

# CHRISTIAN LEADER

November / December 2020

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# Loving in return

God's love for us calls us to love others

Last fall as we began planning the 2020 editorial calendar, Associate editor Janae Rempel and I were excited to try something new—a year-long theme that would encourage U.S. Mennonite Brethren to think about what it means to be healthy disciples and healthy churches guided by the Great Commandment—loving God, our neighbors and ourselves. We settled on the phrase Vision



2020 for this theme based on Matthew 22:37-40. As this is the last issue of that effort, I thank the writers who have contributed to this project, including Jon Wiebe, who in an online essay for this issue reflects on loving others in the context of his trips to Ukraine.

God's command to love others has implications during this global pandemic, which has dominated so many aspects of our lives in 2020. Currently we're reminded that wearing a mask, limiting the things we do outside our homes and social distancing will help our businesses stay open, keep children in school and protect people—including vulnerable individuals in our churches and communities—from the coronavirus. Wearing masks, a simple act that has become surprisingly divisive, is not about ourselves but about serving and loving others.

COVID-19 isn't the only event of 2020 that has challenged us to demonstrate love for others. Events this summer reminded us that racism is something that Christians must address. The rallies and marches highlighted for me the importance of individually and corporately demonstrating that love can transcend racial hatred. The webinar series, "Understanding Racism and Our Part in the Battle Against It," sponsored by USMB and the Center for Anabaptist Studies at Fresno Pacific University is helping me understand the history of racism, and I hope this knowledge will help me know how to better address racism in myself, in our churches and in our communities.

In a recent sermon, our pastor reminded the congregation that God's command to love others, including people with whom we disagree, is not optional. When it comes to disagreements, politics is certainly one area in which even we Christians struggle to graciously differ. Since loving others is not optional for Jesus' disciples, can we acknowledge that Christians can be Democrats and Republicans and agree to preserve our relationships despite political differences?

Loving God, myself and others sounds easy, but the events of 2020 remind us that it's not as easy as it sounds. Our vision for 2020 did not include the craziness we have seen. We are reminded that we do our best to plan and anticipate but so much is beyond our control. One thing we are certain of is that God is faithful to us, and we are called to be faithful in return. And faithfulness calls us to love—both God and our neighbors. ▀



Connie Faber

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## Support USMB on Giving Tuesday



Individuals and churches will have

opportunity to support USMB on Giving Tuesday, Dec. 1, 2020. Giving Tuesday is a global day dedicated to generosity and falls on the first Tuesday after Thanksgiving, Black Friday and Cyber Monday.

All donated funds will be used to support USMB mission and ministry, including resourcing USMB church planters and providing LEAD initiatives for USMB pastors and churches.

"Every dollar given on Giving Tuesday goes toward ministry, not overhead," says USMB national director Don Morris. "It means that we can better resource our MB pastors and churches through our USMB LEAD initiatives. It means we can provide project management resources for our MB church plants. It allows us to provide connecting points for immigrant churches which are seeking a family to belong to. Your donations make a huge kingdom difference."

In the six years USMB has been part of Giving Tuesday, donors have contributed more than \$186,000, including \$38,305 last year.

"Giving Tuesday has been a beneficial USMB fundraising campaign, providing us with resources to mobilize for mission and ministry," Morris says. "We're praying for another good day of giving that allows us to do even more."

For more information about

USMB's Giving Tuesday campaign, visit [www.usmb.org/GivingTuesday](http://www.usmb.org/GivingTuesday). USMB invites donors to use the hashtag #increasingkingdomimpact. —USMB

## Multiply Review Task Force makes recommendations

Guided by an in-depth analysis of Multiply's culture, board functionality and senior leadership, the Multiply Review Task Force has made 17 recommendations to the Multiply board, as well as USMB and Canadian Conference of MB Churches (CCMBC) leadership boards, according to an Oct. 7 joint statement from USMB national director Don Morris and CCMBC national director Elton DaSilva.

USMB and CCMBC collaborated in February 2020 to perform an extensive review of Multiply, the global MB church planting ministry, following Multiply's merger and consequent demerger with C2C Network. A binational task force was formed at the request of the Multiply board and appointed by the USMB and CCMBC executive boards.

This task force engaged the service of John Radford of Transpectives Consulting Inc., who conducted an in-depth analysis of the mission agency's culture, board functionality and senior leadership. Radford delivered his report to the task force May 25.

A Sept. 1 statement announced the completion of the Task Force's review of Multiply and the submission of a report, including recommendations, to the Multiply board, as well as USMB and CCMBC leadership boards. The boards subsequently affirmed these recommendations.

According to the Oct. 7 statement, these recommendations include, but are not limited to changes in gover-

nance to allow for greater input from the constituency, changes in board composition, changes in qualification for board chair (determined skill sets), changes to senior leadership style and significant recommendations as it relates to culture.

As the first step toward fully implementing the recommendations, the U.S. and Canadian boards will be appointing new Multiply board members to replace outgoing board members who have "finished their term or have resigned effective immediately." This new board will work with present senior leadership to facilitate further changes recommended by the task force. Read the full statement at [www.usmb.org](http://www.usmb.org). —USMB

## CL wins award

The *Christian Leader* was awarded fourth place in the Evangelical Press Association's Best in Class Contest. Winners were announced Oct. 2.

Judges complimented the magazine's "bright, airy cover" and "good clear writing." One judge wrote, "Good emphasis overall on what USMB folks are doing."

The Best in Class contest categories were determined by circulation ranges for print magazines with a nearly even number of contestants in each category. For most magazines, contestants competed against a different group of magazines than in the Awards of Excellence contest where competition is divided by type of magazine. —CL

## MB Foundation expands staff

MB Foundation's commitment to expanding services has resulted in a number of recent staff hires.

Nate Yoder has been named chief development officer and started Sept. 1 in MB Foundation's Fresno, Calif.,



office. Yoder brings experience in leadership, having served as the executive director of West Coast Mennonite Central Committee, in pastoral roles for 15 years and as a regional leader with the Brethren in Christ for four years. He is a graduate of Asbury Theological Seminary and Denver Seminary.

As chief development officer, Yoder will serve as a member of the senior leadership team and direct a team of six field staff from Kansas and California offices.

Yoder and his wife, Grace, are parents of three children. They attend North Fresno Church.

Marlin Hielt has been hired as church relations director in the Fresno office. He has pastored churches for more than 30 years, most recently at Fairview (Okla.) MB Church. He and his wife, Michelle, have relocated to California.

Additional staff members have been added to the Hillsboro, Kan., office, including Clay Shewey as loan associate, Heather Silhan as client account administrator and Alex Wiens, a Tabor College student intern. —*MB Foundation*

## Colleges receive Lilly Endowment grants

Tabor College and Fresno Pacific University have both received grants from Lilly Endowment Inc.

Tabor College, Hillsboro, Kan., received a \$300,000 grant to continue FaithFront, a program funded through Lilly Endowment's High School Youth Theology Institutes initiative. FaithFront is designed to equip youth ages 14-19 in developing theological competencies essential for ministry leadership. Wendell Loewen, Tabor College professor of youth, church and culture, directs the program with assistance of FaithFront staff, Tabor's religion professors and a variety of denominational leaders.



Leaders from the Center for Community Transformation at Fresno Pacific University and Butler Church in Fresno lead a Faith & Finances financial tools class in a housing authority complex, one of many forms of training being expanded by the Lilly Endowment grant.

*Photo by CCT*

Fresno Pacific University, Fresno, Calif., has received a grant of \$990,280 through Lilly Endowment's Thriving Congregations Initiative to help establish the New Skills for a New Era Initiative at the Center for Community Transformation (CCT).

The program will be rooted at the Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary, a graduate school of the university. New Skills for a New Era Initiative will build on and expand key aspects of CCT work in the Central Valley, focusing in particular on equipping churches and organizations with cutting-edge economic and civic tool boxes to address the issues being faced by congregations and residents in their neighborhoods. —*TC, FPU*

## Case against Wall dismissed

The case against former Pacific District Conference minister Gary Wall has been dismissed, according to Fresno County (Calif.) court records. Wall withdrew his plea of no contest Aug. 24, 2020, changed it to not guilty, and the case was dismissed. Wall was formally charged April 22, 2019, with engaging and agreeing to engage in prostitution, a misdemeanor, in Janu-

ary 2019.

Based on a plea agreement reached in August 2019, Wall would be able to withdraw his plea and the case would be dismissed in nine months if he completed certain conditions, which Wall did. Due to COVID-19, Fresno County courts were temporarily closed in May 2020, which delayed the action by three months.

"Former PDC District Minister Gary Wall has informed us and court records confirm that he withdrew his previous 'no contest' plea, changed it to 'not guilty' and the case against him was dismissed," says the U.S. Board of Faith and Life in a statement. "We hope to be able to find ways to support Gary but also want to respect his request for privacy."

At press time, the PDC Executive Board indicated it would be sending a letter to district churches about the matter.

Wall was the PDC minister from 2002 to 2019. He resigned to serve with the International Community of Mennonite Brethren beginning in January 2020 and withdrew from that appointment in November 2019. —*CL*

## Tabor College re-

# 5 minutes with...

Kirk Wanless

## ports record freshman class

Tabor College, Hillsboro, Kan., reports a new student fall enrollment of 237 students—a 34 percent increase in freshmen and overall increase of 23 percent. The college reports the largest freshman class in school history with 171 students, including 31 students from MB churches, thanks to the Tabor 20 scholarship program. Tabor 20 is a first-time incentive program to encourage more MB high school students to enroll at Tabor.

According to a Sept. 15 release, overall fall enrollment is 504 students, an increase of 1.8 percent from 2019. —TC

## FPU fall enrollment exceeds expectations

Fresno Pacific University, Fresno, Calif., reports a fall enrollment of 4,001 students as of Sept. 16, including 1,680 in bachelor's degree completion programs, 1,362 in graduate programs—including 143 at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary—and 959 in traditional undergraduate programs. Graduate enrollment rose by 59 from 2019.

According to a Sept. 17 release, enrollment numbers are less than last year's 4,109, but previous estimates had pointed to a larger deficit. FPU has gone to virtual instruction at all campuses—Merced, North Fresno, Southeast Fresno, Visalia and Bakersfield—due to COVID-19. —FPU

## MWC postpones Assembly to 2022

Mennonite World Conference, in consultation with the National Advisory Committee in host country Indonesia, has postponed the global assembly until July 5-10, 2022.

“The COVID-19 pandemic continues to infect hundreds of thousands of people each day,” says MWC president J. Nelson Kraybill. “Restrictions of large group gathers are still in place, and travel is not advised. These limitations will remain in



On September 8, as the Creek Fire raged in the Sierra National Forest, National Guard helicopters evacuated 250 campers and hikers to the airport 40 miles away in Fresno, Calif. Fresno Fire Department Battalion Chief Kirk Wanless from North Fresno Church (Mennonite Brethren) was there to receive them.

### *How did you spring into action?*

The initial 911 call led us to believe this was going to be one of the biggest mass casualty incidents we've had. We set up a multicaseualty command center at the airport but ultimately only had to transport 10 people to the hospital, three with moderate to severe burns. The big challenge was what to do with 250 people late at night with no ability to get home. I was the logistics guy to find them shelter for the night.

### *How did you find places for them all?*

Normally we would call the Red Cross, but they were overwhelmed providing resources for other wildfire evacuees. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, the county health department had set up an alternate medical care facility in Fresno as an overflow for the hospitals. We used city buses to transport the evacuees to that facility.

