

Transcript

Tom Turner Interview

5.03: "Serving Seniors in South Carolina Who Are Serving Others," & "Providing Care to Seniors in a Non-Profit World," with Tom Turner

This episode was recorded on September 29, 2020. We do not have an update on the COVID situation at the two locations of the SCBMA, but there were no active cases there at the time of the interview.

Andy: Tom Turner joins me today here on the Biblical Perspectives on Aging podcast. Tom, would you take a few moments to introduce yourself and let us know where you serve?

Tom: [00:00:11] Certainly will. Hey, Andy. My name is Tom Turner. I serve as the President and CEO of the South Carolina Baptist Ministry of Aging. And obviously, as it sounds, we're over in South Carolina on the East coast. I'm excited to be with you and hope I can share some information with you all that's helpful.

I'll tell you a little bit about myself. I've had the great privilege to lead our organization for the last 11 years and we are connected or we are a ministry partner of the South Carolina Baptist Convention, one of seven ministry partners that are here in South Carolina and affiliated with the Baptist Convention.

And so, I've been with our organization 11 years. I'm a lifelong Baptist. And [for] my entire career I've worked in senior care. To tell you a little bit about how Baptist I [00:01:00] am, I am a lifelong Baptist, but yet also married into a missionary kid's family. And so, this has been a great privilege for me to serve in this role. With my background, which is in administration, I've served in skilled nursing and assisted living as an administrator, in the for-profit side, before I moved into this role, 11 years ago.

Andy: [00:01:22] Okay. Okay, great. Well for our listeners, I'm going to share that when we refer to the SCBMA, we mean the South Carolina Baptist Ministries of Aging, and that's ultimately your employer. At this point now, this podcast is a ministry of The Baptist Home in Missouri, but it's good for listeners everywhere to hear how God is working in different regions [and] different areas with those who are caring for the aging. So, could you please share a little bit about the ministry of the SCBMA?

Tom: [00:01:52] Okay. Well, as I said earlier, we're part of the Baptist Convention here, an affiliation, and so we serve as our own [00:02:00] 501c3, and our ministry is represented by two life-plan communities.

We've formally called those continuing-care retirement communities. And so our campuses serve our array of services to our residents that live there, independent living, assisted living, and lastly, skilled nursing services. We've been operating for 60 years and are honored to have Christ-centered environments where our residents find meaning, purpose, and joy.

And that's really the purpose of our campuses. And we've just been able to do that for a lot of years. And so it's an exciting place to be. And I love to tell people about our two campuses. They are, Bethea Retirement Community in Darlington, South Carolina and Martha Franks Retirement Community in Lawrence, South Carolina.

And maybe I can tell you a little bit more about both of those, if it's appropriate.

Andy: [00:02:59] Sure. Go ahead. [00:03:00] Please feel free.

Tom: [00:03:01] So we'll start with, Martha Franks, which is our younger of the two, a 35-year-old campus. This campus sits in the upstate of South Carolina. It sits on rolling hills in a beautiful, relaxing setting.

At that particular campus, we have a great number of retired pastors and missionaries that live on our campus and always have. Especially missionaries. I think they're somewhat drawn to our campus. And when I think about our two campuses, I think, and really our focus over the last several years has been service, one of the things we realize is that, when folks make a choice to move to a community like ours, many times they're moving to our communities because of a need they have. Whether it be a physical need, maybe there's some memory impairment, maybe one spouse is healthier than another. But what we see a lot of times, [00:04:00] and in most cases, our residents that choose to live on our two campuses have been very active in service either on the mission field, as a pastor or pastor's wife, or as Christian laity.

And so, one of the things that, Martha Frank's campus really does well is to continue placement of service for our folks. One example of that is, about seven years ago, Martha Frank started a Billy Graham call center. And it's operated by residents mostly, and some volunteers and some staff. But if you're not familiar with, or your audience is not familiar with the Billy Graham call center, you'll know that the Billy Graham crusades are, are re-shown, re-televised.

And when those crusades are re-televised, there's a prayer line at the [00:05:00] bottom that individuals can call. And our Martha Frank's campus is one of those prayer locations. And this is done twice a month. So twice a month, of course, it's been interrupted a little bit with COVID, and the virus, but twice a month, individuals can call in. When they call in to that prayer line from the crusade, it is dispatched into Martha Franks. And since 2013, when we started this our residents and those who volunteered in that, in that ministry have answered 2,642 calls. And of those have resulted in 787 salvations.

