

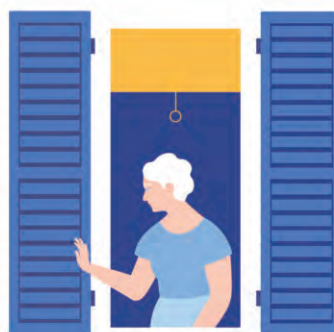
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Love your neighbor



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Boris Borisov



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www.usmb.org/gathering2020

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Hitting the reset button

Grief in loss, hope in what we've found

As I took one final look at this issue of *Christian Leader* before it went to the printer, I was struck by the ways in which God orchestrated the content, beginning in fall 2019 when COVID-19 wasn't even on our radar and through the crazy last weeks of March when we hurriedly revamped various news articles and essays to address the coronavirus pandemic that has prompted us to find new ways of staying together while we stay at home.

Back in October when Quentin Kinnison offered to write an essay on grief for this issue, a scenario in which a projected 60,415 Americans would die by August of a new coronavirus was not something I had considered. And yet this is the current estimation, although this projection will likely change again as more data becomes available. That's an overwhelming number of mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, neighbors and friends.

How many is 60,000? It is a little more than the capacity of Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles. It is the number of passengers in 180 full jumbo jets. It is more than the number of U.S. combat deaths in the Vietnam War. With this number in mind, I read with new eyes Kinnison's reflection on offering support and comfort to the grieving.

There is so much to grieve for right now. Some of us have lost family members and friends to COVID-19, while others we love have died of other causes. We've delayed long-anticipated wedding and graduation celebrations. Schools were suddenly closed, and instruction moved online. Some of us found ourselves working from home with little time to prepare while others lost their jobs all together as businesses closed. We did our best to celebrate Palm Sunday and Easter in spite of mandatory stay-at-home orders. We wonder what will happen to vacation plans, recreational sports programs and typical summer church activities including mission trips and vacation Bible school.

Right now, we're grieving in a wilderness of uncertainty. There is certainly grief in what we have lost, but what have we found? For what can we be grateful? How will we reset our lives after these weeks of isolation? What changes have we made personally, in our work and communities and as families and congregations that we hope will continue? What have we learned about being socially connected while physically distant from one another?

When the coronavirus "pause" is over, it might be tempting to go back to the way things were, ignoring what we've learned and downplaying the good ways in which we've changed. Let's not let that happen. Let's boldly claim this new promised land. Let's be people whose vision for life after COVID-19 is guided by the new ways we've discovered to live out our love for God and our neighbors and our commitment to becoming fully devoted disciples of Jesus Christ (Matt. 22:37-40). ▀



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Special activities planned for USMB Gathering 2020

Don't miss a slate of special activities planned in conjunction with USMB Gathering 2020, to be held July 21-25, 2020, in Independence, Mo.

A Congolese gathering will be held Thursday, July 23, from 1-5 p.m. Nzuzi Mukawa, Garry Prieb and USMB leadership will facilitate the gathering. Congolese pastors are encouraged to participate in this gathering and the convention in order to make new connections and establish a sense of belonging in the USMB family.

MB Foundation is sponsoring the opening dinner and session of the National Convention Thursday, July 23. According to an MB Foundation statement, "As MB Foundation recognizes its 30th year of incorporation, it celebrates the longer 140-year story of stewardship and generosity that has been its legacy. A stewardship initiative began in 1880 by the Mennonite Brethren to spread the gospel around the world. Through the next 140 years, the stewardship ministry operated under several different titles and structures, eventually becoming MB Foundation." The evening will include featured speaker Gary Hoag, president and CEO of Global Trust Partners.

Mennonite Central Committee's centennial celebration will be marked by a reception, sponsored by MCC, after Friday evening's session. The reception will include MCC stories from around the world, a brief report, video and a special presentation.

Join friends for an optional Kansas City Royals baseball game following the close of convention Saturday, July 25 at 6:05 p.m. Tickets may be purchased with registration. Registration is online at www.usmb.org/gathering2020.



As of press time, USMB Gathering 2020 is scheduled to proceed as planned. A final decision will be made June 8.—*USMB with files from MB Foundation*

FPU postpones commencement

Fresno Pacific University, the Mennonite Brethren institution in Fresno, Calif., announced April 9 its decision to reschedule commencement, originally scheduled for May 9, to Dec. 12, 2020, in a combined spring/fall 2020 ceremony. Degrees will be posted in May, so long as candidates have fulfilled all degree requirements and applied for graduation.

Due to the coronavirus, all classes in the traditional undergraduate, bachelor's degree completion, graduate and seminary programs were taught online beginning March 21. The first session of graduate classes May 11 to June 19 will also be online. Leaders are working on a decision regarding classes for the second session June 22 to July 31 and traditional undergraduate summer sessions.

All events scheduled to take place on any FPU campus through June 10 will not be held on the date scheduled. Campus access has also been reduced, limiting access to and from each of its

five campuses to a single point, where staff will be screened for symptoms of COVID-19.

Employees working at home will continue to do so until May 15 with only essential employees at the campuses. The offices at all campuses remain physically closed, but all service areas continue to be operational during the shelter-in-place mandate. For the latest information, visit <https://www.fresno.edu/coronavirus-covid-19-news-and-information> —*FPU*

Tabor College adapts to COVID-19

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Tabor College, the Mennonite Brethren institution in Hillsboro, Kan., rescheduled the 2020 commencement to Sunday, Oct. 11, 2020, during homecoming weekend. Degrees will be conferred in May and diplomas for graduates will be mailed by June 1.

The college moved instruction online March 23. All activities and events were cancelled for the remainder of the semester, and the campus was closed to guests and non-employee personnel until further notice.

In a March 30 update, Tabor announced its compliance with Kansas governor Laura Kelly's "stay-home" order, with Tabor employees who perform essential functions performing them from home "to the extent possible." For the latest information, visit www.tabor.edu/coronavirus. —*TC*

ICOMB postpones summit

International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) executive director Rudi Plett announced March 25 the Executive Committee's decision to cancel the ICOMB summit in May

in Brazil due to COVID-19 and to seek an alternative for the event.

“Please remain in prayer for all ICOMB leaders and summit guests, that fellowship and relationships can continue to grow even as we are physically apart,” writes Plett in the April ICOMB newsletter. “Pray for countries whose health systems are overwhelmed by the virus and for church leaders guiding their members through these challenging times.”

Alternatives being considered include postponing the event until September or October 2020 and creating a virtual event on the days originally planned for the Summit.—*ICOMB*

MBministries provide coronavirus resources

In mid-March, as the COVID-19 outbreak began to impact nearly every aspect of life and society, USMB ministries acted quickly to provide churches and individuals with resources designed to encourage and inform.

MB Foundation, the stewardship ministry for U.S. Mennonite Brethren, is providing a variety of services and resources, including the COVID-19 Relief Fund. This fund will be administered by the USMB national director and the district ministers and is intended to assist USMB churches that are most impacted by the coronavirus.

The COVID-19 Church Relief Fund was established through the generosity of a donor and a matched gift by MB Foundation, together totaling \$50,000. Contributors have the opportunity to double the donation impact by taking advantage of matching these funds dollar for dollar. For more information, visit mbfoundation.com/COVID19ChurchReliefFund. Any funds not used in response to COVID-19 relief will be used for church planting.

USMB together with Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary’s Center for Anabaptist Studies hosted two video conference discussions for USMB pastors to share ideas and to support one another as churches across the country discontinued Sunday worship services and other activities. USMB offered two webinars, one March 27 led by Fred Leonard, Mountain View Community Church, Fresno, Calif., and the other April 7 by Josh Shaw, Light-house Church, Denver, Colo., intended to give practical help in using various online and social media platforms in church ministry. USMB also provided a tutorial prepared by Stephen Humber, Multiply staff member, on using Zoom, an online meeting platform. The USMB website (www.usmb.org) offers a list of resources provided by Mennonite Brethren agencies as well as other ministries.

Multiply, the MB North American mission agency, offered three avenues for learning from global church leaders about living on mission in times of crisis. Multiply hosted twice-weekly live calls March 24 to April 21 with church leaders from around the world to pray and talk about ministry in the midst of hardship. In late March, Multiply offered an intensive two-day webinar on having online faith discussions and developing a home-based missional community. The third learning option was a March 30 to April 10 interactive online training program, *Living on Mission in Times of Crisis*. —CL

USMB boards meet via videoconferencing

The USMB Leadership Board, Board of Faith and Life and National Strategy Team did not hold face-to-face board meetings March 18-21 in Denver, Colo., because of social distancing guidelines put in place due to the spread of the coronavirus. Instead, each board held its meeting via video conferencing.

Implications of the coronavirus pandemic were discussed during the Leadership Board meeting March 20, attended by 16 of the 21 members. National director Don Morris reported on the various resources related to the pandemic that USMB is providing pastors, including two video conference discussions during which pastors shared about their responses to the restrictions put in place to combat the spread of the coronavirus and presentations offering practical tips on doing church ministry online. USMB also developed a resource page on which links to various resources are listed.

In his report, Multiply president Randy Friesen told about twice-weekly calls with global leaders scheduled through April 21, a two-day webinar and a 12-day online course on “Living on Mission in Times of Crisis” that the mission agency offered in response to the coronavirus.

In addition to discussing ways in



5 minutes with...

which the pandemic is affecting local church activities, the Leadership Board discussed financial implications should church giving to the U.S. Conference drop. Morris was asked to develop reduced budget options in the event that church giving continues the current downward trend; the board agreed to review the budget again in 30 days. The board also discussed a possible timeline for cancelling USMB Gathering 2020 should restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic continue into July.