### *Was the Fresno Fire Department involved in other ways?*

When something big like the Creek Fire happens, the closest local resources go up to help. Fresno had 32 people committed and eight pieces

of firefighting equipment. It was our crews who burned around Camp Keola, the Mennonite camp where our church youth go in the summer. Kudos to them for making the good backfires that saved the camp.

### *Is your logistics role a typical assignment?*

One of the really fun things about my job is that when there's a situation and no one knows what to do, they call the fire department. Firefighters don't typically have a classical education, but we are trained in problem solving. We may not have the skills or tools to solve a problem, but we'll figure it out.

### *What is causing such a destructive wildfire season in California?*

Fire is a multi-faceted issue. Climate change has placed us in a bad period of drought and high tree mortality. Another factor is more and more people living in the wildland environment. When we have communities, ranches, logging operations in the Sierra National Forest, we can't let these fires burn out like they would normally which leaves all kinds of fuels that make these fires more intense.

*Interview by Kathy Heinrichs Wiest*

# The gift of today

What about the gifts we don't want?

When my husband, Jeff, and I were first married, we received some memorable wedding gifts. Some gifts were part of a registry that we had selected, and others were not. One gift I remember well was from my grandmother. She gave us handmade tea towels to use in our new apartment.

She had cut a towel in half, crocheted a new top half and added a button so it could be attached to the oven door. The towels would not have been on the registry nor would they have been something we sought out to buy. The colors she used didn't match my other items. The geese on the towels were not part of my décor, and they just weren't my style.

I had a choice. I could politely thank her and never use the towels because they didn't meet the vision I had for my kitchen. Or, I could use them because Gramma had spent time making them.

The lesson I learned was that not all gifts given and received need to be gifts that I would choose. Sometimes the heart of the giver is more important than the gift itself. I loved what, and who, that gift represented, so I used the towels. In fact, the next time we were able to visit Gramma, I asked her to teach me how to make them, and she did. That time learning from her is still one of my favorite memories.

In January 2019, Jeff was diagnosed with a rare form of lymphoma. That spring he underwent intensive chemotherapy treatments followed by a stem cell transplant and then radiation. These were difficult days for Jeff, me and our two college-aged children, but they were also days of great learning as we saw God work in amazing ways. A major lesson we are learning throughout this journey is to appreciate each day as a gift that God gives us.

Recently, there have been some harder days that I would not choose or have asked for, and yet I believe that they are still a gift from God. It seems that in these hard days, God tenderly reminds me of his

character as he sets the standard for how I am to respond and react.

There is a sharp contrast between a God-honoring response and a reaction that does not bring him glory. I must choose what to do with each day God gives me. And I know I am accountable to the Gift Giver for my choices. Will I give it back to him and say, "I didn't ask for this?" Or will I choose to use this day to bring him glory in my thoughts, deeds and words?

Several months ago, I wrote this in a post on social media: "My Gramma passed away over 20 years ago and I would do almost anything for one of her tea towels right now. That towel, though I didn't fully appreciate it at the time, was a treasure because it represented the heart behind the person who created it."

About a month after I posted those words, and the day before Jeff was to go in for a follow-up PET scan, I received a package in the mail. My sister Brenda, who lives in Canada, had read my story and remembered that she had one of Gramma's crocheted towels stored inside her hope chest. She carefully wrapped it, wrote a note of encouragement reminding me to value the gift of today and sent it on its way.

As I opened the package, I was overwhelmed by God's goodness and my sister's sacrifice in giving me the family keepsake. I was also struck by the reminder of what and who that towel represented. Even in the hardest of days, God is good. He is faithful, and my heart's desire is to honor him.

God, thank you for the gift of today. In the easy and in the hard days, I choose to trust your heart and keep my eyes on you as the giver and creator of this treasured gift. I pray that I use each day you give as an opportunity to give you glory. And God, when I fail, I pray that you will quickly remind me of your grace and allow me to appreciate the value of your gift to me. ▀



Tracy Gowling is a pastor's wife and mother of two college-aged children. A small-town girl from Saskatchewan, Canada, who married her high school sweetheart, Gowling has lived and ministered in Dallas, New York City and for the last 17 years at Bridge Bible Church in Bakersfield, Calif. Sharing the love of God with those he puts in her path is a true privilege. She loves thrift shopping, sewing, drinking tea and baking scones.



# We survived COVID-19

Couple share story to encourage others

**Phyllis:** We were sick. My husband, Harold, had a cough, and I had battled infections since Christmas, developing C. diff colitis. During a conversation with home health in mid-April, my nurse called an ambulance.

The ambulance took Harold and me to the emergency room, where medical personnel conducted x-rays and lab work, but surprisingly, no COVID-19 tests. They gave me an IV and sent us home. Four days later, Harold's condition worsened.

**Harold:** At first, I thought it was just a cough or an allergy, but I called my doctor and drove to the clinic April 17. I tested positive for COVID-19, and they sent me straight to the hospital. I don't remember much after that.

**Phyllis:** They let Harold make and receive phone calls Saturday morning before they intubated him. Harold received a call from our daughter, Jen, who works in orphanage ministry in Romania. Then, he called me. He said, "I love you, and I'll see you on the other side." He doesn't remember any of it.

Saturday afternoon, our son, Kevin, took me to the emergency room. They placed me in the hospital room next to Harold. Doctors said I had blood clots in my lungs—a symptom of the coronavirus. My test results came back inconclusive, but my records say I had COVID-19.

On Sunday, people from church came to the parking lot with a poster and prayed. It meant a lot to us when we found out.

I was discharged April 22 and quarantined at home two weeks. Our sons, Darrel and Kevin, cared for me. I was too weak to cook for myself, so church members brought food to my front porch. That was a huge blessing.

April 24, a hospital chaplain arranged a three-way call for the boys and me at home and Jen in Romania to discuss our healthcare choices. We told her they had to abide by his living will. That was one of three calls we received saying they thought Harold was dying. I cried and prayed. Each time, Harold improved.

Jen came to the states April 27 after a 36-hour, complicated flight. It was great to have her home when we needed her. She returned to Romania July 12.

We saw Harold May 4, the day he came off the ventilator. We couldn't go into the hospital, so we stood in the bushes outside his room and looked through the window. We talked using cell phones. The nurses helped relay our messages. Each day, Jen's message was, "Don't give up, Dad."

**Harold:** When I woke up, it was all a fog. I prayed, "God, come get me. I'm done." I was having a lot of nightmares and not fully awake.

**Phyllis:** Harold's mouth was swollen from the tube, and he had a feeding tube through his nose. Harold would get restless toward the end of the day, but nurses said when he heard or saw us, he would calm down. Standing at the window became our daily routine.

May 9 was our 50th wedding anniversary. Our family came to Harold's window with flowers and posters.

**Harold:** I remember waving to the grandkids and our children. Four days later, they transferred me to Wichita for rehab. But after a day or two, they put me in ICU because my breathing was not supplying enough oxygen.

**Phyllis:** When they moved Harold to Wichita, we couldn't stand by his



Harold and Phyllis Schroeder attend Buhler (Kan.) MB Church. They live on a farm outside of Buhler, about a mile west of where Harold grew up. He is 74 years old and came home from this ordeal 30 pounds lighter. She was 73 when the virus occurred. Harold and Phyllis have three adult children and nine grandchildren. They share their story to let people know that COVID-19 is, in the words of Phyllis, "something you don't fool with" and to give encouragement and hope to others. The couple celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with family and friends at the end of June. Read more of the story online at [www.christianleadermag.com](http://www.christianleadermag.com).

See TESTIMONY, page 30

# FOOLISHNESS OR FAITH

What Jeremiah's "foolish" decision in a time of uncertainty teaches us about faith

**T**his might rank near the top of a list of foolish decisions made by people in the Bible. But he was one of God's prophets, and he was convinced that he was doing God's will. His story is in Jeremiah 32.

The year is 588 B.C. Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, is in the last year of his reign, though he doesn't yet know it. What he does know is that the Chaldeans, under their mighty general Nebuchadnezzar, will soon be at the gates of his capital city, Jerusalem. Zedekiah has been told, though he doesn't like it, that this enemy will soon smash his kingdom, destroy his government and carry the king and his family into captivity.

Zedekiah is aware of all this because the prophet Jeremiah has been warning him. In fact, the king has grown so weary of Jeremiah's constant haranguing that he has had the prophet locked up in the palace courtyard in a classic case of "If you don't like the message, shoot the messenger."

But this story isn't about Zedekiah, nor is it about Jerusalem. It's about Jeremiah and his "foolish" decision. While in the king's prison, Jeremiah hears a word from the Lord. Yahweh tells the prophet that his cousin is soon going to visit him, offering Jeremiah the opportunity to buy a piece of property just outside of Jerusalem. His cousin is coming because Jeremiah has the first right of refusal.

Now, picture this. Jeremiah has just prophesied that the country will be invaded by a foreign power, that the government will be destroyed, that the king and his court will be hauled off as prisoners and that the invaders will take over the entire country. In the midst of this, Jeremiah is offered an opportunity to invest a portion of his life savings in real estate.

Any financial advisor would tell the prophet, "This is crazy. This land is going to be taken from you and without any compensation. It will be worthless. Keep your money. Run from this deal as fast as you can."

That would be sound financial advice. But Jeremiah believes the Lord. So, against all common sense, he weighs out 17 shekels of silver, and the deed is transferred into his name. Jeremiah puts his savings into an investment for which there is no earthly possibility of a return. This is money poured down a hole.

But Jeremiah believes the Lord is in this. He takes the deed, which is now his, gives it to his associate Baruch and instructs the latter to seal the deed in a clay jar and put it in a safe place, because, Jeremiah says, "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." Jeremiah doesn't know it, but that deed will remain sealed in that jar for almost 70 years before anybody comes to retrieve it. And it won't be Jeremiah who retrieves it because the prophet himself will be long dead before anyone takes up residence on that land, and it begins to turn a profit.

## Betting on the future

So, is this a decision of incredible foolishness or an act of incredible faith? Would you take this deal? Would you cash in your IRA, drain your 401k, for this offer? Jeremiah did. But why? What's the point of this story? Why include it in the Bible? Where's the lesson here?

This text is about betting on the future. It is the consistent story in the Bible and of the church for that matter, to bet on the future, to trust God when uncertainty and disaster loom and to press forward with hope for the days ahead. It's a call for putting one's money down now, for risking hard cash on the most speculative venture in the market. It's like betting on a bankrupt company that's going under.

Betting on the future is a risky act, sometimes an act of foolishness. But for the Christian, betting on the future is an act of hope. Hope is not merely keeping one's fingers crossed. Christian hope is tied to a promise. Sometimes that hope goes against good sense, but it is always in relation to the promise of the one who shapes the future.

Right now, I argue, we are facing a future that seems out of anyone's control. As I write this, COVID-19 is still roaming across our country, though thankfully at a slower rate. And just today another Black man was shot by a police officer. There are people protesting the racism in this country, reminding us that Black Lives Matter; sadly, some of those protests have had elements of violence and property destruction, leading to more deaths.

Our economy is still stumbling along, with unemployment at record highs. People are losing their homes, their health



By Jim Holm

care and even running short of food—and all in what we like to think is the richest country in the world. In the midst of this, we are deciding on the next president of the United States. We don't know what the future holds, and we don't know how our country will face that future.