Andy: [00:05:39] Amen.

Tom: [00:05:40] And other assurances and rededications. But it's just a great example of how those who have been in ministry life, all their lives, whether it be in the pulpit or otherwise can still serve and minister.

I had a little lady at Martha Franks tell me one time that she [00:06:00] wanted to serve, but didn't know how to serve. And she felt like she couldn't operate a telephone well and be on the line. But she was able to be in a prayer circle right outside of this area where these calls are coming in.

And so we really want folks to be involved and continue to serve in those, those ways. So that just gives you a little bit of the spirit of our two campuses. That's more at Martha Franks, specifically. At Bethea Retirement it has been serving there for 60 years. We opened just right at 60 years ago now.

And it's a very similar environment. It's in the PD area of South Carolina, which may not mean anything to your audience, but to give you some logistics, that's about 45 minutes from Myrtle Beach.

Andy: [00:06:51] Okay.

Tom: [00:06:52] I think most everyone knows where Myrtle Beach is. And so, that is a property, a large property. We had over a hundred [00:07:00] acres at one point and, it's a very similar spirit, more of an agriculture history.

We are in the process, we're very excited because we're in the process of building a nursing replacement in that campus today. We're about 85% finished, and their nursing building is the oldest building on the campus. 60 years old is getting ready to have a brand-new campus and we're building a household model, which means it will be more residential in feel, and really, non-traditional for skilled nursing settings. So, we are very busy on our Bethea campus right now, as we get ready to open, or to transition residents over and open our new building, we believe probably somewhere between the second and third weeks of November.

Andy: [00:07:51] Oh, wow.

Tom: [00:07:52] So that's a little bit of our campuses. Yeah.

Andy: Okay. While we're on the subject, Tom, I know that you're also in the midst of expanding. You're [00:08:00] looking at the possibility of adding another campus as well. And obviously, you know, the baby boomers are retiring 10,000 a day, I think is the number that relates to that.

So the need for care, skilled care, and just retirement settings in general are going to continue to increase throughout the decades. So could you share a little bit about the rationale? I mean, I just gave part of it from my perspective, but from your perspective, a rationale for possible expansion, where that's going to be and what gap that you hope that fills for the retirement community in South Carolina?

Tom: Well, I think you hit a driving factor in, in your introduction to that. We accessed, or completed, a strategic plan, our board did five years ago, and as we were looking at what our ministry's mission is and will continue to be, one thing we did [00:09:00] isolate is the need for growth, logistically or more where we, serve in South Carolina. Our campuses, while we're not a big state, our campuses are about two and a half, three, two and a half to three hours apart.

Andy: [00:09:13] Okay.

Tom: [00:09:14] And one is in the PD. One is in the upstate. We do not have a presence in the, what we call the Midlands, which is the center of our state. And so that's really where we have isolated the possibility of an expansion and our board likes the idea of expanding into a third campus. And so we've been looking at how we might do that, prayerfully looking at property and such and such things.

God may open doors for us to serve in another way, whether it be a different line of service, but that's what we're looking at. And I would say that for us beyond the increase in senior needs that you mentioned, that the baby boomers, and that certainly is a [00:10:00] major driver, but also for us, our expansion goes back to our mission as an organization.

And our mission is to provide professional services with compassionate care so that all we serve may thrive. And working in this industry for 27 years, and I say, industry, I should say ministry now, but working with senior adults for 27 years, one of my, one of the things I have realized is that as a society, we, many times, place a senior adult on a shelf when they finish their work.

And we try to say compassionately, it is meant to be helpful is to say, you've done your work. Let someone else do that. Um, and when we do that many times, Andy, we are no longer valuing or placing value on that individual. And we all have value and we can continue to contribute through our entire life – whether it be mentoring others, [there are] a lot of different ways you can do that. So [00:11:00] we want to serve folks where they are. Sometimes that's an independent person who wants the safety and security of one of our campuses. Other times it's because there [are] care needs for one or both (might be a couple or an individual).

And so that's really our goal is to meet them where their needs are. But to also, like I mentioned about one of our campuses, is to be able to provide an environment where they're there with folks like they're used to being with maybe in their local church home, they're continuing to be able to serve each other.

And then at the time where it's important for them to be served themselves, that there's a community that comes alongside them and serves them. And that's really our driving factor for growth.