The Leadership Board made the following decisions:

- To allocate \$50,000, the majority from an existing mission reserve fund, toward Thailand 2022, a global event hosted by Multiply, the MB North American mission agency, that will bring together MB leaders for a time of storytelling and encouragement.

- To affirm Judy Lopez as the U.S. Mennonite Brethren representative to the Mennonite Disaster Service board of directors and Lynette Madrigal-Granados as the USMB delegate to the Mennonite World Conference Global Youth Summit to be held in Indonesia in 2021.

- To present to 2020 National Convention delegates Yvette Jones, Fresno, Calif., and Asres Belaye, Olathe, Kan., as nominees to serve on the Leadership Board; a third nominee is needed.

The Leadership Board heard reports from Morris on a variety of initiatives, the National Strategy Team (NST) regarding efforts to serve diaspora groups from DR Congo and Ethiopia and the U.S. Board of Faith and Life (BFL) on nominating new board members, projects related to helping local church staff and agency staff become more familiar with Anabaptist values, ongoing discussion on Article V Salvation and publishing projects. The NST met March 19 via video conferencing and BFL met March 18.

Leadership Board chair David Hardt gave an update on the Multiply Task Force's external review of the mission agency. The report from Multiply's Friesen included an update on the agency's financial situation. District ministers also gave reports. —from *LB minutes*



Terron Nolan

In front of The Ellen Show's national television audience, school teacher Terron Nolan of North Fresno (Calif.) Church confronted some of his deepest fears—clowns and cotton balls.

Terron, his wife, Kristina, and their three children had the surprise of their lives when they were called up from the audience by talk show host Ellen Degeneres. Terron's creative approach to helping his sixth graders face their fears earned them the moment in the spotlight and a gift of \$25,000 for Robinson School.

when it was over it was ok. That's how it will be with this virus.

Why do you address the subject of fear with your students?

Many students live in a nearby apartment complex with so much brokenness and violence. Every day I have to send them back into this environment of extreme fear. I wanted to show them how to walk through fear.

What do you draw in from your own experience?

I grew up in a gang environment where you don't show fear. My own fears were always something I was ashamed of.

What was your approach?

I challenged them to write down one of their fears and to face that fear before the end of the year. I made a list of my own fears and posted videos of myself conquering those fears. They have been absolutely loving watching their teacher jump off a 45-foot pole and handling a snake.

The theme of fear is particularly appropriate in this time of global pandemic.

My students are so terrified. School is closed right now, but my videos remind them of how to face their fear. You don't have to stay stuck; you can push forward. Like when I was holding that snake. I was terrified. I didn't know what was going to happen. But

How does your class mantra, "One Class, One Family" help students face their fear?

God allowed me to plant that seed at the beginning of the year. It's mind-blowing how they're running with it. They're scared, but they'll go visit or deliver some food to a classmate who is home alone. That's the beauty that comes out of fear when we think about other people instead of ourselves.

What advice do you have for parents in this fearful time?

Learn from your kids. So many of us are feeling the impact of social distancing. Yesterday on a bike ride with my 4-year-old son, he was relentless to make sure the man walking his dog saw him smiling and waving at him. Even though these are scary times, we still need to love one another.

Find Terron Nolan's GRIT&INTEGRITY YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFL1PEDeJfzQJYlpy61vO1Q>
For a clip of their appearance on The Ellen Show go to <https://youtu.be/Tqr-pESb6D-U>

Interview by Kathy Heinrichs Wiest

Seeing beyond COVID-19

What God is showing us during the pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic caught me by surprise. One day I was laughing with a table of ladies at a mom's group and the next I was preparing to shelter at home with my family. The following week, three of my four children came home from school (the fourth is a toddler). In a matter of days, our existence as a family had radically changed.

Part of what made the whole thing so difficult was the relentless tidal wave of emotions. Disappointment over cancelled events. Fear over the health of loved ones and the strained economy. Grief over moments missed that could never be recaptured. Loneliness from being pulled away from friends and community.

My husband is a pastor, so I watched our church scramble (impressively), as many others did, to put together "Home Church" after large groups were prohibited from meeting to slow the spread of the virus. The church provided a worship set, sermon and discussion questions families could access online and encouraged church members to respond through social media.

Our young family struggled through the transition of being home together all the time, juggling work and school and interpersonal dynamics. Some days were amazing as we spent more time together as a family than we had in months. We took walks, watched movies, read books, rode bikes and made care packages for neighbors. Through online conferencing, we met digitally for Bible studies, small groups and extended family get-togethers.

Despite those positives, many days were disheartening. The children bickered, laundry piled up, dates for special events came and went and school was eventually cancelled for good. As the days and weeks wore on, we, as a soci-

ety, seemed to settle into a collective grief over the many things we had lost to COVID-19—people we loved but also our way of life.

When life events shake us out of our sense of comfort and security, we usually view this as a trial. Scripture is clear that our trials have a purpose and don't have to steal our joy. James 1:2-3 puts it like this, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness."

At first glance, the events surrounding COVID-19 may appear to be your everyday, run-of-the-mill trial. But upon closer inspection, I believe it is something more. Beyond the inconvenience and discomfort of the crisis, God is at work. Believers have more time for prayer and reflection. Families have greater capacity to build relationships and reset priorities. Even churches are breaking down walls as powerful messages full of God's truth go forth on a global platform. Neighbors seem more receptive to the gospel. Healthcare workers are joining together in prayer and worship. And missionaries report that people around the world are giving their lives to Christ in unprecedented numbers.

COVID-19 has certainly been a trial. Many people have experienced great loss. In times like these, it's a great comfort that God is close to the brokenhearted and strengthens our faith through trials. But we can't miss that God is also actively using this global crisis to accomplish his purposes. People are coming to know him. Families are growing closer. The gospel is flourishing and going forth. As we look to the future, may we never forget what God is showing us in this pandemic—and more importantly that he shows up in it. ■



Suzanne Hadley Gosselin

is a freelance writer and co-author of *Grit and Grace: Devotions for Warrior Moms*. Her husband, Kevin, is a pastor at The Bridge Bible Church, a Mennonite Brethren congregation in Bakersfield, Calif. They have four young children.

Saved from suicide

How God used the FBI, Facebook to rescue me

I awoke to pounding at my front door: “Mario Azar, open the door. This is the FBI.” Instinctively, I ran to the bathroom and called 911. My wife went to the door, and when I came out of the bathroom, several FBI agents and police officers stood in my hallway with guns drawn at me.

It was like a scene out of the television show CSI, but this was real life.

My story leading to this point included setbacks and uncertainty, which caused me to shake my fist at God. But what I didn’t realize until I nearly took my life was that God in his love had a plan for me.

I was born in war-torn Lebanon. I was taught to be vigilant of my surroundings, and I learned to descend to shelter each time the bombing started. My uncle and cousin were killed in the war, and I feared for the lives of my father and brothers.

When I was four, my family immigrated to the United States. I grew up in a Catholic household but went to church only to appease my parents. I couldn’t understand why God allowed my relatives to die.

My dream was to play professional soccer. For years I practiced and attended training camps worldwide, which led to a \$25 million contract offer to play professionally after high school. But during a game my senior year, a defender kicked me from behind. The impact dislocated my knee, tearing my ACL and destroying my meniscus and my dreams.

I cursed God’s name, not able to see that he had a different plan.

During high school, I met a girl online. Michelle was a Christian and encouraged me by sharing Bible verses. Five years later, we met in person when I flew from New Jersey to California. It was love at first sight.

After college, I took a job in Tucson, Ariz., with AOL, an online service provider, and eventually popped the

question. We planned to settle in Arizona after Michelle finished school, but seemingly overnight, I lost my job when corporate moved our call centers overseas.

Around the same time, Michelle secured a teaching job in California, so I packed up and moved to California, where I stayed with one of her friends until Michelle and I were married. After several months, I landed a job as an Information Technology (IT) contractor for an oil company. Two years later, needing benefits, I requested permanent employee status but was denied.

During this time, my mother was diagnosed with stomach cancer. I wondered why God would do that to a woman who had spent her life serving him. I flew to visit her. The next day she slipped into a coma and never woke up.

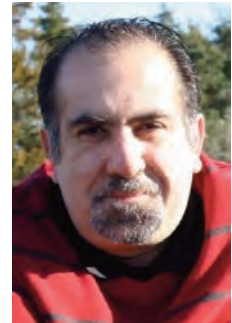
Having found new employment with Toyota that included benefits, I abruptly quit my IT job. I was denied my final two months’ pay and was escorted out of the building when I returned to plead my case.

Now, not only was I devastated over my mom’s death, I was angry with the oil company for stringing me along with no intent of hiring me full-time when I needed benefits and angry because they owed me a lot of money which I needed for funeral expenses.

I wanted revenge, so I used hidden email accounts I had created when I left the oil company to take its entire computer network down from California to Alaska, meaning the company could no longer monitor its pipeline underwater. I could have caused an environmental hazard if there was a leak and no one knew.

A few months later, the FBI came knocking.

I confessed everything during a four-hour interrogation and said if given the



Mario Azar lives in Huron, S.D., with his family. He was born in Lebanon, immigrated to New Jersey in 1985 with his parents, and was his family’s first high school graduate.

At DeVry University, Azar received a bachelor’s degree in Network Communications and a master’s degree in Business Administration/Project Management.

He loves his job as network administrator at Dakota Provisions.

He serves Bethesda Church in Awana, on the worship team doing audio/video and men’s retreat planning.

Azar enjoys family time and studying God’s Word through Bible Study Fellowship. His favorite verse is Jeremiah 29:11.

Mario loves the Lord wholeheartedly and knows he can’t live without him.

See TESTIMONY, page 30

Loving through grief

By Quentin P. Kinnison

Why
do we
feel the
need
to defend
God
when
someone
is grieving?