Our leaders, from the president on down, seem muddled, uncertain what to do and unable to agree on any course of action to move our nation forward. Worse, we believers, we followers of Jesus, are contributing to the chaos rather than relieving it. Some of us are wearing masks while others, sometimes in the same congregation, refuse. Some of us support BLM, others equate it with Marxism. Some of us believe that government must provide relief, others warn of socialism. Some of us think you have to belong to a certain party to follow Jesus, others disagree vigorously. Some of us want our children back in school and ourselves back in church, others think we must wait for clearance to do so.

It seems difficult to find anyone who is optimistic about the future. Do we dare to hope that good days are ahead, that God can lead us out of this confusion and chaos? Jeremiah had hope and trust. He invested in the future, even though he was long dead before that investment produced a return.

#### **Facing the future**

As Christians, as Jesus followers, our call is to face the future with hope, with confidence in God and with trust that God is at work in all of the turmoil of our time. We model hope, we exude hope, we broadcast hope. Because God is who God says God is. So we, you and I, walk forward with confidence, not with fear, no matter what the outcome, no matter who the president is, no matter which political party triumphs.

Why? Because of the marvelous power of God to produce a surprising future. Because we believe that a mixture of God's power and God's grace can alter or reverse present reality. Out of ashes a fresh start, out of disaster a new creation, out of an ending a new beginning. "God can make a way where there seems to be no way."

But remember, Jeremiah's investment took 70 years to begin to turn a profit. God will not be rushed. But with trust and hope, redemption, renewal and security are possible. Jeremiah doesn't use the word "grace," but what he does is exactly what the New Testament understands by "grace."

Go ahead, buy the land. Put down the deposit. Sign the deed. And wait. It may take 70 years, but God is faithful. Restoration is on the way. All things are possible.

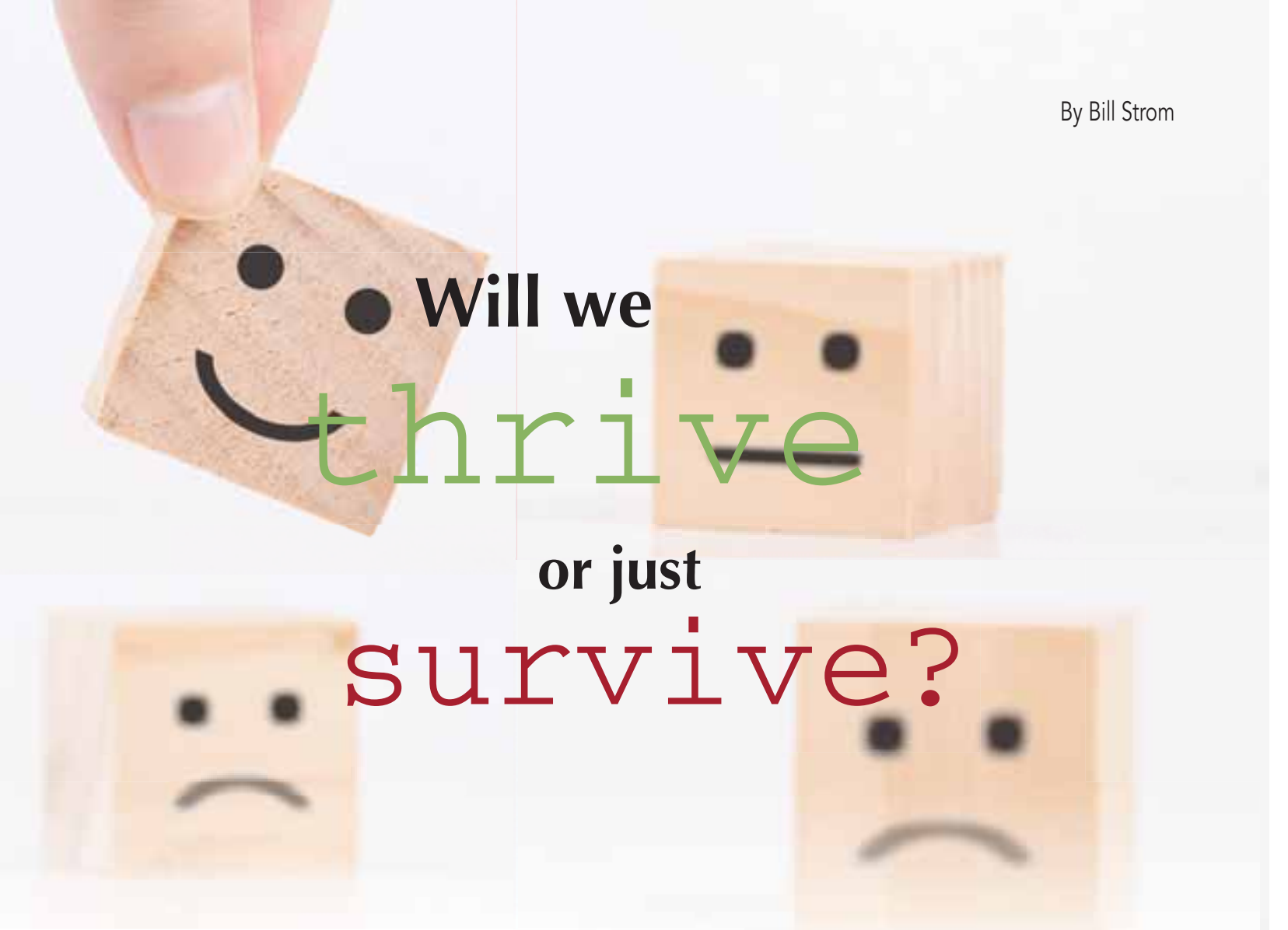
*Jim Holm is pastor of Butler Church's Faith Community congregation. Butler Church is a multicultural USMB church in southeast Fresno, Calif., comprised of four congregations with services in three languages.*

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betting on the future  
is an act of hope.

”





# Will we thrive or just survive?

## What produces reliance during a global pandemic

“**S**top your grumbling,” Mom used to say. “If you don’t like the way things are, change them.”

While maternal wisdom has its merits, does it apply to our ongoing situation of 2020? The pandemic has thrust upon us many obstacles beyond our control. Maybe we have a right to complain.

More recently, I think Mom was right. Maybe we have more choice than we think. Better yet, maybe she and Dad instilled in us the conviction that, God helping us, we have the relational fiber and faithful love to thrive in month eight of COVID-19. This is what I found in a study I conducted seven weeks after the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic.

### Change of plans

Like many other people, my initial response to news of COVID-19 was, “This is happening over there, and it will soon pass.” I was all set in April to launch a study on close re-

lationships to see if the ideas of covenant relating really made a difference in marriages and friendships. Then COVID-19 hit. It became apparent that even if I stuck my head in the sand, people’s answers to my questions would be tainted by their experiences living in home isolation.

So, I changed my tack and asked a new question: Does a covenantal approach to relationships help us thrive—not struggle—even during a worldwide pandemic? You can bet I had never asked *that* question before. I went about gathering over 750 surveys from church-going people and unchurched, age 18 to 80, women and men, stuck at home or working the front lines, in order to answer my question.

What did I discover? How can we apply these insights in our congregations?

### Covenant values matter

In the big picture, I learned that holding a covenantal view of close relationships helped people weather the storm of pandemic change and frustration. By covenantal I mean



valuing family and friends as much or more than oneself, aiming to become holy—not necessarily happy—together and belonging to a faith community where positive role models teach and live by similar convictions.

The facts: The more people hold covenant values, the more likely they trusted their isolation housemates, felt emotionally supported by home partners and rated life as pretty good despite the pandemic. They also reported experiencing less fighting with the people with whom they lived, as well as less anxiety, fear and loneliness during lockdown. That is quite the testimony of living abundantly—even if it did not feel like it at the time.

The survey also included questions about “contract values” in one’s relationships, such as focusing on oneself, protecting one’s rights, keeping things “even,” hoping for happiness and breaking off if relating gets rough. As you might guess, people who hold these values appeared to struggle. In fact, they experienced less trust, support and satisfaction and more fighting, anxiety, fear and loneliness.

My conclusion: Contract-minded people need our support. How can we model covenant relating to them? How can we show that interdependence with others in authentic ways yields life, not constraint?

### **Gramps and Gram doing well**

I also found that people 60 years old and older were getting along best, especially better than young adults in their 20s. This may seem counterintuitive in light of media stories of older folks being most at risk, especially in care homes. However, the group in this study were 60 to 80 years old, living at home, empty nesting and financially secure. Such people enjoy stable marriages and were already accustomed to spending time together—alone.

By contrast, young people were the most disrupted. Those attending university or high school were cut off from friends, sent home, switched to online learning and stuck with family. You will recall the upheaval when everyone was competing for workspace, leisure space, kitchen time and alone time. For sure, parents living with kids under foot struggled a lot but kids and young adults even more so.

How can we reach out to high school, college and young adults today? Are there meaningful ways we can connect people intergenerationally? Have we capitalized on the strength of mature parents to nurture stability among 20-somethings?

### **Some coping strategies are better**

Another dimension I examined were the coping strategies people used to manage pandemic chaos. Some were adaptive (helpful) and others maladaptive (not helpful) even if we thought both helped.

The results show that people who exercised more times per week, attended church more per week, ate better (compared to before the pandemic) and engaged in fewer hours of entertainment media per day were more relationally resilient.

I spoke with one woman who said, “The first thing I did was ask ‘What can I control?’ and the answer was to prepare great meals for my clan. They loved it, and I felt significant in

doing so.” Showing control over diet, exercise, and media are keys to coping well.

Are we choosing to eat healthy food rather than convenient or fatty meals? Do we get out to walk, hike or bike in wide-open spaces? Do we limit our entertainment media to one to three hours per day rather than binging on five hours or more?

Attending church seemed to be a positive way to cope, too. It helped people stay connected to covenantal values and find personal support. This does not mean attending church is a magic bullet for everyone. I think it means that followers of Jesus who connect meaningfully with his body were already primed to weather the COVID-19 storm and that showing up at church—even online church—was a sign of values such as commitment and sacrifice they already held.

As leaders, we might consider how to develop proactive activities that bring people together (safely) to enjoy adaptive fun. Let us not give up on meeting together.

### **Be honest**

Finally, I also studied whether or not people were being honest with their answers compared to how they were really doing. Psychologists call this trait social desirability; it is the tendency for some people to put their best foot forward in public settings by making statements they think others *want* to hear in order to look good. People who are high on social desirability often tell little white lies when asked how they are doing because they want to appear fine.

The study shows that people high on this trait were more likely to say they were coping better and struggling less than they really were. That is, they inflated their answers on trusting others, feeling supported and judging life good and deflated their responses on being argumentative, anxious, afraid and lonely. One could call this optimism—or denial. It is optimistic because it reflects a silver lining amidst hardship, but it is denial by not acknowledging true struggle.

As leaders, how will others view us if we always appear calm and collected when we are really hurting? Will they feel free to approach us for support or avoid us because we appear too with it?

### **I am thankful**

As a covenanter, I have experienced the relational benefits described here. Last year, the day after Thanksgiving, my mother passed away. I think she hung in there for one more family party! We will miss her this year yet reflect on her legacy—how she modelled resilient living by depending on God, prayer and patience while raising us. I would like to think she did well in modelling relational grit and faithful love. For that, I am thankful.

*Bill Strom is professor of communication at Trinity Western University in Langley, B.C., where he teaches and researches relational communication. His books The Relationship Project and More Than Talk: A Covenantal Approach to Everyday Communication recognize biblical virtues and ways of relating that help people thrive in friendship, marriage and work.*

# Hope for all seasons

Why *Silent Night*  
became our  
year-round carol

By Jessica Michele Rutkosky

“Auntie Jess, please sing one more song!”