Andy: [00:11:51] I don't want our audience to miss what you were talking about earlier with the Martha Franks Retirement Community there. Um, I know that we [00:12:00] went into the expansion, but what a great ministry, to have the opportunity to continue to serve, for those, you know, related to the Billy Graham call center. And the number of people they're helping, they can see that difference in themselves, and have maintain hope and dignity in serving others as well.

So that's, that's wonderful. Well, Tom, one of the challenges, obviously this is being recorded, in the latter part of 2020, a year that will be remembered for a few different things, one of which I'm certain will be COVID. So, what has been the effect of COVID for your ministry right now and how have you responded to date? And are there any changes that you're looking to making just to continue to make sure, as we talked about before we came on air, with the uptick around in the state and stuff, and of course that's around the country and around the world? But what impact is the virus having on your different communities now?

And how are you, how have you weathered the storm? [00:13:00] What are you looking to do to weather the storm in the future?

Tom: [00:13:03] Well, 2020 has been an interesting year, hasn't it? I will tell you, I'm very thankful that today we do, we are not being impacted by COVID on either of our campuses. You know, when most of a large portion of what we do is our care for care levels is assisted living and skilled nursing, COVID has been a big deal because it's really changed the fabric of what we do on our campuses, as I'm sure it is in Missouri.

We've had restricted visitations on most of our campuses since March. We are now getting ready to re to have a re-entry into our campuses, hopefully over the next two weeks.

And that of course is contingent upon the COVID positivity rates in our counties and what our local government will allow. But it's appearing that we may be able to start having visitors [00:14:00] back into our assisted living and skilled nursing over the next two weeks.

I will tell you, Andy, this has been tough. And in, in my experience, operating senior living communities, it is unparalleled to anything we've dealt with before. And our staff and residents have been so resilient during these this time, but it's been hard because, if you think about it, Andy, our

residents have not seen their family members, especially in the skilled nursing arena, have not seen family members in six months until just recently when we were able to start doing window visits.

I don't know how it is in Missouri. In South Carolina, you know, it really didn't really hit the news, if you will, as far as cases, until I don't know, May or June, something like that. And then we've just seen it continue growth in that. And so it has been difficult, in a lot of ways, but God has really blessed in a lot of ways, too. I will share with our audience that we, we did have COVID enter one of [00:15:00] our campuses, in our skilled nursing, back in May, and we reacted very quickly. I think some of what has to do with why one campus and not another, while one nursing facility and not another potentially has to do with the environment and ventilation and the years of your building and, and all of that physical plant things.

But we were able to eradicate it. And so we have not had any cases in that community and none at our other campus since [the] first week of June.

Andy: [00:15:35] Wonderful.

Tom: [00:15:35] So we've been very blessed with that. What are we doing in the future related to COVID? Well, I think this is going to be like yours and mine daily life has changed completely. I wear a mask just about everywhere, which I think you do too. And I think our audience does.

So, I think we're going to see in senior living, a continued heightened awareness of that for a while. We have been [00:16:00] looking for our communities on all things environmental. What can we do to keep the airflow to where it helps to not allow it into our communities? And then just continuing to follow all the regulatory guidelines of the CDC with precautions and screenings. I think that's here to stay for a while. I do not think we're going to operate any differently, at least through 2021.

If you ask me personally, I'm ready for visitations. While it's risky and scary in some ways, as an individual, who's experienced a loved one in a nursing facility, it's got to be terribly difficult not to see your loved one and to be dependent on others to care for them. So I hope we can carefully and safely open the doors back up, in limited form, so that our residents can see their loved ones and experience that again.

Andy: [00:16:53] Thank you for mentioning that, Tom. I think that probably is one of the biggest challenges that many people on the outside of the industry are [00:17:00] not thinking about as much. What feedback, um, what feedback have you had from the families? I mean, obviously there's an understanding that that has to be in play, but it's frustrating for the families on the outside as well.

Have they been fairly open and accepting of the policies that you've had to have in play, or have you had some pushback on that?

Tom: [00:17:23] No, I would say for the most part they've been positive and very helpful. We have some of the best families of individuals that we care for. I think like all of us though they're coming to the end of their ability to, to not see mom anymore, mom and dad.

I think that they've been very accommodating. They understand the limitations we have. They understand that for the most part, they've understood that we are setting these guidelines that have been setting by local government and the CDC. But again, I think it's one of those situations that they're ready to see their [00:18:00] loved ones again.

And then, we do have a small population of people who are very cautious themselves. And so we've received some questions about how are we going to re-enter or have re-entry safely and should we reconsider that? Not many, but a few. And so, we're trying to answer that as best we can.