There are many things about the book of Job with which I wrestle. Job 42:7 is one of those. Job's story is familiar: A righteous man by God's testimony, Job experiences horrific tragedies (permitted by God): loss of livelihood, death of his children and painful illness. His friends comfort him for seven days by sitting with him in silence.

On day eight, Job begins to agonizingly reflect on his suffering, wondering where God is in it all. His friends jump to God's defense and the situation deteriorates into an argument with them accusing Job of sin. Job rightly insists he has not sinned; this is God's doing and without apparent reason. (Job does not have access to the behind the scenes insight we do).

Finally, God shows up, reminding Job of God's character by becoming present with Job in his suffering. Then God turns to those friends: "After the Lord had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has'" (Job 42:7).

I suspect these friends are shocked by God's rebuke. After all, they defended God; why would God be angry? But notice God's reason:

"You have not spoken the truth about me." Somehow in defense of God they had misrepresented God's character.

In my work with grief, I am often confronted by ways well-meaning people misrepresent God while attempting to care for grieving people. Pastors and lay people alike seem to feel the need to say something in defense of God to "fix" or justify the pain of the grieving person. Such attempts usually have the opposite effect. They tend to shut people down from sharing their true feelings—feelings of abandonment, anger, deep sorrow and even despair. Those who most need our comfort instead are further discomfited and left in isolation.

Answering for God

Why do we feel the need to answer for God when, according to Job, God refuses to defend God's self? God never explains Job's suffering to Job. Instead God's response is, "I'm here now, Job, and I am who you thought I was and more." Why then do we try to answer for God? After working on a recent book to help churches and people of faith to walk with grieving people, here are a few of my conclusions about why we do this.



First, we are empathetic and sympathetic. Most people genuinely want the grieving person to not hurt. We care and don't want pain for them. The medical model of addressing pain is to eliminate it or its cause. We try finding ways to alleviate pain with our words. The problem is words rarely fix or remove the pain. Grief, by the very nature of living in a broken world, is not abnormal and the pain that comes with it isn't either. "Fixing" a person's grief or helping them "move on" seems like helping, but it is not.

Second, death scares us. Often when people "help" someone grieving, they are really managing their own discomfort with loss and its possibility in their own life. When we see death or loss in another person's experience it triggers our fear: "What if that happened to me?" In the modern world, we live with an illusion of control.

Grieving persons reveal an uncomfortable truth and shatter our illusions. It reminds us we are not in control and there are things we cannot prevent. We subconsciously need the grieving person to smile, laugh and cheer up in part because it makes us feel better; it recreates the illusion. Seeing others grieve reminds us of our own mortality and frailty.

As Christians we understand salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus means death has no ultimate power over us. We affirm an ultimate lack of death's "sting" (1 Cor. 15:55). But until Christ returns, we do feel a stinging. This is why Paul says we still mourn, just not without hope (1 Thes. 4:13) and why he says we should mourn with those who mourn (Rom. 12:15b).

Third, we are uncomfortable being silent. Hearing Job's questions provoke his friends' responses even though they should have remained silent. As a professor teaching young pastoral students, I often remind them to consider which moment they are in. We tend to answer heady theological questions when the moment is an emotional pastoral care moment.

What answer satisfies a parent whose child has been killed or a spouse whose husband or wife has been diagnosed with cancer? Usually when people ask questions in

the midst of the crisis of grief or trauma, those questions are best left unanswered. Like Job, the question they verbalize ("Why did this happen?" i.e., Job 3:11-26) is not the question they are truly asking ("God, where are you?!" i.e., Job 13:3, 23:1-17).

To be present without answering the questions offers those who grieve a way of realizing God's presence through our presence with them. I am not saying we should not have a theology that accounts for these concerns. But we ought to hold those theological assumptions with humility. God is at work and can handle their anger and sorrow.

Loving those who grieve

So how can we demonstrate love to those who grieve? We need to recognize, admit and manage our own fears. If we can love ourselves enough to be honest about our fears, then we can be healthy enough to care well for others.

We need to recognize our culture tries to ignore death and dying, but God's Word does not. By acknowledging our fears and the ways they are shaped by culture more than by faith, we can learn to recognize how our responses are more hurtful than helpful.

Additionally, we can avoid platitudes that minimize the pain of grief. Silence is golden. For seven days, Job's friends were a comfort to Job while they remained silent.

Finally, we can recognize grief as an expression of love. Rather than trying to fix grief or remove it, we can sit with people in their grief and bear it with them as they learn how to mourn the loss of someone they love. They will smile again and laugh and hope. But for the time being they need the presence of someone who will love them like God does—without conditions.

We demonstrate our love for grieving people by being in their sorrow and pain with them. We are sharing their love, even when it hurts. And our presence speaks truthfully to who God is.

Quentin P. Kimmison is chair of the Biblical & Religious Studies Division and associate professor of Christian Ministry at Fresno Pacific University and editor of A Road Too Short for the Long Journey, a book on grief.

“

Rather than trying to fix grief or remove it, we can sit with people in their grief and bear it with them as they learn how to mourn the loss of someone they love.

”

labels

How labels keep us from hearing, loving each other



Everyone has that drawer in their kitchen, or maybe yours is in the office. Mine is typically full of batteries, scotch tape and pens, the dried-up ones mixed in with those that still work, and probably some box tops I was supposed to send to school with the kids so their classroom could have 10 cents. Recently my husband decided that it was time to get that drawer in order, so he bought a drawer organizer and made a little home for everything. Now we know where to put the rubber bands and post-it notes, and we have no excuse for not finding an AA battery when we need it.

Labels are helpful for organizing. Our minds crave order in a chaotic world, and labels allow us to categorize things so that we don't waste time finding them and can focus on more important matters. When it comes to people, labels are less helpful. Labels allow us to distance ourselves from fellow humans, to create an "us" and a "them." Labels keep us from seeing the person by focusing only on one aspect of their life.

We don't even realize it, but when we attach a label to someone, we are discounting the majority of their life—their influences, their interests, their experiences, their hopes, their fears. We have deemed all of that as less important than one thing, often something they did not have full control over. The fact is, we can't truly love people that we can't see.



Human trafficking labels

Ten years ago, most people were not using the language of human trafficking. Women walking the streets were prostitutes, the men selling them were pimps and the guys paying for sex were johns. Here in Fresno, that began to change when, instead of seeing a criminal charge or a moment in time, service providers and law enforcement officers began to listen to stories.

They heard stories of children who ran away from home because they were being abused, of women who fell in love with a man who turned abusive and forced them to do things they didn't want to do, of men who felt trapped with no other choice but to keep working. The stories had been there all along, but the labels kept us from wondering about them. Applying a label to a person assumes that you know enough about them to put them in a category and put them on a shelf, and that's essentially what we did, until God began to open our eyes.

Suddenly workers at a youth shelter began to notice, as they listened to stories, that there were some commonalities. They began to realize that the story they were hearing today sounded a lot like the story they had heard yesterday, and that allowed them to be curious. Police officers began to sit with "prostitutes" and listen to their stories as well. When they saw past the label and began to wonder about the person, the reality started to emerge—that these were not women who had chosen this life but were women who were suffering and in need of resources. All of a sudden, victims were identified by name, not by a criminal charge, and the culture began to change.

When I began working with Central Valley Justice Coalition in prevention education, some of the language had already begun to shift, and certainly the attitude toward individuals who had been prostituted had softened. We no longer sought to punish victims as if they were criminals, but instead desired to offer resources to meet individual needs.

Hiding behind labels

It didn't take me long, however, to notice that we as a society had moved quickly to labeling other groups of people. Traffickers were "evil," "monsters," "the worst of the worst." Then we got curious about their stories, and we began to discover that traffickers had very often suffered abuse themselves, had been raised in gang neighborhoods where the model of manhood was a broken one, had been exploited themselves and saw recruitment as the only way out. Once again, listening to stories began to soften our hearts and helped us to see.

Sometimes the people we already love, the ones we think we know, can be the ones that we fail to see. At their worst, labels are the thing we hide behind so that others don't see the truth. We know the statistics, but we don't want to believe we know people who represent those numbers. We label him father, teacher, husband, pastor, and we don't know all that is hiding. Again, we cannot truly love people if we don't see them.

Sometimes love requires accountability. When someone's actions are hurting another person, love means acknowledging the behavior, not sweeping things under the rug, not allowing a person to hide behind the titles, positions, labels they hold. Repentance is fundamental. We must also commit to loving those who cause pain in ways that keep them from being discarded. We don't allow them to be forever identified by a moment any more than we allow that for victims, but we do require reconciliation, an acknowledgement of the pain caused and effort to make that right.

The work of repentance and restoration is hard, but it is our work as the church, the work we partner with the Spirit in and it starts with us. Loving our neighbor as ourselves begins with seeing ourselves. Acknowledging the ways that we as followers of Christ fail—the ways that we commodify people and fail to see their individuality and their humanity—is painful work that must be done.

We choose to see the people behind the screen, behind the counter and behind the products we buy. When we recognize our own complicity, we are much more eager to extend grace to others, more interested in what contributed to their current situations and more willing to recognize that there is more to them than we can see. Sometimes this requires that we pull off our own labels that identify us as part of a particular group and become part of a larger community.

A name is a very different kind of label. Can you imagine if my junk drawer contained a label for each individual item: "Black ballpoint pen with the doctor's office logo," and "Blue felt tip marker"? This would not be helpful for efficiency and it would not allow me to lump all the pens together. It amazes me to think that we serve a God who is not interested in efficiency or in figuring out the easiest way to group us all, but rather in knowing each of us individually.

Creating labels is actually more about me, my efficiency, my understanding of the world, my feeling of control. Loving our neighbor means letting go of our own convenient filing system and spending time with individuals, expanding our definitions instead of narrowing them. When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, he did not label her and dismiss her. Rather, he heard her story, even before she could tell it. Being seen is what saved her and her community. What if loving our neighbor as our self was as simple as starting with their name?

