worship, and expansion of facilities.

Alvin was assigned to give ministerial staff support to missions. Missions became his major joy. The missions committee ramped up its personal knowledge of mission partners—then introduced them to the whole church. On any day, Alvin might be counseling a visitor from China or the Middle East, or setting up a grocery account for a visiting scholar from Singapore. Alvin blessed countless lives beyond our membership. He was and is a great encourager.

Starting with the 1999 church budget, our members began to shift a significant portion of their contributions to our own selected missions initiatives. Missions contributions grew. Alvin kept track of allocations, and missions giving amounted to about 10 million dollars in Alvin’s 20 years—phenomenal! He implemented a system whereby each mission partner gave our church a detailed report of their stewardship.

Thus began a parade of exciting visitors with stories to share with Mountain Brook Baptist Church. Lilian Lim was one who especially touched Alvin and Lennie’s hearts. Alvin credits her with changing his own life. Dr. Lilian Lim of Singapore sprang onto the Mountain Brook Baptist Church scene in 2004–2005, as the newly elected president of a consortium of seminaries known as Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary. Alvin saw Lilian as the new face of missions. ABGTS had been founded by Baptist missionaries in the late 1950s. Now, native Asians were taking the lead and were often better suited for the task. Alvin remembers her as “representing an open door to Asia and specifically to China.” He recalls: “This brilliant Asian woman presented us a fiery passionate plea for partnership. The Mountain Brook Baptist Church family and I were incredibly blessed to work with her. She kept reminding us that Bibles were distributed by the millions in Asia, but there were not enough teachers.”

Today, as an example, the Philippine Baptist seminary is teaching Old Testament online to teachers throughout Asia and even in Germany. “The possibilities for global outreach are simply staggering,” in Alvin’s view. With his guidance and Mountain Brook Baptist Church’s connections, eight seminaries have begun to connect and to learn to teach via digital media. This was difficult, as some of the campuses began with no functional computers and skimpy internet access.

Alvin developed a great technical partnership at Samford. Whenever Lilian Lim visited Mountain Brook Baptist Church, Alvin reached into his own pocket to smooth her sacrificial travels. This beautiful woman was afflicted with a lifetime handicap—Marfan’s Syndrome. It took her life suddenly after she last visited Mountain Brook Baptist Church in 2009. Yet, her vision lives on.

Meanwhile, Alvin was also busy with Mountain Brook Baptist Church’s own internal plans for fresh excellence. Contemporary worship services were in motion by 2004—and Alvin was helping to create the right space and to find Mountain Brook Baptist Church’s own upgraded electronic equipment.

Strategic planning led to a major addition to the church building in 2000–2001. During



Alvin and Lennie Pelton



Dr. Lilian Lim, former president of Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, with members of Mountain Brook Baptist Church’s Missions Committee and ministers. Front row: Catherine Allen, Lilian Lim, Alvin Pelton. Back row: Bill Austin, William Hull, James Moebes, and Jerry Edwards.

construction, Alvin was juggling classrooms to keep all the educational work of the church afoot. On August 25, 2002, a grand opening and dedication were held. The new space included Hudson Hall with adjacent classrooms and kitchen, preschool classrooms, offices, a porte cochere on the west side of the building, refurbishing of the Chapel, and a columbarium. How to pay for this while still sending money around the world? Alvin gave credit to Joseph Cassese, who was on the jobsite daily to save expenses. His leadership inspired church members and friends to give generously. Everything was paid for in a shorter time than expected, and with no debt! Despite endless duties in support of construction, Alvin kept up real excellence in the ongoing work of the church: worship, fellowship, Bible study, and evangelism around the world.

During Alvin’s tenure on the Mountain Brook Baptist Church staff, he completed a doctorate in educational leadership from the Orlean Beeson School of Education at Samford University. He made time to mentor Alabama leaders in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and served on their leadership group. He worked with leaders of the Birmingham Baptist Association.

Soon Dr. Alvin Pelton was in demand as a consultant to other churches. He now serves with Michael Wilson as resource strategist in the Center for Congregational Resources at Samford University. Also, he has joined the staff of the Korean First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Alabama. He travels to preach and plan with the Korean church at least once a month. He and Lennie remain as loving members of Mountain Brook Baptist Church.

The Lilian Lim vision of Christian teaching lives on in Alvin’s current ministry. He implements the same simple broadcast technology used in the Philippine seminary to assist the Koreans in Huntsville and small churches in rural Alabama. He expands their global outreach and that of Mountain Brook Baptist Church through more excellent ways.

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Philippians 4:8 NIV).