

# Choctaw Retreat offers safe space for youth and families to find hope

*By Lindsey Williams*  
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Instead of a traditional row of seats, teenagers along with their youth leaders and families convened in a circle of chairs for worship. The Multicultural Ministries of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board hosted the second annual Choctaw Youth Retreat on the Biloxi beachside from March 8 to 10. The event commenced with the harmonious hum of a Choctaw song, surrounded by the youths' proud parents and grandparents.

Four youths from Macedonia Church – Sebanta, Sabian, Jacy, and Ty'lin – reflected on their group activity experiences. "This was my first time to come," said Jacy. "My favorite part has been playing games with my friends and when we go into group times."

Sebanta expressed appreciation for the morning devotional, highlighting a thought-provoking question: "One of the questions was, 'What do you think God has given you as a gift and how does it embrace you?'" When asked about how Mississippi Baptists could support them in prayer, Sebanta requested, "Pray for our church, that more people will come."

Johnny Tonika, the retreat's Worship Speaker, journeyed from Durant, Oklahoma, with his family, who are active members of First Church Durant. Tonika shared insights from his discussions throughout the weekend, emphasizing God's love and the importance of understanding and accepting this love.



Johnny Tonika

“The first night, we talked about how the Lord demonstrated His love for us by dying in

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He continued, addressing the human tendency to resist God's guidance and the significance of divine pursuit: "This morning, we talked about our tendency to resist God's leadership, and it's easy to do that. Sometimes we even resist Him without realizing it, but another way He shows His love is by pursuing us. Hebrews 12:6 tells us that God disciplines those whom He loves. I don't discipline some stranger's kid, but I discipline mine because I love and care for him. So in that same way, when we go down self-destructive paths, God is going to stop us from continuing down that road. And we talked through that today by looking at the Book of Jonah."

Tonika also touched on the core desires and struggles shared by many, especially the Choctaw youth: "Not just students, but everybody in general wants two things. We want people to love us and to miss us when we're gone, and we want to be a part of something that's worth our time. I think students are really struggling with that. They deal with insecurities like, 'Am I accepted? Do people care about me?'

"For our students in particular, being Choctaw students on a reservation, it's isolating. In their minds, it may be, 'Us vs. the World', which is not entirely true, but they may feel like it is. So from these insecurities, there are a lot of avenues the Adversary uses to get into the minds of our students, our families, our communities, and even our churches. They wonder, 'Are we even cared about as Choctaws?' That's a dangerous place to be, because then it's really easy for the Adversary to make us think, 'Does God really care?' And He absolutely does."

Ray Duplessie, the MBCB Choctaw Ministry Consultant and the retreat coordinator, discussed the unique challenges faced by Mississippi Choctaw youth, highlighting the impact of the

COVID-19 pandemic, the loss of elders, and the prevalence of suicide within the community.

“There are a lot of challenges very similar to what most kids are facing nowadays in terms of this crazy world, but one thing people may not realize is that COVID hit the Choctaw reservation very hard,” Duplessie said. “A lot of kids lost their grandparents, and a couple of kids lost both parents during COVID. Of the nine churches at the time, two of them lost their pastors. It was devastating because almost everybody on the reservation knows at least one or two or three people who died of COVID. So that brought a malaise in the area.”

Duplessie also emphasized the importance of family and community support at the retreat, noting that the event attracted almost as many adults as youths, underscoring the Choctaw value of familial bonds and collective healing.

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Jourdan Duplessie

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“One day, she woke up and said she was really scared,” Jourdan Duplessie said. “So my wife and I taught her that Jesus loves her, Jesus will hold her, and then she came up with, Jesus will kiss her. We realized a little bit later that she associated kissing your ‘boo boo’ with being healed. She was saying Jesus will heal her. So I want these kids here to know that foundation that Jesus loves them, Jesus will hold them, He will comfort and He will heal them.”

Jourdan Duplessie urged Mississippi Baptists to actively engage with Choctaw local churches, emphasizing the value of

direct involvement and partnership in the spirit of collaboration and cooperation reminiscent of the Apostle Paul's mentorship of Timothy.

"If we're going to say that SBC is all about collaboration and cooperation," Jourdan Duplessie said, "then we really need to partner with the churches and say, 'Hey, we can't speak Choctaw. We don't know your culture, but we're going to be here and not just financially support you, but also theologically train you, because the pastors are declining in number. We're going to train young leaders to rise up like Paul trained Timothy.'

"Choctaws are all about collaboration. That's the reason why we worship in a circle instead of rows. There's a reason why at powwows, you have a circle around the drum. So pray for your church to partner alongside another church, and be ready to see where the Spirit leads."



Katy Lynn

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Katy Lynn, an attendee who found faith during the first retreat, spoke about her ongoing battle with mental health and the importance of clinging to faith during difficult times.

“Pray for my mental health, because there are times that I relapse,” shared Katy Lynn, highlighting the struggles that many young people face regardless of their cultural background. “Not only am I in a storm, but I am stuck in the water, and there’s a rope I can hold onto, but it burns my hand to grab. But the only way I will survive is to hold onto the rope.”

Pray that the Choctaw of Mississippi, and across the nation, will be ‘kissed by Christ’, that their worldly wounds may be healed.