I was babysitting my best friends’ two little boys while they indulged in a much-needed date night. The above request came just as I thought my duties for the evening were finished.

Bath time.

Stories.

Songs.

Now, it was time for me to watch an episode of *Call the Midwife*.

While I knew this plea was a stall tactic, I couldn’t help but indulge their earnest request. Having already sung the standard bedtimes songs and mentally fatigued from keeping up with their youthful energy the last several hours, I was at a loss as to what to sing.

As I plopped back down on the beanbag in their nightlight illuminated room, I started singing *Silent Night*. This was a deviation from the normal bedtime repertoire. However, it was December, and Christmas music was playing nonstop, so the song selection wasn’t all that surprising, considering I’d probably heard it earlier that day.

*Silent night, holy night.*

*Son of God, oh, love’s pure light*

*Radiant beams from thy holy face*

*With the dawn of redeeming grace*

*Jesus, Lord at thy birth*

*Jesus, Lord at thy birth.*

When I finished singing, the room was silent. In the absence of any further requests, I stealthily made my way out.

Looking back, I couldn’t have predicted the impact this very ordinary night would have on me and the boys, nor that the boys would request this Christmas carol every Sunday morning at our small family gatherings when our state went into lockdown and our churches shut down.

Just one month after I serenaded the boys, the world became aware of COVID-19, and life as we knew it came to a screeching halt. As we witnessed the coronavirus spread from country to country and watched fear consume us with the same tenacity as the disease, we also witnessed a world very much in need of the hopeful refrain, “Jesus, Lord at thy birth.”

As a young child, I experienced a certain wonder when I heard *Silent Night*. I felt a connection with the baby Jesus. Like me, he was born, he was a child, he had parents, he cried and most likely, he enjoyed playing. All things I could relate to. As an adult, I'm moved by the powerful simplicity of the song. It's humble yet packs a theological punch.

I like reflecting on the import of Jesus' titles, *Savior*, *Son of God* and *Lord*. I'm moved by the magnitude of the Incarnation, *God in-caro*, God made flesh. I enjoy imagining what that night was like; what Mary and Joseph were thinking as they welcomed their child, God's child, on that sacred night.

Like Jesus, the song itself was born on a humble, unassuming night. Josef Mohr penned this famous carol several days before Christmas in 1818. Tradition tells us that a combination of a broken church organ, a poignant Christmas play, an idyllic nighttime winter scene in Oberndorf (Mohr's small village in Austria) and his own meditations on Matthew and Luke's nativity scenes inspired Mohr to set a previously written poem to music.

On Christmas Eve, accompanied by a guitar rather than an organ, Mohr sang *Silent Night* for the first time in St. Nicholas' Church. I doubt Mohr could've predicted the impact of this very ordinary night, nor that his song would be translated into 140 different languages almost 200 years later.

I also doubt Mohr could have foreseen that his song would be sung out of season by a small family every Sunday in Fresno, Calif., as a way to illuminate the darkness of 2020. *Silent Night* is a seasonal song. It was composed for, and meant to be sung at, Christmastime.

However, the events of this past year, as well as my best friends' two little boys, have taught me that *Silent Night* is perhaps meant to be sung year-round, in every season, particularly, this COVID-19 season. Simply because the hope that arrives with Jesus' birth isn't seasonal. It doesn't expire after one night or one month.

While *Silent Night* depicts the scene of Jesus' birth, more importantly it captures the promise that broke into the world on that holy night. There was much need for hope at the time Jesus was born. While the night of Jesus' birth may have been serene, the world he was born into was not. The first century was wrought with oppression, injustice, political rivalry, socioeconomic disparity, uncertainty and fear. A world not unlike our own.

As we look back on this past year, it's been anything but calm and bright. Our world has been upended, ravaged and polarized by a pandemic. A pandemic which has caused much personal loss and grief, but which has also revealed the deepest divisions within our country—an entirely different communal loss and grief. We've known the paralyzing effect of fear and anxiety. We've experienced the stress of living with prolonged

uncertainty. Perhaps the only stillness we've seen is the empty parking lots in malls, businesses and churches. Like those in Jesus' day, we're also in much need of hope. *Silent Night* proclaims Jesus, who offers this.

Mohr knew that the good news began in the manger. The child was actually the Christ, God's anointed. He was the Savior, the promised deliverer that would rescue God's people from their suffering. The *holy infant*, so tender and mild was both Lord and LORD, the ruler worthy of respect and reverence and the one true God now appearing in flesh.

On this holy night, God declared his commitment to his creation. He was undeterred by the ills of the world and the brokenness of humanity. He didn't cringe or balk at society's ugliness but rather responded in love by becoming an active participant in and through Jesus.

*"As a young child,  
I experienced a certain  
wonder when I heard  
Silent Night. I felt a  
connection with the  
baby Jesus."*

God is just as committed to us and our world today. He's not discouraged by disease or illness. He's not frightened by strife or division. Rather, he enters into it, offering to heal, redeem and reconcile it. He declares over it that he is Savior and LORD. Only in focusing on this will we reclaim the calm, peace and stillness which Mohr's song speaks of.

Churches may still be closed this Christmas. We won't all be singing *Silent Night* a capella, by candlelight, surrounded by our community. However, my prayer is that we participate in this symbolic act in our own small family gatherings. And in so doing, that we see the light that Jesus brings into the darkness our world is currently living through. In a time that seems so uncertain, may we be moored by the declarations in this simple song. At this Christmastide, and all year long, may we look to a new dawn, a new beginning of God's redeeming grace.

Jessica Michele Rutkosky is a Fresno Pacific University adjunct faculty member teaching in biblical studies and early childhood development. She is a 2013 graduate of Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary with a master's degree in theology. She blogs at [musingsofatheologist.com](http://musingsofatheologist.com).

not just the  
angels' descent  
but their song of rescue  
for anyone  
who dares believe

### This Night

Cracked earth clumps in pieces  
mortals falter in this desert of lostness  
burned wicks of hope trampled dreams  
earth cries for droplets of rain

not prepared for God's intervention  
sheets of light electrify the sky  
is this the promised downpour  
we prayed for  
a final chance to survive

not just the angels' descent  
but their song of rescue  
for anyone who dares believe

play the whistle shake the rocks  
sing with angels on this night  
God's promised miracle is here.

Shirley Klotz Bickel

*Shirley Klotz Bickel is a retired Christian educator. Her poems have been published in magazines as well as in Voice of Many Waters: A Sacred Anthology for Today.*



## Church plants that plant

Kohs, Wiebe launching new campuses

**P**astors Christian Kohs and Phil Wiebe may be separated by 1,200 miles, but the two USMB church planters are united by a similar mission to launch new churches in Minnesota and Utah, respectively, within the year.

### A new normal

Kohs is senior pastor at Redemption Church in Owatonna, Minn., where he intends to use a campus model to scatter small churches across southern Minnesota.

Kohs says his church planting strategy has shifted significantly since moving to Minnesota from a mega church in Seattle. His church plant, Redemption Church, joined the Central District Conference in November 2017.

"I can remember (saying) from the pulpit numerous times, 'We will be the biggest church in Owatonna that does stuff,'" Kohs says. "Wow, has God changed my mind in two years."

As Redemption plans to launch its first campus, Kohs is not looking to be the biggest church. The shift came during the coronavirus pandemic, he says, which brought new metrics for success beyond numbers or attendance.

For Kohs, success is measured in active engagement in discipleship and community—80 percent of people at Redemption read their Bibles daily—as well as a number of people attending church that don't yet know Jesus.

"I think in the midst of COVID-19, God has shown me that the new normal might be small," Kohs says. "And that small isn't bad."

### Campus model

Attendance at Redemption numbers



Christian Kohs teaches a Bible study for members of the Redemption Church congregation. Redemption began as a Bible study in Kohs' home and plans to launch campuses in small cities in southern Minnesota, beginning with Wells, by Easter 2021. *Photo by Christian Kohs*

around 100 people, including online viewership. In addition to Sunday services, Redemption offers ministries for men, women and children and hosts a recovery group.

Redemption is seeking to launch 10 campuses in 10 years in small cities. Campuses, at least those in close proximity to Owatonna, will likely have similar names. Kohs would like to see Owatonna attendance at 150 people, with each campus around 100 people.

The campus model is more cost effective than starting a new church, Kohs says, referencing affordable rent and minimal startup costs.

"There's so much opportunity if you keep the campuses smaller," he says. "In southern Minnesota, there're so many small towns where it's so cheap to plant a new church."

Redemption continues to make its way off subsidy, and as new campuses are launched, Kohs says the church may ask for money to cover equipment, instead of a monthly subsidy.

With each new campus, Kohs plans to recruit three or four families in a small group and a campus pastor to preach on Sunday. Kohs intends to theologically train and develop leaders

during his own nine-month training program covering competence, character and calling. He has his first lead pastor resident in training. Between campuses, Kohs envisions using technology to split preaching duties with the campus pastor.

### Planting in Wells, beyond

Redemption plans to launch its first campus in Wells, Minn.—a city of 2,300 people about 50 miles southwest of Owatonna—by Easter 2021.

Current associate pastor Mike Petts will serve as campus pastor at Redemption-Wells. Petts and his wife, Diane, moved to Owatonna in September 2019, after serving 10 years as pastor at Salem MB Church in rural Bridgewater, S.D.

As a result of expensive housing in Owatonna and having heard that people were seeking a Bible-preaching church in Wells, the Petts found a house there, the very city for which Kohs had been praying for nine months.

The Petts moved to Wells in August, where they plan to offer a basement guest bedroom as a space for pastors or missionaries to relax and stay for a



Volunteers prepare for a Lakeview Grantsville pilot service, the first campus to be planted by Lakeview Stansbury. New churches will be planted in communities that are at least 50 percent LDS. This pilot service was held at the first LDS Ward (now privately owned) of Tooele County. *Photo by Phil Wiebe*

few days.

Families from Owatonna are participating in monthly prayer and vision nights in Wells, and the Petts plan to start a men's Bible study that meets at a coffee shop.

"We're actively seeking to get this thing going by next spring," Kohs says.

Beyond Wells, Kohs is eyeing Medford, Minn., 8 miles north of Owatonna.

"It's only a city of 1,500, but they have no churches in town," he says.

Not every church Redemption launches or pastor trained may be tied to Redemption or Mennonite Brethren, Kohs says, as his primary focus is on planting gospel-centered, Jesus-loving churches.

"I'm kind of a kingdom guy," he says.

As Kohs shifts his focus from large cities to smaller ones, campus location possibilities abound, including a city of 10,000 to the west and two cities of less than 2,000 people each to the south. Kohs' desire is for people in each community to have a home church.

"Even if they're all churches of 50, that's still a win," Kohs says. "I never thought God would make my vision smaller, but yet bigger, at the same time."

## "Hub" model in Utah

Phil Wiebe, lead pastor of Lakeview Church in Stansbury Park, Utah, is also developing a strategy to launch new campuses.

Lakeview's "church hub model" resembles a wheel with spokes, with the main "hub" in the center—Lakeview Stansbury—supplying the administrative team and support for three campuses branching from the center.

The approach is similar to that of South Mountain Community Church, a USMB church with five campuses in Utah with whom Wiebe previously worked for 12 years. Wiebe met Lakeview discipleship pastor Jeff Hubrich and his wife, Heather, at SMCC. The Hubrichs will serve as pastoral couple of Lakeview's newest campus in Grantsville, Utah.