Christa Wiens is a member of North Fresno Church in Fresno, Calif., a graduate of Fresno Pacific University and a current Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary student, pursuing a master's degree in Ministry, Leadership and Culture. She works as the prevention education coordinator for Central Valley Justice Coalition, a nonprofit organization working to prevent human trafficking in the Central Valley of California and beyond. In five years with the organization, Wiens has created numerous classes and presentations and taught thousands of adults and young people to understand and identify human trafficking. Her heart is to see the church leading the way in ending this injustice.

LOVING ACROSS

Who is my neighbor? What does it look like to love my neighbor?

I sometimes like to sit on the porch of my apartment building with my neighbor. We talk about life as we watch the world go by, and as I've gotten to know her, we've shared coffee, food and stories and even gone together to the local pool.

But I share this with a nagging thought in the back of my mind. *I'm not sure I'm a very good neighbor.* Sure, there are the occasional porch sits and friendly greetings. But often I'm left wondering, what does loving my neighbor really mean?

Having traveled to Arizona, south Texas and Mexico on a pair of Mennonite Central Committee-led borderlands learning tours has added a new dimension to this question. When it comes to migrants at our southern border, who is my neighbor, and what does love look like?

Who is my neighbor?

Merriam-Webster defines "neighbor" as "one living or located near another" or "fellow man," meaning "a kindred human being."

While there is an element of proximity to the idea of neighbors—our next-door neighbors or neighbors in a nearby town—the definition seems to be more broad.

Thinking about my neighbor as a "kindred human being" sent me searching for

another definition. Kindred means "of a similar nature or character" or "of the same ancestry." Again, there are layers here. Kindred can be my biological family or those with whom I share a similar outlook on life—a kindred spirit. As humans, we are united as having been created in God's image. Could my neighbor, then, be any human being?

Neighbors in the Bible

Equipped with a better understanding of "neighbor," I studied what the Bible says about neighbors. Once again I pause to say that just as I am no neighborly expert, so I am not a Bible scholar.

A search for "neighbor" on BibleGateway.com produced 141 results, including 119 occurrences in the Old Testament and 22 in the New Testament.

According to Blueletterbible.org, biblical usage of "neighbor" can mean a friend, a member of the Hebrew nation or any person with whom we live or meet.

The command "Love your neighbor as yourself" occurs nine times in the Bible.

Leviticus 19:18 says, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

Three of the gospels refer directly to Leviticus 19:18. Jesus speaks about this second great commandment to love your





By Janae Rempel

SS

BORDERS

neighbor as yourself (the first being love of God) in Matthew 19:19, Matthew 22:39 and Mark 12:31. In Luke 10:27, Jesus discusses this with an expert in the law.

The command to “love your neighbor as yourself” is also found in Romans 13:9-10, Galatians 5:14 and James 2:8.

In Luke 10, Jesus expands on what it means to love our neighbor. When an expert in the law asks Jesus who his neighbor is, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. Perhaps it’s a familiar story. A man was stripped and beaten at the hands of robbers between Jerusalem and Jericho and left for dead. Both a priest and a Levite pass by, but a Samaritan “outsider”—the Jews and Samaritans did not always play nice—stops to

help. He cleans the man’s wounds and takes him to an inn, where he pays for his care.

The Samaritan was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers. Jesus commands the expert to “Go and do likewise.”

So, who is my neighbor? It appears Jesus is saying anyone in need.

How do I love my neighbor? By offering to help.

Jorge’s journey

At the CAME migrant shelter in Agua Prieta, Mexico, I met a family of migrants whose journey has been filled with peril.

Through an interpreter I learned that Jorge’s family owns a ranch in Guerrero, Mexico. When the family



purchased a truck for their ranching business, the state police began accusing them of working for organized crime. Because Jorge's family's land and resources are enviable, others began making accusations as well.

Jorge's grandfather, uncle, cousin and father have been killed by organized crime. When his house was burned, Jorge knew it was time to leave. He escaped first to Morelos, but as a result of continued threats, chose to bring his young family to the border.

Jorge has not reported his father's death. The reality is, local governments often work together with organized crime, so if a person reports a death, he or she is likely to be the next to go missing. Since he has no death certificate, all Jorge has as proof are photos of some of the murders. He scrolled through them on his phone—horrific images I cannot erase from my mind.

Later in the trip, we asked an attorney at the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project about Jorge's asylum case. The attorney said Jorge would likely lose before a judge but would have an argument to make an appeal. In order to win his case, he'll need to prove there's nowhere he can go in his home country. I was surprised the attorney said it wasn't a particularly strong case.

Extending a hand

Using a broad definition of neighbor, it seems that migrants at the border like Jorge qualify. Jorge is seeking a safe place to raise his young family. There's a need, and on an individual level, we are united by a common humanity. But semantics creates interesting creases in my brain as I consider the difference in responsibility between individuals and governments.

Borders are a necessary reality, and we cannot welcome people without some kind of vetting system. But what kind of pathway is there? In many ways, the problems extend beyond people to systems, which is overwhelming and complicated.



I admit I don't know all of the implications for welcoming people who show up on our doorstep. We ask legitimate questions: Are there enough pieces of the pie? What about the war on drugs? What does it mean for a government to love its neighbor? I'm left with more questions than answers.

A few topics for continued conversation come to mind. How could U.S. foreign policy help people stay home and thrive in their own communities? Would there be a way to clear the backlog in immigration courts by increasing the number of immigration judges?

It's true, we don't love our neighbor at the expense of our own family, and we can legitimately ask in what ways we—collectively and individ-

*How do I love my neighbor?
By offering to help.*

ually—are doing that. But can we also consider, if we're created in God's image, does that not also give us some common ground for a different kind of family?

In any case, people—on both sides of the border—become strangers no more when we listen to their stories. Our response will be quite different if we label people as neighbors instead of strangers or aliens. We would do well to resist the temptation either to romanticize or to vilify.

I certainly do not have a solution to the border crisis, but what if we as individuals chose not to look the other way but to take time to listen, see and care for needs? It's already happening at shelters like CAME in Agua Prieta and Casa Alitas in Tucson, and evident, too, in a Border Patrol agent who adds his own water to stations in the desert and seeks to help peers in emotional turmoil.

Personally, I can buy coffee from Café Justo, a coffee cooperative based in Chiapas, Mexico, formed to address poverty and migration. I can share stories of what I've seen.

Back on my front porch, I remember how, on our tour, we were asked to consider what opportunity is provided at the border. Whether that be the front door separating my neighbor's apartment from mine or the U.S./Mexico border, I'm left to wonder what it could look like to extend a neighborly hand instead of passing by on the other side.

Janae Rempel is associate editor of the Christian Leader magazine. She enjoys meeting people, traveling and storytelling. In addition to her participation on two MCC-led borderlands tours, she has traveled to countries in South America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. She lives in Hillsboro, Kan., and attends Hillsboro MB Church.

COVID-19 prompts creativity

Two California churches connect with families, community in fresh ways

Thursday, March 12, 2020, Neighborhood Church lead pastor Forrest Jenan awoke to news that California governor Gavin Newsom had limited gatherings to 250 people as a result of the new coronavirus and COVID-19, the disease it causes.

The day before, the COVID-19 outbreak had been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, causing a chain reaction of cancellations, closures and social distancing practices across the United States affecting everything from sporting events to church gatherings.

Jenan instinctively knew that Neighborhood Church (NC), a USMB congregation in Visalia, Calif., whose average attendance in 2019 was more than 1,900 people, would move entirely online. That first decision made, Jenan says his thoughts went immediately to helping the Visalia community.

“Our general posture as a church is, ‘How can we add value to the place that we call home?’” Jenan says.

Out of this posture of being “for” its community, Neighborhood Church developed a plan of action to respond with love and aid during the pandemic, which sprouted a collaborative effort with another U.S. Mennonite Brethren church.

Devising a plan

In light of the restrictions, Jenan called a “war room gathering” with the NC directional team to outline a framework for the church’s response to what was a rapidly evolving situation.

Because NC already streams its services online and offers a podcast, the



Distributing Drive-Thru Family Fun Packs is one way Neighborhood Church is responding to needs in its Visalia, Calif., community related to stay-at-home orders put into place in March as a result of the coronavirus. *Photo by Neighborhood Church.*

church was well-equipped with audio and video technology to transition to an online-only format, Jenan says, which freed the team to find unique ways of meeting needs in the community.

“There were really two conversations,” Jenan says. “We weren’t really going to talk about us going online—that was going to happen already. We were really just asking the question, ‘How can we help?’”

By communicating with NC’s network of community leaders and friends, Jenan and the NC directional team learned of immediate needs in Visalia and developed a three-part response seeking to add value to their city during the pandemic.

First, knowing some parents would still need to work outside the home, NC developed a plan to provide a kids’ day camp for children of essential personnel, including hospital staff, doctors and first responders.

Working together with the public health department in Tulare County, NC and its facility team takes every pre-

caution to limit health risks. For example, nurses perform temperature checks when children are dropped off, children wash their hands every hour, the team wipes down the campus throughout the day and the facility is fumigated at night. The camp is held in open air spaces as much as possible.

A combination of NC staff, college interns who had been sent home from their respective universities because of COVID-19 and volunteers staff the day camp.

Community members sent money to NC to be used for scholarships, Jenan says. The goal is to provide cost-effective childcare—\$60 per week for full-day camp from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., with half-day options available as well.

While NC initially planned to offer the day camp for three weeks, the NC team decided March 25 to continue the day camp for as long as California’s state-wide “stay-at-home” order is in place. The order went into effect March 19, 2020, limiting business operations to essential services such as pharmacies

and grocery stores, among other things, and will remain in effect until further notice.