Again, 2020 has been a year, like no other, so...

Andy: [00:18:26] Absolutely.

Tom: [00:18:27] None of us know the answers to those things. We just got to continue. One thing our families do for the most part realize is that, while this all surprised us, it did not surprise the Lord.

Andy: [00:18:39] Amen.

Tom: [00:18:39] And, so, we're just leaning on him for guidance and direction and, and so hopefully He will continue to bless our communities, your communities, and those who live in senior living communities.

Andy: [00:18:52] Thank you for that, Tom, very much. Now you said that you've been involved in caring, senior care [00:19:00] in some way, shape, or form for over 25 years, the last 10 plus years as a part of the SCBMA part of your career was on the for-profit sector. Explain some of the similarities and differences related to those mindsets. You've been in administrative the entire time. You said, what are some of the similarities and differences from that perspective, Tom?

Tom: [00:19:19] Well, obviously there are a good amount of similarities in care levels. We provide on our campuses, and in many life plan communities, not-for-profit life care communities, we provide skilled nursing assisted living, some independent services, just like the for-profit folks do. So there's a lot of similarities in that similarities in how regulatory-wise they're operated.

And, and then we see in some of our for profit arenas, like the not-for-profit that we're, we have those who are getting into those providers who are getting involved in home care, some hospice services. So all of the services are very similar, whether it be in [00:20:00] the not-for-profit or for-profit.

I like to tell our staff that in the for-profit arena, that there was a term I learned early on, which was called, "we can't have margin without mission." And honestly, even in the for-profit side, that's what I heard. But that really took a very different view for me when I came into the not-for-profit world – recognizing how important our mission is. And I think that's really the difference that we're here to establish a mission.

It's kind of interesting, Andy, on a personal note, as an administrator, I have always felt like I was able to minister to individuals, whether I was in a for-profit or not for profit environment. But when I joined the not-for-profit sector of senior living, I realized that it really becomes our DNA and who we are is the mission piece. And that for us, and so many [00:21:00] not-for-profits really, comes back to our biblical principles that guide us.

Not to say it can't be that way in a for-profit sector. There are those companies that operate that way, but it's unusual. But in the not-for-profit, and more specifically the faith-based communities like the Baptists here in South Carolina and there in Missouri, it really starts with our guiding, biblical principles.

And our ministry is built on the faith and foundation of the work of God. And then from there we establish what those principles mean to us. And for us, they're Christian service, and stewardship, partnerships, and perseverance.

As I said earlier, we've been in our business of caring for individuals for 60 years. And we believe that the Lord has blessed us in a lot of ways to be able to continue to do that. And so I think that is really the difference is how our mindsets change. And, [00:22:00] now with that said, like any other business, you've got to be able to keep the lights on and keep paying bills. And so we can't forget that we are a business, but larger than that, we're a ministry to people.

And I think what's been so exciting for me through the years is with this ministry, with SCBMA, is to really see the connection of our Baptist constituents that we serve. We do have individuals on our campus that aren't Baptist, but for the most part, about 80% (last time I surveyed), of our population attest to be Southern Baptist.

And so, as I said earlier, many of those are retired pastors and missionaries. But some of them are Christian lay people that just want to know they live in an environment when they, when they have care needs, folks who are going to love them because we love Jesus. And, and so that's really the difference, in what we, [00:23:00] in what we do.

In addition to the mission, we also, I think, in the faith-based organizations that we have, we also see some funding changes that allow us to care for people that maybe wouldn't be able to live in a for-profit side. For example, at SCBMA, we have a missionary fund. We call it the minister's fund that's taken up every year in a special offering that churches voluntarily can participate in. It's called the Mother's Day offering. You may have something similar in Missouri. And that fund is established for ministers and missionaries, primarily, that would not be able to financial live on one of our campuses without some assistance financial assistance.

And so that gives us the ability to ensure we are taking care of those individuals if they want to move in one of our campuses – our need and their needs are there. So I think that's probably the difference.

Andy: [00:23:58] That's wonderful. Thank you for [00:24:00] sharing that, very much. Well, Tom, I appreciate your time today. Is there anything else that you would like to share with our audience today?

Tom: [00:24:08] You know, the only thing I was going to mention Andy is, as you said, 2020 has been a really different year. And I think some of what all Christian ministries, including ourselves, are experiencing is just the cultural shifts and in our world, and how that is starting to affect how we do ministry and how we continue to do ministry in a way that supports our residents, and their families, and our staff.