Wiebe proposes a four-campus model, keeping Lakeview Stansbury between 400 and 500 people and each campus between 300 and 400 people for a total of 1,500 people.

"We'd rather be a sending and planting church than a grow-big-in-one-location church," Wiebe says, mentioning substantial savings. "We can host 1,500 people at four churches for \$8 million, versus a 1,500-seat church building that (is) well over \$20 million."

"We're trying to stay small so that there's an intentional discipleship and training program for our people," Wiebe says, adding that the hub model will provide one pastoral staff member for every 100 people.

All campuses will be within 25 minutes from Stansbury Park to allow pastors with both organizational and campus responsibilities to travel easily between campuses.

As campuses grow, they can split off as new independent Mennonite Brethren churches to become the hub for more churches, allowing Lakeview Stansbury to start another campus.

"We're always wanting to be a four-campus model with our hub," Wiebe says.

Wiebe's goal is to launch campuses in Grantsville to the west, Tooele to the south and Lake Point to the north by 2025.

## Grantsville is first campus

With Lakeview Stansbury on track to outgrow its meeting space, Wiebe decided to launch the Grantsville campus instead of adding a third Sunday morning service.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, Lakeview Stansbury's attendance numbered more than 200 people. Including

online and in-person attendance, it has grown to 360 people. Lakeview Stansbury will send 50 to 75 people to Grantsville, a city approximately 10 miles southwest of Stansbury Park with a population of around 11,000 people, to help launch the campus.

The Hubrichs are assembling their team. A former Mormon, Jeff Hubrich left his career as a pilot to become a pastor.

"In our model, we bring on a campus pastor and he works at the hub for a season," Wiebe says. "Then he builds a relationship with his team. And then when we're ready to launch, that team goes out and starts the next campus."

Lakeview Grantsville held its first pilot service in June and a second one in August before holding pre-launch services with the team on location.

The launch is slated for December 2020.

### Leadership development

Part of Lakeview's hub model includes intentional leadership development, beginning with hiring apprentices—students in high school or junior high—to work part-time in the church over the summer.

Wiebe is developing partnership relationships with other USMB churches that will offer ministry internships to college students. He would like to offer a residence program to college graduates and then a one-year trial run in church leadership before a leader moves into a permanent staffing position.

### Long-term plan

Wiebe has formulated a 30-year plan, in which 15 churches come from Lakeview. In order for a location to be considered, a city must be at least 50 percent LDS and less than 10 percent evangelical.

"Our hub model only works if we're reaching people," Wiebe says. "If we're just doing church and hoping people show up, it doesn't work."

"If Jesus is coming back, I want to be on the battlefield," Wiebe says. "And not just the battlefield, I actually want to be on the front line." —*Janae Rempel*

## MB Foundation celebrates 30th anniversary

Stewardship activities date to 1880

Turning 30 is a significant milestone for many people. For some, it marks the end of youth, while others see it as the beginning of adulthood.

For MB Foundation, it's the latter.

The stewardship ministry of U.S. Mennonite Brethren is celebrating its 30th birthday Dec. 28, the date it was incorporated in 1990.

"The crazy year of 2020 has done so much to validate the maturity of this organization," says Jon Wiebe, president and CEO, when asked to reflect on stewardship ministry's milestone anniversary. "In spite of global chaos, stay home orders, etc., MB Foundation is strong and growing stronger. We have added four staff people in the last six weeks and gave over \$700,000 away to our constituency to assist during the pandemic."

Like many celebrations slated for 2020, MB Foundation adapted its original anniversary plans to accommodate the coronavirus.

MB Foundation anticipated hosting

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the opening night of the USMB National Convention, scheduled for July 23-25 at Stony Brook Conference Center in Independence, Mo. But then Gathering 2020 was moved online due to COVID-19.

“Our initial plan was to make USMB Gathering 2020 the centerpiece of our celebration,” Wiebe says. “In addition to sponsoring dinner and the speaker, we were going to unveil our book, *Taking Hold of Real Life: The Story of MB Foundation*, distribute it to attendees and have our entire staff and spouses join us in Kansas City for the evening.”

While they weren’t able to celebrate as planned, MB Foundation remained committed to celebrating “vigorously” in

spite of the pandemic, Wiebe says. The staff sent gift boxes that included a copy of the anniversary book, coffee mug, peppernut cookies and their own blend of coffee called “Real Life” to over 400 friends and ministry partners.

They also mailed more than 800 additional copies of the book to clients. Staff, spouses and board members were invited to a celebration dinner Sept. 29 that included special guest Kenn Kington, a Christian comedian.

MB Foundation is also offering a special rate of 2.40 percent on new one-year certificate investments; the offer expires Nov. 30, 2020.

## Early milestones of stewardship

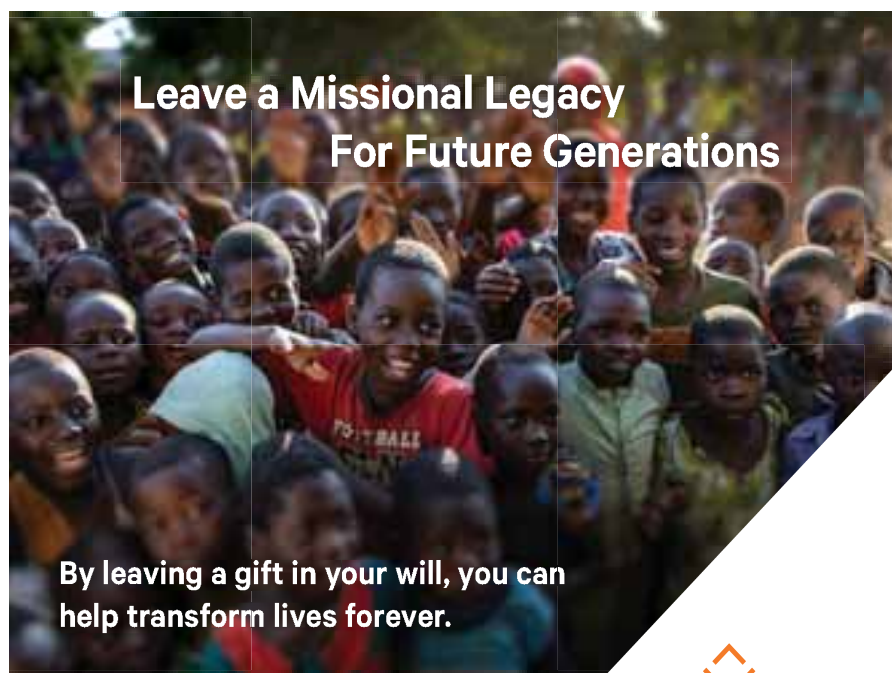
While the celebration was initially intended to recognize three decades of ministry, the research process for the anniversary book alerted foundation staff to how long stewardship efforts have been part of the U.S. Mennonite Brethren story.

“When we realized that 1880 was the beginning, we decided it was important to recognize that while we are 30 years old as a corporation, we have actually been ‘doing this work’ and providing this ministry in our MB family for a much, much longer period of time,” Wiebe says. “Thirty years reflects maturity; 140 years reflects longevity and strength—additional important attributes for a fiduciary to have.”

*Taking Hold of Real Life* chronicles the early roots of MB stewardship dating back to 1880 when immigrants to the United States began gathering funds from churches to support evangelistic work in North America and around the world. By 1898 the conference set a goal of increasing the Mission Fund to a \$50,000 endowment. In 1904 the conference received its first planned gift of 80 acres of farmland.

As the North American MB General Conference grew, so did its efforts to support mission efforts and education by collecting, investing and loaning funds. In 1908 the Board of Trustees was created to focus on legal and property issues. Working under the Board of Trustees was the Financial Administrative Committee that in 1933 became the Stewardship Committee, charged with caring for money donated to the Mission Fund and the Educational Endowment Fund, created in 1924.

Continued growth prompted the Board of Trustees in 1972 to create an official Stewardship Department to develop a planned giving program geared toward educating constituents in the U.S. and Canada. By 1987 it became apparent that localized management would better serve the respective conferences. And so, in the U.S., MB Stewardship



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Since its incorporation 30 years ago, MB Foundation has grown, including in terms of staff numbers. The original staff 30 years ago numbered five, and the current staff totals 20. Photo by MB Foundation

Ministries was formed to provide gift planning, stewardship education, estate planning, financial management, endowment fund management, an investment program and loans.

Soon after, Stewardship Ministries staff and board began to explore forming a foundation. After many meetings and discussions, the U.S. Conference approved the move.

When MB Foundation was incorporated in 1990, it did so with \$16.0 million in assets, \$10.5 million in loans, \$12.8 million in certificates and five staff members, including Lynford J. Becker who served as president and CEO.

Wiebe, the current president, joined the staff in 1996 and became president and CEO in 1998 when Becker retired. Wiebe continues to serve as president and CEO, overseeing a \$251 million corporation with a staff of 20.

Highlights of MB Foundation's first 30 years of ministry as outlined in *Taking Hold of Real Life* include:

- Preparing for potential computer

malfunctions due to Y2K — January 1, 2000 — by making recommended software changes;

- Developing relationships with congregations of recent immigrants and with church plants in the late 1990s and early 2000s that positively affected the loan fund;

- Formalizing investment practices and fund management services in the early 2000s, including the formation of the MB Loan Fund in 2003;

- Giving back to the U.S. Conference in the form of First Fruits gifts, grants to the five district conferences, a Ministry Rebate program targeting borrowers and the Leadership Generation Fund; and

- Building the current office building on D Street in Hillsboro, Kan.

In addition to stories of both positive and challenging times of ministry, the book includes personal stories of generosity. To request a book, visit [www.mbfoundation.com](http://www.mbfoundation.com) — *Connie Faber*

## Strutz serving as part-time ministry leader

Dan Strutz's responsibilities include attending national board meetings

A large map hangs on the wall of Dan Strutz's office at Community Bible Church in Mountain Lake, Minn. On the map, Strutz has marked brightly-colored dots across the north central United States, each dot representing a church in the Central District Conference (CDC).

As the CDC's new part-time district minister, Strutz prays regularly for each church on the map.

The CDC stretches from northeastern Montana on the west to Indiana on the east. In between, the territory spans

across the Dakotas, Minnesota and Wisconsin and south into Nebraska.

The large geographical spread between churches in an expanding district is one of the reasons the CDC needed a second district minister, according to district minister Rick Eshbaugh, who says he travels 25,000 miles visiting churches in an average year, in addition to attending national meetings.

So, at a Sept. 16, 2019, CDC Ministry Council meeting, the Executive Committee voted to hire Strutz to work alongside Eshbaugh while maintaining his pastoral duties at CBC.

## An expanding CDC

The CDC had 26 member churches when Eshbaugh started as a part-time district minister in 2013. That number has grown to 38 churches, a statistic Eshbaugh anticipates increasing as Congolese congregations express interest in joining the district.

Eshbaugh is collaborating with EDC district minister Terry Hunt to resource the Congolese churches. The CDC's eastern-most reach will be Indiana, Eshbaugh says, adding the CDC has contacts in Iowa, Indiana, North Dakota and Minnesota. Meanwhile, the EDC will work with churches in areas stretching from Tennessee to Maine, and possibly Georgia.

The combination of a growing district plus increased responsibilities on a national level left Eshbaugh with little time to visit churches.

"(There) wasn't enough time to do everything, so the shortfall kind of ended up always being a little bit on the church visitation side," Eshbaugh says. "The determination was that either I needed to have something cut back or we needed to expand."