Food, fun for families

Second, in order to reach out to a nearby low-income neighborhood, the church prepares and distributes Weekend To-Go Bags with groceries for those struggling to feed their families over the weekend.

Recognizing that schools only provide meals for children during the week and knowing that some parents might be faced with unemployment, NC fills bags with breakfast and lunch items for those needing help. The congregation is encouraged to donate items from a designated list or to make a monetary donation.

Third, NC began distributing Drive-Thru Family Fun Packs each Tuesday, which includes things related to a common theme like card games, family devotions, postcards and stamps, hike ideas, sunscreen, trail mix and coloring pages. Families simply drive to the church during two, one-hour designated time slots, and NC delivers the packs through vehicle windows. The first day, Jenan says the church ran out of supplies after distributing 150 bags.

Creating “touch points”

NC also formulated a response for its own congregation and others connecting online. That response included moving both its small groups and peer counseling services online and providing a daily devotional on social media.

At the end of March, the church began posting a weekly invitation on social media with a specific way people could serve their community. For example, a March 27 post encouraged people to send digital gift cards to teachers, first responders or healthcare workers.

“The best way for us to tell people about Jesus is by modeling that Jesus is for them,” Jenan says. “We do that best



Forrest Jenan, lead pastor at Neighborhood Church, records a message for “Church at Home.” In California, large gatherings were restricted March 12 because of the coronavirus, and as a result, Neighborhood moved its service entirely online.

Photo by Jordan Brokaw.

by us being for them. Obviously that same posture has driven every decision we’ve made over the last couple of weeks. Our staff is just so creative.”

The goal of NC’s response is to create “touch points” of connection, Jenan says, adding that with a fluid and potentially drawn-out situation, the challenge became finding healthy rhythms for the NC team and a balance between providing enough online resources without flooding people’s feeds.

“We definitely see it as an opportunity,” Jenan says. “In fact, our reach has grown since we’ve gone all digital. We’re reaching more people every week than we have been. That’s a good thing.”

According to Sarah Ledgerwood, NC office manager, data integrity manager and family ministry events coordinator, the church seeks to remain available, constant and encouraging.

“People look to their familiar faces and places when reacting to situations like this that are huge, scary and unknown,” Ledgerwood says. “Providing so many

resources and encouraging a sense of routine and normalcy is very comforting, and we are striving to be that place for people.”

A unique collaboration

COVID-19 has provided a unique opportunity for collaboration as churches nationwide are finding new and creative ways of doing and being the church. Some of NC’s ideas are being implemented elsewhere, including among the USMB family.

Mark Isaac is lead pastor at New Life Community (NLC), formerly Dinuba MB Church, just 27 miles from Visalia. Dinuba MB planted Neighborhood Church—then Visalia MB—in 1960.

As a result of a variety of connections—Isaac’s family formerly attended NC, and he and Jenan live in the same Visalia neighborhood—the door has always been open for collaboration, Isaac says.

So, during a March 18 webinar co-sponsored by Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary’s Center for Anabaptist Studies and USMB, Jenan shared about NC’s response, which led to a conversation between Isaac and Jenan.

“Mark heard me talking and shot me a private message and said, ‘Can my people call your people?’ And I said, ‘Absolutely,’” Jenan says. “Thus began a conversation. That’s really our heart, too. We want to be able to help and resource and brainstorm with other churches as much as we can.”

The two pastors connected staff members Cece Olea, NLC’s new community strategist, with Ari Parsons, NC’s Chief Party Thrower.

“The two got on the phone as Forrest and I were still on the web conference, sharing ideas that Cece began to implement with our staff,” Isaac says.

As a result, staff at NLC met to decide which ideas to implement.

In response, NLC refreshed its online presence on Facebook, actively engag-



In response to COVID-19, New Life Community in Dinuba, Calif., refreshed its online presence on Facebook, including providing online content for children and families. In this March 25 video posted on the New Life Kids Facebook page, Children's Ministry leader Kayla Isaak demonstrates how to make a favorite snack for "Show & Tell Wednesday."

Photo by NLC

ing people with video devotionals, questions and worship. NLC also began providing online content for children and families. On its children's ministry Facebook page, NLC began offering Sunday school curriculum with activity sheets and videos, as well as cooking and activity videos for families, Isaac says.

NLC packaged and mailed materials to families without an Internet connection.

For Easter, NLC distributed, via drive-thru, "Easter boxes" containing activity resources for families in the church and the community, Isaac says.

"When Forrest said that they had reached more people on the first Sunday of cancelled services than they would normally have reached when they gathered in their facility, I wondered if that would be true for us," Isaac says. "It has been, and that's changing our mindset and expectations going forward, beyond COVID-19. Isaiah wrote, 'and a child shall lead them.' In this case, our daughter church has inspired us as we re-engineer our ministries for transformational community impact."

Listening in order to love

Asked what message he would give to churches looking to serve their communities during the pandemic, Jenan says there are no bad ideas. He emphasizes a posture of listening when formulating responses, not only during COVID-19 but all the time.

"I think the church has made a mistake over the years in just assuming we know what people need, rather than taking the time to listen, hearing people's hearts, hearing their angst and letting them tell you what they need and then coming up with creative ways that we can partner with our communities," Jenan says.

As its focus has been all along, and continued through the pandemic, NC aims to love its community well.

"The thing I keep telling our staff is, 'What are we going to be remembered for in all of this?'" Jenan says. "Are we going to choose generosity over fear? Are we going to adapt to change? Are we going to keep loving our neighbors? Are we going to keep helping our people love our neighbors?" —*Janae Rempel*

Spots camp builds character

Midwest churches partner with Utah church for a "game changer"

"Hungry! Humble! Hustle!" The sound echoes through the dry Utah air as young athletes huddle-up under a pavilion and chant these words at the top of their lungs. The energy is contagious, but even more contagious is the love of Christ being displayed through coaches who have volunteered their time and vacation to serve.

For the past two summers, this has been the scene in Saratoga Springs, Utah, where Greenhouse Community Church (GCC) partners with a team of Midwest coaches and athletes to provide character-based coaching to youth in the community.

The Greenhouse story

Greenhouse was planted in 2013 by Tabor College graduates Jason and Nicole Quiring, and the leadership team expanded in 2016 to include fellow Tabor graduates Drew and Allie Pankratz and Logan Whitney, who met and married Miranda after moving to Utah.

The church currently meets for weekly gatherings in a dance studio and focuses on building relationships with members of the local community.

"We view our work as missions and partnerships rather than viewing it as a church plant," Quiring says.

He adds that in all of its outreach, GCC must be sensitive to the religious culture of Utah County and the Church of Latter-day Saints. Saratoga Springs, a city in Utah County, is home to less than 1 percent evangelical Christians.

In 2015, GCC partnered with Henderson (Neb) MB Church, now Living



Game Changers coaches huddle before kids arrive for the character-based sports camp offered by Greenhouse Community Church, Saratoga Springs, Utah, in partnership with a team of Midwest coaches and athletes. *Photo by Bailey Kaufman*

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Hope Church, to host Summer Bible Adventure, a three-day vacation Bible school. The Quirings worked with Henderson's Christine Quiring to tailor the curriculum used by the Henderson church for their VBS to meet the needs of the Utah County context.

The upbeat, fun nature of the VBS format drew in kids from the community and attendance grew.

"They see something different—the excitement, the joy," Christine says. "Our worship time is loud and fun, and we have a good time praising Jesus.... We emphasize Jesus as fully God and that he died for our sins and paid the whole price on the cross."

Changing the game

Greenhouse's vision for ministry continued to grow, and in 2017 four Tabor College students spent the month of January in Utah dreaming with Jason and Nicole about building a partnership between Greenhouse and the MB churches in the Midwest. As the vision team helped Greenhouse assess the needs of the community and the opportunities in front of them, it became clear that sports is an effective avenue for ministry in the community.

"Thousands and thousands of kids are involved with youth sports here," Quiring says. "It's insane. I was already coaching football and basketball and making great connections through that, so it seemed like a natural step."

Sports camps hosted by the city often are put on by volunteer coaches, and specialized sports camps are too expensive for many families in the area.

"Our vision became to provide a really quality sports training for a really affordable price," Quiring says.

However, Greenhouse wanted to make sure it's camp stood out by teaching more than just the skills of the sport.

"We decided to make it a character-based camp," Quiring says. "By going character-based, we were able to incorporate our faith and biblical truths without crossing lines."

The character traits highlighted in 2019 were hungry (to have passion and vision), humble (authenticity and meekness) and hustle (sticking with things and teamwork). A verse of Scripture was presented with each

trait and leaders performed skits and shared personal stories of how the day's trait was a "game changer" for them.

The character aspect of the camp has helped reignite a passion for sports in many campers, says Pankratz, GCC's youth pastor. "The politics that comes with youth sports out here can get nasty, and there's a lot of pressure put on kids to perform. Our heart behind the camp is to give kids freedom in their sport to just come, have a blast, learn important skills and get better."

Recruiting a team

When the vision team came back to Tabor's campus and shared about their experience, one student was particularly struck. Tena Loewen, a volleyball and basketball athlete from Hillsboro, Kan., remembers listening to the vision team share and knowing that God was providing her with an opportunity to combine her love for sports with her love for ministry.

"Seeing how God collided the Greenhouse team's dream with 'some of the dreams he had placed on my heart was really special,'" Loewen says.

In the summer of 2018, GCC launched its first Game Changers Sports Camp with the help of a team of athletes and coaches from the Midwest organized by Loewen. The camp, held in conjunction with Summer Bible Adventure, was received positively in the community, and Jason says the Saratoga Springs recreation director even reached out to Greenhouse about plans for the next summer.