And, you know, whether we're talking about COVID or we're just talking about the way our culture looks and views certain issues. It's a new challenge that we didn't have even five years ago, to the extent that we have now. You know, how we manage staff, how we communicate and articulate our Christian values and how we continue to be authentic and [00:25:00] providing those.

And how can we do that in a legal environment that is going to be careful but yet, still to some degree, unapologetic about our Christian stance. And that's really kind of, I think, for Christian organizations and many para-church organizations like us, are going to [be] the real areas of focus that need to be there in the future to ensure us to have longevity as we move forward in our culture.

Does that make sense to you? I think that's one of the things that we're starting to talk a lot about on the board level and because it's important to us where I feel like it's important to you all, that we continue to not only do a good job of caring for folks and providing compassionate care, but to do it in a way that honors the Lord, and in a way that are the baby boomers and even some of the, the generation before them, that we now care for, can take pride in that they, you know, they [00:26:00] chose to live on a campus that brings glory to God and then invites an opportunity for the others to know the love of Jesus. And that's really what we hope to be able to continue to do and continue to do well as we move through.

And I'd love if your audience is listening, and would offer up some prayers for us as a ministry just that we can continue to be bold where we need to be bold in that arena. And also, I would just say Andy, from a prayer perspective of continued, that there'll be continued blessings on SCBMA and provisions of safety and so that we can continue for the long haul and to continue to serve folks where they need us to serve them.

I would say that I would love the opportunity to know too what we can be praying for you all as well, may be similar, but may also be different.

Andy: [00:26:53] Well, I, I think Tom, uh, I think there'll be a lot of similarities. I know obviously [00:27:00] the care, the safety of the individuals. You asked, or you kind of mentioned earlier, that you were in a phased reopening of sorts, reentry. Missouri is, the, the governor of Missouri has recently, made that option available, that is being worked out right now.

And interestingly, just as all of that became began to be realized in some ways, it was announced that, that [the governor] has COVID now. So I think there's a lot of parallels, a lot of similarities there, Tom. But I think as we look to (I'm a pastor as well, and I haven't been able to visit) some of the care centers and facilities since March when this broke as well. And, you know, I contact them via phone and whatnot, but I sense the hurt in their, in their eyes and/or in their voices, I should say. I know they're in their eyes too, from, from those I've talked to that, that have been able to at least see them through a window and whatnot.

So yes, I think a lot of [00:28:00] those similarities would be in place. So I appreciate you asking and sharing your own prayer requests for your ministry and for yourself, wisdom for yourself as you lead the organization going forward as well.

Tom: [00:28:12] Do we have time for me to possibly offer up some prayer for our organization and yours?

Andy: [00:28:18] Absolutely. Please do Tom.

Tom: [00:28:20] Awesome. Dear heavenly Father, we just thank You so much for this opportunity to be together and to share. And, Father, we thank You for the privilege that it is to serve our senior adults, throughout our country, specifically in South Carolina and Missouri. Father, I just thank You for the blessings on our organizations and for those individuals who are served on our organizations. I thank You for our staff and those who unselfishly serve every day this population. And Father, I do offer a prayer and for our staff, for our residence and for all the things [00:29:00] that we've talked about, whether it be cultural issues, issues with the virus, Father, I just pray that You will continue to bless our organizations. I pray, Father, that our organizations will continue to be focused on how we can serve people better, but do it in Your name and that You will be glorified in the process.

So Father, we just thank You for today. We thank You for Your many blessings. We pray continued blessings and wisdom on leadership and our organizations. And Father, we pray for our nation that hopefully this virus will continue to decline and we can get back to normal, whatever that new normal is, Father.

But Father, we also pray for our nation and for all the issues that are being driven culturally. And we pray that You help us to know how to be part of the solution. And Father, we pray that as [00:30:00] we do that, that our seniors will benefit and be blessed and that You will be seen as the way and the answer for all people.

Now, these things we lift up in Jesus Christ's name. Amen.

Andy: [00:30:12] Amen. Well, thank you Tom, for your time today, and for that prayer. I look forward to hearing how your ministry and the expansion that you have going on there in South Carolina continues to unfold in the future.

Tom: [00:30:23] Awesome. Well, I appreciate the opportunity. I don't get an opportunity to share out of state much. So I really do appreciate it. And please let me know how I can help in any way over there in Missouri.

Andy: [00:30:33] Okay. Well, thank you very much, Tom.

Tom: [00:30:35] All right. Thank you.