So, the CDC hired Strutz, the former Church Planting and Renewal Board chair, to help ease the load. Strutz and Eshbaugh had already been working together with the CDC's two church plants.

"Part of my 'yes' was to say, 'If it helps (Rick) and it helps him do his job better,



Dan Strutz, pictured with his wife, Susanna, serves as the Central District Conference minister on a part-time basis. *Photo by Dan Strutz*

I want to support him,'" Strutz says.

## Introducing Dan

A Wisconsin native, Strutz was introduced to the Mennonite Brethren family by his wife, Susanna. The couple has been married nine years.

Susanna grew up at Bethel MB Church in Yale, S.D., the daughter of current USMB Leadership Board member Lud Hohm and his wife, Julie. When Dan enrolled at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, Minn.—before he says he considered joining the MB family—Bethel MB supported him, no strings attached.

"It's a fun story of how a church can sow a seed in someone, and it turns out being way more than they imagined," says Strutz, who celebrated the five-year anniversary of his installation at CBC in August.

Strutz completed his Master of Divinity degree while pastoring in Mountain Lake. As pastor of a rural church in a town of 2,000, but having grown up in churches with thousands, Strutz brings a variety of perspectives to the role.

"I get a real joy out of working with other pastors and encouraging them," Strutz says. "I have a pretty diverse background of churches that I've been

in and ministry styles. ... I've been in a lot of different contexts that can uniquely help me think about things from different perspectives."

## Splitting the role

Strutz anticipates spending about 75 percent of his time in his pastoral role and 25 percent as district minister, although he and Eshbaugh are still finding a balance. Admittedly, the coronavirus pandemic has altered the best-made plans.

With limited weekend time available, the majority of Strutz's district work will happen during the week as he serves on the CDC BFL Committee and represents the CDC at U.S. Conference meetings, including U.S. Board of Faith and Life, National Strategy Team and Leadership Board; and Tabor College Board meetings. This allows him to be present in his congregation in Mountain Lake on weekends.

Eshbaugh will continue to oversee the overall work of the district ministers but will focus on the CDC Church Planting and Renewal Committee. Most weekends he will travel to visit pastors, leaders and churches—both existing and potential—in the district. He also sits on the task force teams for all CDC church



plants and chairs the National Congolese Task Force. Eshbaugh will represent the CDC on all national church plant and renewal efforts and will attend national meetings as required or requested.

Both serve on the CDC Executive Board and Ministry Council to promote communication between the churches and prepare for conventions and pastoral retreats.

Eshbaugh says that Strutz, as a younger district minister and more recent seminary graduate, brings knowledge of current theological streams and authors, as well as social media and technology.

"I do believe that we need to bring in new leaders as we can," Eshbaugh says.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Strutz was instrumental in orchestrating Zoom meetings for pastors to share insights about online video streaming for Sunday services.

Some CDC pastors continue to meet with Strutz and Eshbaugh weekly for prayer via Zoom.

"We're talking about how things are going and building relationship and really sharpening each other," Strutz says.

#### Goals for the future

Looking ahead, Strutz says he will continue to build relationships with and between the churches represented by the dots on the map in his office.

"I pray and think about the churches that are (on the map)," Strutz says. "I see them every day in my office."

Strutz and Eshbaugh continue to work together to build relationships, bring churches in and encourage revitalization. Strutz says he is excited to welcome and learn from the ethnic churches partnering with the district, even as he seeks to encourage churches to elevate their eyes to the mission of the kingdom.

"We have a good number of churches that are like my community—a lot of rural communities—and you can think, 'Oh, everyone knows Jesus,' but that's

not true," Strutz says. "So how do we encourage all our churches to stay on mission and move forward? There're people that are hurting, and there are people that Jesus wants to love on. To encourage pastors in that's a real joy."

—Janae Rempel

## Vision Summit equips kingdom leaders

Midwest team multiplies missional leaders through annual conference



This November will mark the sixth iteration of the Vision Summit, a conference and retreat hosted by the Midwest Mobilization Team of Multiply since 2015, as part of their 2020 Movement. The vision for the 2020 Movement was one of raising up and sending out 20 missional leaders by the year 2020.

Stephen Humber and Bob Pankratz are two members of the team that conceived the idea for the weekend retreat. Humber defines missional leaders as "people who mobilize God's people to join in the work that he's doing; they're multipliers."

Both Humber and Pankratz emphasize the importance of letting each member of their mobilization team lean into their unique giftings in order to further

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their mission, a theme that carries over into the purpose of the Vision Summit as well. Humber describes himself as more task-oriented and refers to Pankratz as a more “visionary person.”

The Vision Summit was created to facilitate a time of discernment for anyone seeking to discover a deeper understanding of the work God has for them using their gifts.

“The purpose is to set aside some time to really focus on God, worshipping and praying, but doing it with other people,” Humber says. “In that setting, when we’re focused on God and listening, God has something to say.”

Humber says that while Multiply is a missions-focused organization, the summit isn’t limited to those who feel

called to be a missionary or pastor.

“We’ve had high schoolers attend, and we’ve had people in their 50s, 60s and 70s attend,” Humber says. “There’s a whole spectrum of life experience and faith, but also where they are in terms of doing what they feel like they’ve been called to do.”

The weekend provides an excellent opportunity for participants to wrestle with God’s calling for their lives, while the team also steers away from being “overly directive toward next steps.”

“It’s fun to get people together who have really diverse interests and callings and gifts and passions and then just see what a weekend of fanning that can look like,” Humber says.

While some participants have gone

on to do local or international missions, others have felt callings to serve Christ through things like foster care or teaching.

## Connecting leaders

The Vision Summit began as a four-day retreat that took place at Oasis Ranch and Retreat Center in Plevna, Kan. It was held the same weekend as fall break at Tabor College in Hillsboro, as the mobilization team wanted to allow students the opportunity to participate.

Allie Pankratz was a Tabor student when she attended the first Summit in 2015.

“At this point I was seeking discernment and clarity on what God had for my future, so that was part of my decision to attend,” Pankratz says. “But I also really valued and appreciated the deep community and discipleship that MB Mission (now Multiply) provided, so I was excited but also a bit anxious to see what God would reveal that weekend.”

Though the format of the conference has changed slightly from year to year, each Summit has involved hearing testimonies from missionaries, both local and global, as well as time for prayer and silent retreat.

But a large part of what makes the Summit so valuable for participants is the chance to share, pray and process thoughts with other people in “connect groups.”

“What I remember most about that weekend is the conversations I was able to have with some amazing people,” Pankratz says. “After each session we would have time to process God’s Word and what he was laying on our hearts in our small groups. It was a safe place to share my struggles, victories, fears and passions and dive deeper into God’s heart for making the gospel known locally, nationally and globally.”

Pankratz says her time at the Summit left her with both clarity and questions; she felt God calling her to trust him in a “season of unknowns.”

With a **\$28,500** per year scholarship renewable each year the cost of the first year would be approximately **\$13,800** before outside scholarships, grants, and loans.



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Participants in the 2017 Vision Summit gather in a connect group to pray and process God's calling for their lives.

Pankratz and her now husband Drew, who also attended the Summit in 2015, have been serving for the past four years at Greenhouse Community Church in Utah, in an area heavily populated by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"It's been challenging, rewarding and everything in between, but we are so thankful God led us to where we are today," Pankratz says.

### Equipping workers

Bob Pankratz explains that a large part of the Summit revolves around equipping participants for doing God's work by learning to listen for his voice.

"We always believe when we send teams out to the nations, if these teams are able to hear the voice of God, then they're going to be OK," Bob says. "They can listen to God and God will tell them what to do, and they just follow."

The team does provide some resources and guidance for possible ways participants can explore living out the Great Commission after the Summit is over, such as contact information for local ministries and organizations, as well as information on Multiply's short term missions opportunities.

"It would be really presumptuous of me to think I know what everybody

should do with their life," Humber says. "We'll talk about missions, we'll talk about the kingdom, we'll talk about God's heart for the nations, but I don't know that God wants everybody in that room to go do that. But he does have something for them to do; that's really worth the effort of drilling down on and taking chances, and taking steps."

He adds that the relationships that develop during the Summit and continue afterward are often where they see fruit.

"Cool things can happen in a weekend, but really cool things happen in a year or two of continuous sitting down together and talking and praying and listening together," Humber says.

### 2020 and beyond

Attendance at the Vision Summit has ranged from about 50 to 90 participants over the past five years. The team is excited this year to celebrate the first milestone of the 2020 Movement, as they have exceeded their goal of raising up 20 leaders by 2020.

"It's really been amazing, beyond what any of us would have asked or imagined, just seeing the Spirit revealing things to people," Bob says.

Bob's wife Kelly, also a member of the Summit leadership team, keeps a running list of past participants and how they continue to pursue working for

God's kingdom.

This year's Summit will be held Nov. 6-8 and will look quite a bit different than past years. In the interest of continuing with the idea of multiplying leaders, the team asked past participants to consider hosting a "hub" of six to eight people in their own location.

A primary hub with a limited number of attendees will be hosted at First Menonite Brethren Church, Wichita, Kan. The event will then be live streamed to the different smaller hubs.

"We sensed the Lord say, 'You're not able to accomplish what I want to accomplish through the Vision Summit by just meeting in one place. I want to multiply this beyond that,'" Bob says.

Hub leaders will be free to design activities around what will serve their group best in their context and using their giftings.

Humber says that although this year's Summit wasn't necessarily planned with COVID-19 considerations in mind, the more spread out format is an added benefit.

The mobilization team continues to dream about expanding their 2020 Movement vision in the future, says Bob. They are asking what it would look like to raise up not just individual leaders but also perhaps more training bases or hubs across the nation or the

# Hard days and the God who speaks

Scripture offers comfort, kindles faith

Over the past few weeks, it has been a pleasure to engage with other pastors in our LEAD Cohort, “The Disciple-Making Power of Expository Preaching.” As we have considered the work of explaining and applying the Scriptures in our preaching, I have been very refreshed in reflecting on the place of the Bible in our local fellowships. Here are two of the reasons why:

**Through the Scriptures, God speaks to us about true comfort.** There is no doubting the fact that we are living in challenging times. Given the pressures we are facing—everything from political tensions to social unrest and injustice to the spread of a global pandemic (throw in wildfires on the West Coast and hurricanes for those on the other side of the country)—we can find ourselves feeling not only exhausted but overwhelmed by the voices all around, the varying news outlets addressing us day by day and social media platforms continually vying for our attention. In all of this, we feel our need for words that are not slanted or confusing, but instead are full of comforting truth.

As we come to the Scriptures, it is this voice of comforting truth that we hear. In the Bible, the God of creation and redemption speaks to us. He tells us, for example, in Psalm 46 that even though our places of safety (the mountains) may be tossed into the places of our greatest fears (the raging sea), the Lord of Hosts is with us. This promised presence is something cosmically demonstrated in the coming of our Savior, Jesus, who not only identifies with us in our weakness (Heb. 4:14), but through his cross and resurrection he has also opened up the way to God,

purchasing our access to divine mercy and grace in our times of need (Heb. 4:15).

**Through the Scriptures, God speaks to us, bringing about faith.** In the doxology at the end of Romans 16, the apostle Paul states that it is through the preaching of Scriptures’ truth about Jesus that the obedience of faith is worked in our hearts. In our current climate, we are in a place of regularly wondering who we can really trust—who is worthy of our allegiance? Through the pages of the Bible, God tells us that he has set up his Son, Jesus, as the eternal and reigning king (Psalm 2).