"I've had so much positive feedback," Quiring says. "People say they can't believe the quality of coaching their kids are getting and their kids are coming home saying that camp was the most fun they've ever had playing sports."

Loewen and the Midwest team deserve the credit for this positive feedback, Pankratz says. Over the past

two summers, the coaching team has included high school coaches from Hillsboro High School in addition to Tabor College coaches and current and former athletes.

In 2019, 60 people, including children, were part of the Midwest team, and 90 children attended the camp. Team members came from Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma and Nebraska and represented the three Hillsboro MB churches—Hillsboro MB, Parkview and Ebenfeld—as well as Cross Timbers Church, Edmond, Okla., and Henderson's Living Hope. In addition to the sports camp, the Midwest team provided the personnel for the VBS, which was coordinated by Christine Quiring.

A family affair

While Summer Bible Adventure and Game Changers have been a blessing and outreach to the Saratoga Springs community, it has also mobilized families in the Midwest for missions.

"It's been really neat to see the multi-generational and the family discipleship that has come from this being a very reasonable trip for a lot of families," Loewen says.

Nathan Hiebert, the Hillsboro High head girls' basketball coach who attends Parkview MB Church, as does Loewen, has brought his family of seven on the trip each year, and despite needing to rent a larger van for the drive to Utah, the trip has been a perfect fit for his family.

"This trip seemed like a great match



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of our passions and skill sets,” he says. “Greenhouse was optimistic about us bringing our family, and God has allowed us to use our time and our giftings well through this trip.”

Phil and Melanie Thiessen are close friends of the Hieberts and decided to take part in the 2019 camp after hearing about the Hiebert family’s experience in Utah the first year.

“When you’re there with a family, you have to balance being present and missional with understanding that it’s okay to tend to your kids,” Melanie said. “Being a mom and being present with my kids was missional, and God even used it to minister to other families in the community.”

Robert Rempel, Hillsboro High’s athletic director who attends Hillsboro MB Church, has also brought his clan of seven on the trip each year.

“I really enjoy watching our own family serve,” he says. “Some of the older kids actually got to be a part of running the camp sessions and it’s really special to watch them lead.”

Dreaming forward

Currently, the COVID-19 outbreak has put plans for the 2020 VBS and sports camp, planned for July 21-24, on pause.

“Our game plan right now is to pray,” Loewen says. “I’ve been reminded that the Lord works and speaks however he wants to. If he wants this to happen this summer, then it will happen this summer.”

Despite this, the Greenhouse team has dreams for Game Changers beyond the one summer camp.

“Our dream is to build a facility where we could run programs throughout the year and possibly expand into some sort of sports ministry that has more permanent footprints here,” Quiring says.

Currently, Greenhouse does not have staff to tackle this long-term goal, but hopes to partner remotely with those who could provide leadership in purchasing ground, architecture and finances. Quir-

ing and Pankratz encourage anyone interested in supporting sports ministry in Saratoga Springs to contact them and to possibly participate in a vision trip.

“If a picture is worth a thousand words, then an experience is worth a million,” Quiring says.

—Bailey Kaufman

Five churches, one VBS

Hesston Community VBS is a 60-year ministry

A 60-year community tradition in Hesston, Kan., is one of the many events that has been disrupted by the coronavirus. Five churches, including Hesston MB Church, from four different denominations join together each year to host Hesston Community Vacation Bible School.

Hesston MB along with two Mennonite USA congregations, a Methodist congregation and an independent church were planning to host the annual event May 26-29 until the governor of Kansas issued a stay-at-home order March 28.

“We are going to postpone VBS until after the stay-home order has been lifted,

and we are safe to gather in large groups again,” says the group’s Facebook page. “We look forward to the day we can serve our community with the VBS it deserves.”

The planning team hopes to hold Hesston Community Vacation Bible School (HCVBS) sometime this summer, says J.L. Martin, Hesston MB Church pastor of children and families.

HCVBS got its start in 1959 when Hesston Mennonite Church invited children from the community to take part in a week of games, crafts and Bible stories. When 206 youngsters registered for the event, the 18 staff and 10 volunteers were overwhelmed. Community members quickly recognized that one church would not be able to accommodate all the children, so the next year five churches decided to host the event cooperatively.

This year, that cooperative venture will celebrate six decades of ministry. In 2019, 70 volunteers served 270 children through HCVBS, which is held in the evening for children ages 4 through those finishing fifth grade.

Over the years, the participating churches have made changes to components of the week. For example, initially



J.L. Martin, standing, Hesston (Kan.) MB Church pastor of children and families, leads the Bible story station at the 2019 Hesston Community Vacation Bible School.

Photo by Hesston MB Church

each church hosted an age group at their site. The individual churches each selected their own curriculum and provided teachers and all supplies needed. This meant that parents with several children were dropping off and picking up children at more than one location.

A major shift took place in 2014 when the churches agreed to use the same curriculum, a change that Martin says has reduced the cost to churches.

The partnering churches find that VBS curriculum produced by Group Publishing works well for them. They like the quality of the music and how well material is organized for the various age groups. This year they plan to use Group's "Rocky Railway: Jesus' Power Pulls Us Through."

In 2019 another change was made. HCVBS was held in one location, Hesston Mennonite Church, which has a large facility. Each church was in charge of a different area such as story time, crafts and recreation across all age groups. Volunteers from each church could choose what area to work in, allowing volunteers from different churches to work together.

Martin says that working together has had a very positive effect on the community as citizens see the churches working in unity and putting aside their theological differences for the common good of the community.

Over the years, the planning team has addressed, prayed about and worked through various challenges, including theological differences, selecting a date each year and use of volunteers.

Follow-up with children who make faith decisions during VBS is an ongoing challenge. When each church hosted a specific age group, each church followed up on "their" students. Moving to one site has created new follow-up challenges.

But Martin is encouraged, believing that solutions are possible.

"(Hesston Community VBS) is worth the few challenges, but you must be willing to be flexible," he says.

Michelle Coffman, coordinator of children and youth at Hesston United Methodist Church agrees. "The benefit of doing work together in spite of our different traditions, theology, and processes is very rewarding," she says. "It speaks to the community about the unity of Jesus."

This VBS takes a lot of effort, says Coffman, but is a "nice way of uniting with others over the love of children, church and the gospel. We often assume we are so different than others, but when you can sit down and work towards a common goal, you realize that we all have the same issues, concerns and desires."

Martin says putting aside theological and organizational differences happens when churches "choose to focus on Jesus and similarities."

HCVBS culminates in a Sunday event for children and their families. On the Sunday following HCVBS, the five churches host a community gathering where attendees view a slide show of photos from the week, and the children perform a musical that shares the biblical principles they learned during the week. A pastor shares the gospel and encourages the audience to find a church home in the community. The finale makes the planning, challenges and exhaustion of the week worth it all. —Dara Halydier

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Students at Prodigal Church, Fresno, Calif., meet online for their weekly Bible study.



Jeff Blomquist preaching at Cornerstone Community Church's (Harvey, N.D.) Palm Sunday drive-in service.

Ministry in the midst of COVID-19

As shelter-in-place orders and social distancing guidelines were introduced in early March to curb the spread of the coronavirus and limits on the number of people who could gather face-to-face continued to drop, USMB congregations creatively adapted their activities and ministries to meet local, state and national recommendations that initially changed almost daily. *Photos courtesy of church social media sites.*



Medhane-Alem Evangelical Church of Seattle (Wash.) holds a live online service March 22.



Live stream services at Bethany Church, Fresno, Calif., allow for multitasking.



Butler Church, Fresno, Calif., pastor Scott Holman preaching from home.



Before shelter-in-place orders limited gatherings, attendees at Kingwood Bible Church, Salem, Ore., March 16 say hello a new way.



A family from First MB Church, Wichita, Kan., have church at home.



Mountain View Church, Fresno, Calif., distributes hot meals to needy individuals and families.



The "physically distant" Sunday crew at Axiom Church, Peoria, Ariz.

Sailing boldly ahead

Thanks to COVID-19, ministry will never be the same

As I write this, the entire world is in the middle of a pandemic. COVID-19 has required a response never previously experienced. We all know this; we're all living it. I remember the responses, both personally and corporately, to 9/11 and, for those of us who live in Oklahoma, to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Those were devastating experiences that resulted in days full of news-watching, and as a pastor, dealing with the fallout as people's fears escalated.

But COVID-19 is different. It's all-encompassing. It appears to be long-lasting in its effect on our nation's daily life. The ramifications for the church and ministry seem daunting at times. When will this all end? When does life get back to "normal"? Will there ever be a time when we return to normal? Will there be another pandemic after this one?

In the midst of this radical change for our lives and for the life and ministry of our USMB churches, I have witnessed a truly amazing, passionate, inspired, unruffled and composed response from our pastors and leaders. The ingenuity, imagination and problem-solving capacity of our MB family has been nothing short of incredible. We've turned to Jesus, pleading for wisdom and insight for how to move forward, and he has answered.

Jesus saw this coming. God hasn't been caught off-guard. So, what we've beheld is exactly what we've consistently claimed to know and trust. That Jesus will be with us and will never forsake us. That he will see us through the darkest of valleys. In fact, our trust has soared as we've encountered Jesus in fresh new ways and feel and know his presence as we move forward during these most challenging of times.

I am honored to be associated with men and women who have rallied with grace,

faith and immense energy in facing an unseen adversary. Instead of cowering in the shadows, our MB family is doing all it can to help mitigate the effects this virus has brought upon us and our communities. I think we'd be doing even more if we weren't restricted by personal contact rules and recommendations.

