

'Discern' addresses pressing need for more ministers

By Lindsey Williams

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At Garaywa Camp & Conference Center on Jan. 11, 48 students attended Discern, a now one-day event designed for high-school and college students who sense God calling them to Christian ministry. The conference, sponsored by the Discipleship/Sunday School department of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB), grew from the heart of a group of student pastors who recognized a need to walk alongside students prayerfully considering God's call.

"The purpose of the conference," said Ken Hall, Consultant for Student Ministry of the MBCB Discipleship/Sunday School department, "is to give them a handle on what it means to be called. 'How do I know if God is calling me? How do I answer that call? What do I need to be doing to live that call?' are just a few of the questions that are addressed throughout the event."

Neil Tullos, senior pastor of First Church, Wiggins, and main speaker of the event, took students through a series of biblical characters who received God's call in different ways, with different backgrounds, and for different undertakings. Tullos taught on a Scriptural basis of how God calls His people and what it looked like when they followed Him.

Worship times were led by Austin Mathis, associate pastor of high-school ministries at Brandon Church, followed by breakout sessions: *Loving God's Word*, led by J.B. Long, student minister of Harrisburg Church, and Zach DePriest, student pastor of First Church, Jackson; *Faithful to Serve (Servant Leadership)*, led by Bo Rice, senior pastor of First Church,

Brandon; and *A Call to Ministry is a Call to Prepare*, led by Dwayne Parker, director of the MBCB Discipleship/Sunday School department.

“Another valuable part of the event was the panel discussion,” said Hall. “On their registration form, the students answered, ‘What is one question or one concern you have that you would like to see addressed this weekend?’ Dr. Neil answered a lot of those in his sessions, but others were taken up by the panel.”

The panel included Tullos, Rice, Parker, Chris Thomas, BSU director at Meridian Community College, and Dannie Waller, student ministry associate of First Church, Tupelo, and who represented women in ministry.

One topical concern from the young women who attended was what they will be allowed to do and what opportunities will be available to them as females in ministry.

“We addressed the elephant in the room,” said Hall, “which is if you’re a Southern Baptist, a woman won’t be a pastor, but Dr. Bo Rice answered that well, affirming that we really need women in ministry in the church.”

Other common questions revolved around education and whether or not the students need to attend a Christian school or major in Christian studies to further their ministry aspirations.

“Everybody on the panel gave great advice and explained how one of them did major in Christian studies, a couple of them had gone to a Baptist school, but some of the others had not,” said Hall. “All of them had different journeys, and they all talked about the advantages of the paths they took and how God still used other degrees in ministry.

“It was a real encouragement to students who were worried about changing majors so late in the game. For example, education majors, business majors, communications majors, and

many others, are all very valuable in the field of ministry. We also spent a lot of time talking about the importance of seminary, as Dr. Bo Rice, a former dean from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS), and representatives from NOBTS, encouraged students to consider seminary.”

Students who attend Discern are encouraged to know they are not alone, that other students are also sensing a call to a life marked with uncertain roads yet a very certain finish.

The 30 adults who joined, through invitation from a student or as a staff member for the weekend, engaged the students in conversations during lunch.

“We encourage students to bring an adult,” shared Hall. “Some of them brought parents, a lot brought their youth pastors, and others brought BSU ministers. We constantly urge the students to seek out a mentor who can walk alongside them. But it was also really neat to hear the students asking each other, ‘What are you thinking about this? Where are you thinking about going to school?’

New this year was a change in the format of the conference. “For the first five years, it was an overnight retreat,” said Hall. “This year, we decided to try a one-day schedule, which went really well. We are hoping to make this a regional conference so that it will be more accessible to students in North and South Mississippi.”

Meeting a Need

“We have a shortage of ministers not just in our state, but everywhere,” confirmed Hall. “We know God is still calling, and we believe it is the church’s responsibility to disciple these students and to help people understand that God does indeed call ordinary people.”

Hall encourages pastors to make calling out the called a part of their invitation time in worship.

“We hear the most important invitation to accept Jesus as Savior, the invitation to join the church, the invitation to rededicate your life, but, whereas in the past it was normal to hear every week, we don’t often hear pastors asking the congregation, ‘Is God calling you to vocational ministry?’ said Hall. “We want to change that trend until churches are no longer struggling to find resumes.”

An important thing for students to remember, Hall emphasizes, is that a “Yes” to God’s call to ministry means being open to wherever He calls them and whatever He calls them to do. God will always prepare those He calls.

“A lot of us have been in different ministry positions, doing things we never thought we would do,” said Hall. “We really wanted the students to understand that you have to be willing to go to the smallest church and serve God with all you have, no matter if you’re at a small church, a large church, or an organization. God uses us in all different places.”

Resources

The Discipleship/Sunday School department has many resources to assist the local church in discipling students or adults sensing a call to ministry. Some resources include:

Discerning Your Call to Ministry – Jason K. Allen

Is God Calling Me? – Jeff Iorg

Dangerous Calling – Paul David Tripp

Calling Out the Called: Discipling Those Called to Ministry Leadership – Scott Pace and Shane Pruitt

Several resources are available upon request. Call the MBCB Discipleship/Sunday School department at 601-292-3283 or 601-292-3284 for more information.