Currently, we see and experience a world that is pained by dissent, disease and destruction. But when we study the Scriptures, we meet Jesus, the one who is powerful over disease, darkness and death. When Jesus returns, he will bring deliverance for those who are helpless and relief and life to those who are oppressed. In the midst of a broken world, through the Scriptures God speaks to us about the cosmic and eternal reign of King Jesus. As the Lord speaks, our allegiance to Jesus as the supreme source of final and eternal hope is renewed, and faith is kindled in our hearts.

So, what does this mean for us? Well, it means that as Christian believers we are no strangers to the hard days in the world we live in. But it also means that as we continue to come back to the Scriptures, we come to the place where the Master of the Universe speaks. He speaks words of present comfort and eternal hope grounded in the climactic and accomplished work of our Savior-King, Jesus. All glory be to Christ!■



Jared Pulliam is lead pastor of Christ Church Sellwood, a growing USMB congregation in Portland, Ore. He and his wife, Julia, have four children. Prior to planting Christ Church Sellwood, Pulliam served on the pastoral team of Trinity Church of Portland, Ore., which provided a core team for the new congregation in the Sellwood-Moreland neighborhood. The church currently holds two Sunday morning services.

# Choosing between achievements and life

## Leadership lessons from Ernest Shackleton

“My greatest example of a leader is Ernest Shackleton,” I read one evening in a German Christian magazine. Intrigued by this name I had never heard, I bought a biography about this great South Pole explorer. The biography, *Endurance: Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage*, has come to mind many times in my journey as a leader.

The story of Shackleton’s exploration and all the adversity that he and his team experienced was so thrilling, it was hard to stop reading. How he led his team and the decisions he made in the midst of difficult circumstances impressed me deeply. The team achieved high goals and survived many dangers because of Shackleton’s decisiveness as he stuck to his values and priorities.

He was attempting to be the first human to reach the South Pole. On his first attempt he had approximately 112 miles left to the pole. If he had been the first to reach it, he would have been honored by people all over the globe and would have gone down in history. However, the trip took longer than he had planned for. He assessed his supplies and came to the conclusion that they did not have enough food or fuel to both reach the South Pole and return to the nearest supply deposit. He had to decide between the highest honor he had dreamed of and the lives of his crewmembers he would be putting at risk.

There was a lot at stake in the project: time, thousands of pounds of investments, personal sacrifices and painful hardship. Shackleton was racing not only for himself, his team and the investors but for all “400 million British subjects,” in his words. All of this investment would be lost if he turned around. He knew that other explorers were also striving for

this achievement and if he turned around, he would never have another chance to be first.

Even with all these considerations, Shackleton decided to put human life first. He saved the lives of his crewmembers by turning back before they reached their goal. On his way home he wrote to his wife: “Better a live donkey than a dead lion.” Three years later, on December 14, 1911, Roald Amundsen from Norway reached the South Pole, and Shackleton congratulated him openly.

How many times do Christian leaders choose to achieve dreams in order to have honor or wealth? They may indeed profit for decades. But in doing so, they risk so many “lives”: physical and spiritual health, marriage, family and relationships. They damage not only their immediate circle, but the church, local or global ministry and much more.

Serving in ICOMB today I’m grateful for the many “Shackletons” I have met around the globe. But I’m sad and burdened for those who decide to reach their goals at the cost of “life.” Sometimes they even proclaim it is done in the name of Jesus.

In my journey I have seen two things that make a difference. The first is leaders who pray not only for God to provide resources but who take time to sit with God and ask the Holy Spirit to speak on whatever is important to God. They let God touch on whatever needs the most care. The second is leaders who invite someone to be brutally honest with them. This is a place where a leader gets to see the difference between achievement and life.

“The LORD says, ‘I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you’” (Ps. 32:8, NLT).■



Rudi Plett, from Asunción, Paraguay, has been the International Community of Mennonite Brethren executive director since 2018. Plett served as half-time associate director of ICOMB from 2017 to 2018. From 2011 to 2017, he served as chair of the ICOMB Executive Committee while serving in a pastoral role at Mennoniten Brueder Gemeinde Concordia, Asunción, Paraguay. He and his wife, Ruth Ratzlaff de Plett, have five children.



## MILESTONES

### BAPTISM/MEMBERSHIP

Nichole Burke was baptized at **South Mountain Community Church, Lehi (Utah) Campus**, Oct. 11.

Blythe Adkins and Brin Schroeder were baptized and received as members at **Buhler (Kan.) MB Church**, Oct. 4. Emma Hershberger and Cameron Yutzy were baptized and received as members on Aug. 9. Jackson Berning and Cade Taylor were also baptized.

Mike Shuley, Juanita Christensen, Linda Hamm, Drew Yearby, Aiden Woolf, Cisely Dust, Dave Teggin, Dustin Murrizito, Meaghan Nelson, Aaron Harris, Diana Bales, Holly Gwynn, Jennifer Stewart and Christine Moorehead were baptized at **Lakeview Church, Stansbury Park, Utah**.

David Conklin, Sara Conklin, Ella Conklin, Wyatt Conklin, Bailey Conklin, Jada Conklin, Laura Hanberg, Shaun Hanberg, Regan Strum and Kristene Tracy were baptized at **South Mountain Community Church, St. George (Utah) Campus**, Sept. 20.

Brady Manney was baptized at **Pine Acres Church, Weatherford, Okla.**, Sept. 20.

Tim Fahndrich, Pam Fahndrich, Trevor Mackie, John Hauge, Ally Hauge, Joshua Nyamungu and Rebeca Nyamungu were received as members at **Kingwood Bible Church, Salem, Ore.**, Sept. 20. Malachi Lewis, Levi Lewis, Laia Hedlund and Zaiden Hedlund were baptized Aug. 30.

Charles Borchard, Evie Borchard, Hilary Jensen, Ryan Pomerico and Ashten

Pomerico were received as members at **Bethesda Church, Huron, S.D.**, Sept. 13.

Matt Valenzuela, Lori Rowell, Sharon Eichmann, Eleacia Bogan and Amber Tremaine were received as members at **Faith Bible Church, Omaha, Neb.**, Aug. 23. Matt Valenzuela, Lori Rowell and Cheyenne Rowell were baptized Aug. 9.

Josh Thill was baptized at **South Mountain Community Church, Draper (Utah) Campus**, Sept. 5. Gerry Matusick, Helize Matusick, Sandra McCarver, Haley Pester, Ryan Pester and Catherine Thompson were baptized Aug. 16.

Dustin Kresser, Susan Kresser, Melanie Sumner, Izzie Sumner, Tatum Quiring, Calla Cox and Jake Cox were baptized at **Greenhouse Community Church, Saratoga Springs, Utah**, Aug. 2.

Bradley Kennett and Cheyenne Upton were baptized at **Mountain View Church, Fresno, Calif.** Erin Sasser, Greysa Lemmons, Edward Chaney and Kristen Chaney were received as members.

### WORKERS

Jarrett Cesmat began serving as an intern at **Axiom Church, Peoria, Ariz.**

Brenna Peters began serving as director of communications at **Hillsboro (Kan.) MB Church** after Bailey Kaufman concluded her service in that role.

Brad Isaak began serving as associate pastor of youth at **North Fresno (Calif.) Church**, Oct. 1. Isaak was installed Oct. 11.

Linda Oelze concluded her service giving leadership to Community Impact, Care and Volunteer Ministries at **First MB Church, Wichita, Kan.**, Sept. 24. Geoff Graves began

serving as part-time, interim church business administrator. Jennifer Tarbutton is serving as middle school director.

Logan Whitney concluded his service as associate pastor at **Greenhouse Community Church, Saratoga Springs, Utah**.

Dustin Maddox was installed as lead pastor at **North Fresno (Calif.) Church**, Sept. 13.

Randal Kay was installed Oct. 4 as interim pastor at **Bethesda Church, Huron, S.D.**

Jeremy Manns began serving as director of music and life groups at **Enid (Okla.) MB Church**, Aug. 3.

Kristi Schutter began serving as office administrator at **Cornerstone Community Church, Topeka, Kan.**

Cheryl Dueck Smith and Brian Ross concluded their service as interim pastors at **North Fresno (Calif.) Church** at the end of August.

### DEATHS

**Chambers, Bill Gene**, Madera, Calif., member of Madera Avenue Bible Church, June 29, 1941—July 31, 2020. Parents: Elmus and Effie Mae Chambers. Spouse: Cathleen Pekarek. Children: Brian (deceased), Greg, Scott; five grandchildren.

**Dick, Erica Penner**, Dinuba, Calif., a partner in ministry with her husband within the U.S. Conference for more than 60 years, member of New Life Community (formerly Dinuba (Calif.) MB Church), Jan. 25, 1922—Aug. 24, 2020. Parents: Heinrich and Maria Thiessen Penner. Spouse: Henry H. Dick (deceased). Children: Janet Enns, Judy Brown, Jim; 10 grandchildren, seven great-grandchildren.

## Pastor recites Philippians

When preparing for a fall 2020 sermon series on Philippians, Jim Aiken, senior pastor at Heritage Bible Church in Bakersfield, Calif., memorized the book and recited it during an Aug. 30 recorded worship service.

To play the role of Paul, Aiken grew a beard. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, Aiken had grown his hair for five months. With the stage decorated as a jail cell, and the actors in costume, Aiken recited the book, while church member Jacob Blanton served as scribe. Because of limitations on in-person gatherings, the service was recorded.

Aiken says memorizing Philippians caused him to notice things of which he may not have been previously aware, adding that reciting the letter was “fun, challenging and nerve-wracking.”



**Epp, Dorothy E.**, Enid, Okla., member of Enid MB Church, June 5, 1928—Sept. 25, 2020. Parents: Herman and Verna Hoover (Pinneo) Michener. Spouse: Abel Epp (deceased). Children: Ramona Stage, Rochelle Bain, Janelle Hamm; six grandchildren, 13 great-grandchildren.

**Funk, LaVern**, Hillsboro, Kan., member of Hillsboro MB Church, Aug. 22, 1921—Aug. 8, 2020. Parents: Adolph and Anna (Enns) Funk. Spouse: Maxine Loewen (deceased), Joyce Seibel. Children: Mary Leal, Richard (deceased), Janet Mitzner, Russell; nine grandchildren, 11 great-grandchildren.

**Groening, Gala Jean**, Garden City, Kan., member of Hillsboro (Kan.) MB Church, Nov. 30, 1952—June 10, 2020. Parents: Francis and Martha (Wiens) Groening. Spouse: Randy Liebelt. Children: Andy, Cody; seven grandchildren.

**Jantzen, Larry Lee**, Madera, Calif., member of Madera Avenue Bible Church, Oct. 1, 1939—Sept. 12, 2020. Parents: WH and Anna Jantzen. Spouse: Linda Grider. Children: Lance, Lori Kleschold, Lane, Leslie Sciocchetti, Lisa Alvey; 11 grandchildren, six great-grandchildren.

**Johnson, Lorene**, Enid, Okla., member of Enid MB Church, March 23, 1932—Sept. 18, 2020. Parents: Edgar W. and Lucy M. Posey Pearson. Spouse: Walter F. Johnson (deceased). Children: Kevin, Larry, Terri Martin; seven grandchildren, 11 great-grandchildren.

**Kroeker, Peggy Joyce**, Shafter, Calif., member of Shafter MB Church, Dec. 4, 1931—Sept. 25, 2020. Parents: George and Ruby Nikkel. Spouse: Leland Kroeker (deceased). Children: Linda, Janet, Robert (deceased), Richard, Michael; eight grandchildren, nine great-grandchildren.