I've witnessed older people learning how to use Zoom so they can be a part of a small group. I've heard of groceries delivered, communion drive-thrus, innumerable phone calls to check on a person's welfare and people connecting by FaceTime just to bring a cheerful word of encouragement. Pastors have learned how to preach to an empty room—and do it well. Worship leaders inspire us via Facebook Live. Children's pastors teach kids through Zoom breakout rooms. Prayer teams use up lots of bandwidth as they gather to pray fervidly for our people and those around us. The church boldly sails ahead into uncharted waters with Jesus at the helm.

This is mission and ministry as it should be. It flexes as needed. It seeks new pathways. In fact, there are things we've learned during the past few months that will remain with us regardless of whether or not we return to our previous ways of life. Ministry won't be the same—ever again. That's a good thing. Hardship has a way of refining us and teaching us how to cope in ways we hadn't yet imagined.

We can take these things forward into the future. To look at it that way, COVID-19 will result in many good things: innovative methods, intensified reliance on Jesus, novel ways of expressing compassion, experiencing the family of God plowing through challenges together and above all, knowing the One we serve is most worthy of our trust!■



Don Morris
began serving as the USMB national director Aug. 1, 2016. Prior to accepting this new position, Morris served as the USMB interim executive director for two years and as the director of Mission USA since 2004. He and his wife, Janna, live in Edmond, Okla., where they attend Cross Timbers Church.

I thought I was ready for anything

High school graduation looks different as a parent

Graduation day. This significant marker in a person's life does not go unnoticed. Family and friends are eager to watch as their loved one walks across the stage, shakes the administrator's hand and grabs their hard-earned diploma. Cell phones are recording videos and snapping pictures to capture this special moment honoring academic achievement. Those unable to attend the ceremony are happy to send well wishes through cards, phone calls and social media. They may even be watching live streams on their phones or computers. This is an extraordinary day of expectations fulfilled and yet to come.

As a youth pastor, I have watched over 20 years of senior classes graduate. Watching parents in our church raise their children, struggle through the teenage years and launch their young adults off to college or into the workforce has to some extent been my life.

I have been to many high school graduations, but never as the parent. That will change soon. My oldest child will graduate in 2021. In some ways, I feel like I have been there before. Yet, in many more ways, being the parent has brought new perspective.

To walk with parents and teens as they grow and mature together in the midst of struggles, joy, victories and defeats has been a privilege. It has taught me how fast these years go and how quickly transitions happen. It prepared me to walk through these teenage years with my boys.

I have been very purposeful in thinking that the desire of my heart is for my sons to live their lives knowing and loving God. As they have grown, I have

wanted their love for God to come first and for that to determine their course in life, their relationships, their jobs, their life journeys. One thing I've tried to guard against is trying to plan out their lives for them.

I prepared for the rapid pace of high school. It has been a gift to be able to keep an eye out for and seek out those opportunities for sweet times together. I prepared for their quest for independence and have been able to step back and let go. While it isn't always easy, it has been helpful to be intentional and recognize that not every moment is a teachable moment. Often the teaching has come in not saying anything.

I was prepared for anything parenting a teen could throw at me. Ha! You know that's not true, but it is how I felt until my oldest did something unexpected. I have been intentional and involved and wanting him to make his own choices. Wouldn't you know, that's exactly what he did! Only this time he didn't make the same decisions for his life that I would have made if I were in his situation. As my son has grown, I have appreciated and encouraged his ability to make his own decisions apart from the pressures and expectations of others. However, those "others" were not meant to include me. It was easy when his choices were those I would have chosen for him.

Suddenly, I am once again aware of my selfishness. It comes out in my parenting, marriage, politics, church life and everywhere. I'm driven over and over to say to the Lord, "Not my will, but yours." One more year until graduation. May I trust in the Lord and lay my will down. ▀



Russ Claassen
is the Southern
District Conference
youth minister and
serves with USMB
Youth, the national
youth ministry leader-
ship team. Claassen
graduated from Tabor
College in 1994 with a
bachelor's degree in
elementary education
and from Denver
Seminary in 1999 with
a master's degree in
youth and family min-
istry. He has 20 years of
experience working
with youth and families
in the church and camp
ministry settings.
He and his wife,
Chandelle, have
two sons.

MILESTONES

BAPTISM/MEMBERSHIP

Brandon Ramirez was baptized at **South Mountain Community Church, Draper (Utah) Campus**, March 29. Candace Davis was baptized March 22.

Sharlae Whetten was baptized at **South Mountain Community Church, Lehi (Utah) Campus**, March 15.

Val Mawhirter and Kayla Riley were baptized at **Valleyview Bible Church, Cimarron, Kan.**, Feb. 16.

Three people were baptized at **Axiom Church, Peoria, Ariz.**, in February.

Liz Wilson was received as a member at **Enid (Okla.) MB Church**, Feb. 9.

Eighty-five people were baptized at **Neighborhood Church, Visalia, Calif.**, in 2019.

WORKERS

Lura Lomsdale concluded her service as church secretary at **Cornerstone Community Church, Topeka, Kan.**, March 6.

Kayla Isaak began serving as children's ministry leader at **New Life Community, Dinuba, Calif.** Cece Olea began serving as community strategist.

Stacie Winckler began serving as interim youth administrator at **North Fresno (Calif.) Church**. Aaron and Christa Wiens began serving as interim teaching sponsors.

DEATHS

Glanzer, Robert E. "Bob," Huron, S.D., member of Bethesda MB Church, Huron, South Dakota state representative, Sept. 13, 1945—April 3, 2020, of COVID-19. Parents:

Jacob S. and Mattie "Olive" King. Spouse: Penny. Children: Sally Burkholder, Tom; five grandchildren.

Glanzer, Roger R., Huron, S.D., Bethesda Church, Huron, Dec. 28, 1941—Feb. 28, 2020. Parents: Joe A. and Margery Glanzer. Spouse: Jerolyn Pullman. Children: Todd, Jory; four grandchildren, seven great-grandchildren.

Graumann, Donald Clyde, Hillsboro, Kan., member of Hillsboro MB Church, Feb. 13, 1932—Feb. 26, 2020. Parents: Ferdinand J. and Lydia (Seibel) Graumann. Spouse: Marion Dick. Children: Donita Warren, Donell Tallackson; four grandchildren, one great-grandchild.

Hofer, Mari, Huron, S.D., member of Bethel MB Church, Yale, S.D., July 22, 1968—March 28, 2020 of COVID-19. Parents: Jim and Patty Glanzer Gross. Spouse: Quint Hofer. Children: Caleb, Zachary, Lily.

Just, Raymond, Hillsboro, Kan., member of Ebenfeld MB Church, Hillsboro, Dec. 11, 1928—Feb. 26, 2020. Parents: Pete and Julia (Gaede) Just. Spouse: Marge. Children: Darrel, Bev Vogel; five grandchildren, six great-grandchildren.

Martens, Dennis Jay, Fairview, Okla., member of Fairview MB Church, April 8, 1950—March 13, 2020. Parents: Edward L. and Bertha May (Wichert) Martens. Spouse: Sandie Burghart. Children: Blaine, Brent; two grandchildren.

Regier, Luella "Jane," Buhler, Kan., member of Buhler MB Church, July 4, 1931—Jan. 31, 2020. Parents: Lawrence and Ruby (Westervelt) Holmes. Spouse: Leland J. Regier (deceased). Children: Steven, Thomas, James, Paul (deceased); five grandchildren, one great-grandchild.

Sánchez, Alberto "Beto," Mission, Texas, member of Iglesia Menonita, La Joya, Texas, Oct. 16, 1927—Sept. 13, 2018. Par-

ents: José Sanchez and Maria Guzmán. Spouse: Andrea M. Moreno Sánchez. Thirteen children (two deceased); several grandchildren.

Schmidt, Vernon Elon, Fairview, Okla., member of Fairview MB Church, June 13, 1924—March 17, 2020. Parents: Ben T. and Martha (Janzen) Schmidt. Spouse: Ruby Willems. Children: Tarry, Darrell, Elaine Lorton, Barbara; nine grandchildren, 19 great-grandchildren, two great-great-grandchildren.

REACHING IN

FELLOWSHIP

Cornerstone Community Church, Topeka, Kan., hosted a puzzle and game night Feb. 29.

The women of **Corn (Okla.) MB Church** held a tacos and Bunco night Feb. 20.

The Zoar MB Church, Inman, Kan., "Sisters" group hosted a Soup and Salad Supper, Feb. 17. Representatives from the Inman Ministerial Alliance were guest speakers and an offering was taken to support their ministry. The church held a Valentine banquet Feb. 15. The meal was created and served by the high school Cross Training students.

Valleyview Bible Church, Cimarron, Kan., hosted a Valentine banquet Feb. 16.

Women from **Koerner Heights Church, Newton, Kan.**, brought their favorite teacup or mug for a ladies' event Feb. 16. Tea, coffee and dessert were served.

Heritage Bible Church, Bakersfield, Calif. hosted a Valentine dinner and program Feb. 14, which included a complimentary photo, free raffle prizes, video entertainment and more.

Ulysses churches merge

New Life Church, a USMB congregation in Ulysses, Kan., has merged with Patterson Avenue Church of God. The newly formed congregation has chosen the name New Beginnings Community Fellowship.

The two churches finalized the merger by separate vote in October 2019. New Beginnings gathers for worship in the former New Life Church facility. New Beginnings will be bi-denominational, participating fully with USMB and Church of God Ministries, of which the former Patterson Avenue Church of God is a part. Each church's pastor will continue

as co-pastors—Nathan Engelman from New Life Church and Larry Borthwick from Patterson Avenue Church of God. The Southern District Conference Board of Faith and Life has met with Borthwick and credentialed him as a pastor in the district.

"There is a new sense of momentum and energy that the merger gives," says Tim Sullivan, SDC minister. "The pastoral team of Nathan and Larry have formed a strong friendship, and both are eager to see where this will take them together." —CL

North Fresno (Calif.) Church hosted a ladies' game night Feb. 1.

Hillsboro (Kan.) MB Church held a family game night Jan. 26 with live game shows, table games and snacks.

People from **New Life Community, Dinuba, Calif.**, gathered for prayer and fasting Jan. 13 and 27.

WORSHIP

North Fresno (Calif.) Church held an Ash Wednesday Service Feb. 26 with worship, Scripture readings and interactive stations.

Lighthouse Church, Denver, Colo., hosted a city-wide worship night Feb. 21.

REACHING OUT

LOCALLY

Axiom Church, Peoria, Ariz., has partnered with Christ Church of the Valley to install a playground on the Axiom property. Using resources gifted by Christ Church of the Valley, the project will provide the only public access playground in Old Town Peoria and help Axiom love its city by giving children and families a safe place in the neighborhood to gather and play.

Together with local ministry partners, **North Fresno (Calif.) Church** hosted a Freedom Sunday gathering Feb. 23. The event provided an opportunity to learn

about and lament human trafficking that happens in California's Central Valley.

People from **Faith Bible Church, Omaha, Neb.**, participated in an apartment outreach Feb. 11, looking for opportunities to meet new people, give a small gift and share gospel information.

GLOBALLY

The creative projects group at **Willow Avenue Mennonite Church, Clovis, Calif.**, contributed nine comforters to MCC's Great Winter Warm Up event.

Dress-a-Girl dresses for 132 girls were sewn by people from **New Life Community, Dinuba, Calif.**, for distribution in Nigeria, R Congo and the Philippines.

CLEARINGHOUSE

Local Church

Pastor of Worship/Family Ministries: Shafter MB Church is currently in the search process for a full-time pastor of worship and family ministries. The community of approximately 20,000 is located in the southern San Joaquin Valley of California, 10 miles northwest of Bakersfield. Responsibilities include overseeing and implementing blended worship services as well as family ministry programs. A full job description and additional information is available at www.shaftermb.org/pastoralposition

Worship Leader: Rosedale Bible Church, Bakersfield, Calif., is searching for a worship leader to work closely with the pastors to create worship services and develop worship teams that help lead the congregation in the power of the Spirit to see and savor the greatness of God in Jesus Christ. Fostering dynamic congregational worship and singing the best of the old and the best of the new, is a key priority for our church. For additional information and inquiries, contact email is kfast@evergrowag.com

Agency Listings

Chief Development Officer: For over 100 years, MB Foundation (www.mbfoundation.com) has developed a robust, successful stewardship ministry for individuals, MB congregations and ministries and other Christian communities and organizations across the U.S. with over \$250 million under management. To meet growing needs, MB Foundation is seeking an individual to serve on the senior leadership team as chief development officer who is an entrepreneurial leader to develop, implement and manage a comprehensive development and marketing plan. For more information go to <http://bit.ly/2R6VHnk> or contact Ron Infinger at ron@dba-search.com

Church Relations Director: MB Foundation is seeking an individual who will champion biblical stewardship, serve churches and pastors, encourage generosity and promote MB Foundation and its services to pastors, churches and ministries throughout the MB family. This position may office out of either Fresno, Calif., or Hillsboro, Kan. Resumes may be sent to Jon C. Wiebe, MB Foundation, PO Box 220, Hillsboro, KS 67063 or jwiebe@mbfoundation.com. A full job description is available at www.mbfoundation.com/employment

Watershed Church concludes ministry

Watershed Church, a missional USMB community in Kansas City, Mo., has announced it will dissolve in 2020. Co-pastors Jason Phelps and Paul Bartel announced their resignations in August 2019, effective Dec. 31, 2019. As a result, the Watershed community collectively agreed that the life cycle of the church was over and committed to celebrating in 2020 what the community has experienced and accomplished together.

"Watershed has loved and served its community through the years it has existed," says Southern District Conference minister Tim Sullivan. "The Southern District is happy for how God has used this band of believers to influence, encourage and minister to the city around them."

In the first few months of 2020, Watershed intended to celebrate its neighborhood and community, culminating in a final Easter celebration. Because Kansas City and the surrounding area was under a mandated shelter-in-place policy due to the coronavirus, Watershed cancelled its Easter celebration. Instead, the pastors prepared Easter baskets for each member of the community that included gifts and filled eggs for a family egg hunt. The baskets along with a letter were delivered to doorsteps on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday.

Looking to the future, any remaining church funds will be given to various Kansas City organizations. Phelps and Bartel desire to develop and lead retreat-based cohorts on journeys of spiritual transformation.—CL

From TESTIMONY, page 9

chance, I'd do it again. But I was in big trouble. By accessing a protected computer without authorization, I had broken a federal law and faced up to 10 years in prison.

Had I talked with Michelle and released my frustration earlier, perhaps I wouldn't have done it. But God had to break and rebuild me piece by piece.

Sure that Michelle would leave me, I entertained the thought of suicide. The night I planned to take my life, I went to Facebook to leave one final message. The first thing I saw was a video. I don't know how it made my feed, but I clicked it and heard the gospel like never before.

I started bawling. Noticing my cousin was online, I reached out. He had gotten saved several years earlier, but when he'd preach the Gospel, I'd tell him to shut up. Now I knew we needed to talk.

When he called, I asked how I could survive my troubles. He told me to put my faith in Jesus and encouraged me to pray. I wondered where I'd get a priest at that hour. Assur-

ing me we could talk directly to God, my cousin prayed. Peace covered me. I felt a touch on my shoulder and heard a voice saying, "It's going to be okay. I am here." I surrendered my life to Christ.

The next day I told Michelle what had happened, and we started attending church. I shared my story with our couples' Bible study leader. Instead of throwing me out, he knelt beside me and said, "Mario, your sin is no greater than mine." I finally understood God's unconditional love for me.

After court dates spanning two years, I received my sentence—six months of home confinement, five years probation, 200 hours of community service and a \$50,000 fine. While I was on probation, we moved to Huron, S.D., to get a fresh start.

God has taught me that his plan will be carried out, not mine. Now I can't help but live for him because I understand what he did on the cross. I can't find love like that anywhere else. ▀



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We're going to Kansas City

USMB Gathering 2020 is worthwhile investment

It's time to once again come together as a U.S. Mennonite Brethren family—for USMB Gathering 2020 in Independence, Mo. (north Kansas City). I encourage pastors and spouses to make plans now to join us July 21-23 for the biennial national pastors' conference and everyone for our national convention, July 23-25.

The theme is "Increasing Impact," with a focus on how we can increasingly maximize our personal and collective impact through enhanced soul care, leadership development, generosity, intentional disciple-making and evangelism—as we strive to make a real difference for Jesus in our communities, nation and the world. You can register online at <https://usmb.org/gathering2020/>

Both events will take place at Stoney Creek Hotel and Conference Center in Independence—just a few miles down the road from the stadium of the Super Bowl champion Kansas City Chiefs. In 2019, Stoney Creek Hotel received the "Certificate of Excellence" from TripAdvisor.

Donna Sullivan, USMB administrative secretary, worked diligently to negotiate the lowest room rates (including breakfast) at this beautiful, almost new facility. Nestled within the Falls of Crackerneck Creek, there are beautiful nature views and many recreation opportunities along the two-mile walking path surrounded by a small lake right behind the hotel. You can visit Bass Pro Shops right next door or nearby Country Club Plaza.

Meeting at convention is something Mennonite Brethren have done for decades. It's a unique time for gathering together to share stories, hear updates, listen to quality speakers, take part in inspiring worship, do a little business, renew old friendships and create new ones. This is something that we do together to build strong bonds and relationships.

As we meet in Kansas City, I believe it will also be a time of recognizing the diverse cultures and ethnicities that make up USMB. Diasporic people groups, particularly Congolese and Ethiopian, have been connecting with us recently for potential affiliation. In

fact, a mini summit of Congolese pastors and leaders will take place on the Thursday afternoon of USMB Gathering 2020.

Four different main speakers plus a live panel discussion led by pastor Boris Borisov of Pacific Keep will express a variety of ideas about how we can personally and collectively make an increasing impact for Jesus. Rob Reimer (pronounced Ree'mer) will share with our pastors about increasing their own soul care and marriage health as they serve their congregations. Gary Hoag, known as the Generosity Monk, has dedicated his life to encouraging Christian generosity while serving in leadership positions at Denver Seminary and Biola University. Kadi Cole is an author, speaker and leadership trainer who is passionate about helping local churches thrive and equipping leaders to fulfill their calling. Her newest project is to help churches to do a better job of increasing female leadership in their congregations. Nzuzi Mukawa, of the Democratic Republic of Congo, is currently serving as a pastor, mission professor, Multiply team leader and missionary church planter, mobilizing churches in DR Congo for mission and evangelism. It's a great group of presenters.

The USMB staff and leadership board realizes that it is indeed an investment to pay for registration, accommodations and travel costs to attend. That's why we've worked hard to make it a most worthwhile event. Many churches will send their pastors, but I sincerely hope that many others will attend as well, that we continue to gather in this collective way in order to build one another up, worship together and uphold relationships. There's a trend in America to forego denominational meetings. I think this creates isolation, vacuums and disinterest about our companion churches. We need one another.

So, I'm asking for us all to consider this gathering a priority. Pastors and ministry leaders, please encourage your flock to attend. Come to Kansas City, inspired to learn and engage with our USMB family in how we might have increasing impact: together!■



Don Morris began serving as the USMB national director Aug. 1, 2016. Prior to accepting this new position, Morris served as the USMB interim executive director for two years and as the director of Mission USA since 2004. He and his wife, Janna, live in Edmond, Okla., where they attend Cross Timbers Church.

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Gary G. Hoag is president and CEO of Global Trust Partners and provides spiritual and strategic counsel for nurturing a culture of generosity in local churches.



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