**Miller, Carl Francis**, Enid, Okla., of Enid

MB Church, Aug. 28, 1941—Oct. 5, 2020. Parents: Carlton and Winifred Patterson Miller. Spouse: Bevelyn "B" Schenck. Children: Deborah Bolling, Camellia Coray, Michelle Janzen; 12 grandchildren, 12 great-grandchildren.

**Mulligan, Jacob Michael**, Shafter, Calif., member of Shafter MB Church, Jan. 19, 2000—July 24, 2020. Parents: Mike and Susan Mulligan. Children: Angelo.

**Penner, Arthur "Art" James**, Shafter, Calif., member of Shafter MB Church, March 16, 1925—Aug. 1, 2020. Parents: John C. and Susan (Thiessen) Penner. Spouse: Donna. Children: Stephen, Susanne Franz, Randy, Sharon Wiebe; 10 grandchildren, 17 great-grandchildren.

**Pierpoint, Patricia "Trish" Darlene**, Enid, Okla., of Enid MB Church, May 14, 1941—April 27, 2020. Parents: James and Mary (Richardson) Lasley. Children: Kimberli Collins. Step-children: Donald Matthews; two grandchildren.

**Reimer, Donald Boyd**, Corn, Okla., member of Corn MB Church, May 6, 1935—July 19, 2020. Parents: BF and Rosalie (Schroeder) Reimer. Spouse: Jeanette. Children: Cindy Epp, Renee Kliever, Stacy; seven grandchildren, three great-grandchildren.

**Schroeder, Frances "Franny" Lucine**, Buhler, Kan., member of Buhler MB Church, July 5, 1929—Sept. 2, 2020. Parents: John and Lizzie Schroeder.

**Stobbe, Linda (Dick)**, Corn, Okla., member of Corn MB Church, Feb. 20, 1919—Oct. 5, 2020. Parents: Cornelius H. and Anna (Gossen) Dick. Spouse: Daniel W. Stobbe (deceased). Children: Karen Wiens, Mary Kopper, John, Ken, Harold; 12 grandchildren, 23 great-grandchildren, two great-great-grandchildren.

**Unruh, Travis Weston**, Wichita, Kan.,

member of Shafter MB Church, Oct. 22, 1989—July 31, 2020. Parents: Timothy and LaVonne (Janzen) Unruh.

**Wiens, Clifford Gene**, Kingsburg, Calif., member of Hope Kingsburg MB Church, May 13, 1933—Dec. 31, 2019. Parents: Arthur and Alice (Karber) Wiens. Spouse: Laura (Patzkowski) Wiens. Children: Ronald, Pamela Bartel; five grandchildren, five great-grandchildren.

## REACHING IN DISCIPLESHIP

**Hillsboro (Kan.) MB Church** hosted a Discipleship U E-Series with five classes offered online via Zoom. The goal of the courses was to be informative in a discussion-based platform.

## FELLOWSHIP

Families and friends of **North Fresno (Calif.) Church** met at the zoo Oct. 3.

**Cornerstone Community Church, Topeka, Kan.**, hosted an Easter egg hunt corresponding with a fall sermon series about the week of Easter.

**Community Bible Church, Olathe, Kan.**, offered a School Support Network to provide connection for families with school-age children, as well as opportunities for the CBC family to help, pray for and encourage families and educators.

**Stony Brook Church, Omaha, Neb.**, hosted a block party tailgate Sept. 12. People were encouraged to bring their vehicle and back into outer parking spaces. Each family was encouraged to bring a meal or tailgate grill. Games played included "Let's Make a Deal" and "Bingo," each with prizes. Masks were required if a person left his or her tailgate space.

## Henderson church shares hope

Living Hope Church (LHC) in Henderson, Neb., purchased and distributed \$4,000 worth of Chamber Bucks to help 13 families in need. Karla Block, LHC Everence stewardship advocate, says LHC contributed \$2,000 and received \$2,000 from Everence, using the grant money to purchase \$5 Chamber Bucks, which can be used at more than 50 area businesses.

"The year 2020 has created a time of certainly relying on Jesus to be our source of hope, and it is our privilege to share this hope with those around us," Block says.

The Everence Sharing Fund helps meet basic needs through matching grants. This year, to help churches assist those with financial needs as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, Everence doubled the amount of eligible Sharing Fund grant money available to churches with an advocate. Everence is an Anabaptist stewardship ministry.

**Valleyview Bible Church, Cimarron, Kan.,** held church in the park Aug. 23 with worship and a meal.

**Enid (Okla.) MB Church** hosted a pizza supper, children's water activities, lawn games, free shaved ice and a kids' painting opportunity, followed by a time of worship and a guest speaker in place of vacation Bible school Aug. 22.

**Bible Fellowship Church, Minot, N.D.,** met for "Church in the Park" Aug. 9 with a picnic meal following the worship service.

## WORSHIP

**Lighthouse Church, Denver, Colo.,** recorded its first worship album Sept. 18.

Women from **First MB Church, Wichita, Kan.,** gathered Sept. 19 for "Praise Under the Stars," an event including bonfires, hot dogs, s'mores and praise and worship.

## REACHING OUT

### LOCALLY

**Ebenfeld MB Church, Hillsboro, Kan.,** invited the community to a night of outdoor worship Aug. 16. Free snow cones were served.

**Parkview MB Church, Hillsboro, Kan.,** hosted a fire-themed Family Fun Night Aug. 15, with a fire truck, water games and a movie. The church also provided school supplies for students at Hillsboro Elementary School.

**Adams (Okla.) MB Church** held five days of vacation Bible school in late July with 34 students and 10 workers. The same materials and decorations were used a week later in a nearby community with 10 children and four workers in attendance.

**Greenhouse Community Church, Saratoga Springs, Utah,** delivered back-to-school treat baskets for faculty and staff of 11 Saratoga Springs schools.

**Cornerstone Community Church, Topeka, Kan.,** invited students to bring their backpacks and school devices to church Aug. 16 in order for the congregation to offer a prayer of blessing for students and school personnel. Those not attending physically were invited to bring their student's backpack to where they were watching the livestream.

As part of its partnership with the Houston school community, **Neighborhood Church, Visalia, Calif.,** launched The Neighborhood Degree Project, a new initiative aiming to move Visalia forward, one student at a time. Neighborhood Church launched a community group for business leaders Sept. 13 hosted by Executive Pastor Kelly Thomas with the goal of challenging, inspiring, supporting and equipping business leaders in areas of life, faith and business.

## GLOBALLY

Despite not gathering as a sewing circle, members of the Ladies Fellowship at **Rosedale Bible Church, Bakersfield, Calif.,** made relief comforter quilts for MCC while working from home. Some people cut squares, others sewed them into a blanket and a group put together the finishing touches. The group has completed 23 of 50 comforters.

For an MCC Sewing Kit and School Supply Kit project, people from **Bethesda Church, Huron, S.D.,** assembled 11 sewing kits, 65 school kits and 113 extra kits for MCC. Donations to the project totaled more than \$650.

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## CLEARINGHOUSE

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### Church Local Openings

**Pastor:** Turpin Mennonite Church, a small conservative country church in the Oklahoma Panhandle, is seeking a full-time pastor. Founded in 1907, we seek a strong biblical preacher to join us in living out God's Word in our community. If you feel called to consider this position, please email Paula at [ajev6419@gmail.com](mailto:ajev6419@gmail.com).

**Senior Pastor:** Fairview MB Church is accepting applications for a senior pastor position. Fairview is in northwest Oklahoma with a population of 2,700. Pastor responsibilities include serving as the spiritual leader of the church, planning and coordinating worship services, cooperating with district and national denominational leaders, serving as head of pastoral staff, performing weddings and conducting funerals. If you are interested, please send resume to [jbrob1676@gmail.com](mailto:jbrob1676@gmail.com)

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## From TESTIMONY, page 9

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sixth-floor window. A friend gave us an iPad so we could communicate via Facetime.

**Harold:** Eventually, I started rehab. I had to learn to stand and swallow again. I ate pureed food. All liquids, including water, had to be thickened.

When I heard stories of what happened to me, I developed "survivor's syndrome," wondering why God was saving me and not others. I felt the prayers of thousands of people. I'm sure that's why I'm still here. I'm convinced God has a plan for me.

On June 4, after 47 days in the hospital, I came home.

Three therapists and a nurse provided therapy through home health care until the middle of July. They anticipated it would be the middle of August—another miracle.

I'm doing remarkably well now, aside from my endurance. I praise God for the miracle he did in my life. I tell everybody my mansion wasn't completed yet, so God had to send me back.



# Give thanks in everything

Understanding God's impossible commands

Over the past several months as we've experienced the awful ramifications of the coronavirus, horrific wildfires in multiple places, major hurricanes, disturbing rioting and fighting, enmity between politicians, flooding, gale force winds pummeling millions of acres of cropland, intense conflicts around the world and even our own inner battles, it's challenging sometimes to be grateful. And yet, in this holiday season we're entering, we do have so much for which to thank God.

I remember when the worship song *Give Thanks* became popular roughly 30 years ago. It spoke to my heart—and the hearts of many others—that we should give thanks to the Holy One for all he's given us, including his Son. It spoke of the weak becoming strong because we have a God who cares for us. I, for one, need to be reminded of this—that God cares for me and provides so much for me and for my family that I should pause on a regular basis and give thanks.

In three of some of the shortest verses in the Bible, Paul says to the church in Thessalonica, "Rejoice always (v. 16), pray continually (v. 17), give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus (v. 18)" (1 Thess. 5).

What do we do with these impossible commands? If Paul had said, "Rejoice a lot, pray as often as you can, and give thanks whenever possible," maybe that would be doable. But, Paul just lays these unreachable commands out there without any additional instruction. What is Paul really saying here?

Does "rejoice always" mean that we must always go around with a smile on our face and a bounce in our step? Am I sinning if I ever feel sad, depressed, upset or grieved? That can't be, because neither Jesus nor Paul were always happy.

My view is that even within the difficulties of life, this command to rejoice is to be viewed not primarily as a matter of feelings but rather of obedience. When we face difficult trials, we have a choice: We can focus on those trials and fall into self-pity, or we can set our minds on the things above, where Christ is, and rejoice.

We also don't need to feel thankful before we give thanks. When hard trials come or simply living in the midst of what I listed in the first paragraph, we often don't feel thankful. But because we know it's true, we can say, "Lord, I trust that you are good and that you know what you're doing in this difficult situation. I know who you are and that I can depend entirely on you." So, like rejoicing always, giving thanks in everything is often our choice to believe and trust God in difficult circumstances.

I know a lot of people who have become depressed during this pandemic. I too have felt really down at times. Our lives have been turned upside down. It saddens me that this feeling of depression can go to the extreme for some. This is when we must take care of our souls. This is when we spend more time with Jesus and turn to him when things seem overpowering. This is the time for "rejoicing, praying and giving thanks." This is when we need to remind ourselves that these days will pass, one way or another. Our real home is heaven, we're just foreigners here in this broken land. When I remember that, things turn right side up again.

Then, along with the psalmist, we can proclaim, even in the midst of world's ugliest stuff, "Praise the Lord. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever" (Ps. 106:1). ▀



Don Morris began serving as the USMB national director Aug. 1, 2016.

Prior to accepting this position, Morris served as the USMB interim executive director for two years and as the director of Mission USA beginning in 2004.

He and his wife, Janna, live in Edmond, Okla., where they attend Cross Timbers Church.

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