

# CHRISTIAN LEADER

March / April 2021

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## FAMILY TIES

The magazine of U.S. Mennonite Brethren

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# God's wondrous restoration

Undisturbed snow blankets the world—but not for long

Large flakes of snow are falling as I write this editorial. It's Monday of the third week in February, and much of the country is dealing with record-low temperatures and winter storms. Very few people on our street have left home for the past 24 hours, so the roads and driveways in our neighborhood are blanketed with undisturbed snow.

This week also marks the beginning of Lent, the time during which we anticipate and prepare for Easter. As I contemplate Christ's death and resurrection, I think about the now-pristine snow. In time, the smooth blanket of snow covering the lawns, driveways and sidewalks will be rumpled by low mounds of snow pushed to the side by shovels wielded by those determined to find the walkways beneath. Fluffy snow burying the streets will be compressed as vehicles leave their tracks. As temperatures rise, the glittering snow will be splattered by dirty slush and spoiled by muddy footprints. It might not happen today but at some point, the beauty and perfection of the fresh snow will be spoiled and ruined. And no matter what we do, we will not be able to restore it.

The same can be said of sin. God's creation was perfect, but sin entered the Garden of Eden and ever since our world and all of mankind has been marred and damaged by sin. And no matter what we do, we cannot undo the ways in which sin and evil destroy. A miraculous intervention is the only way this mess can be fixed. That's what Easter is—God's wondrous restoration.

The amazing mystery is that God's restoration plan is accomplished by something that would normally stain—the shedding of blood. That is the wonder and mystery of Easter. That God so loved the world that he sent his only Son who he loved very much to die on a cross and to save us. That when we accept God's gift, we are restored so that when God looks at us, he sees us as clean, perfect and unblemished.

This issue of the *Christian Leader* focuses on our family relationships. As in all of life, our family relationships—which we hope will be faultless and pristine—can be distorted and broken. And it is beyond our power to fix them. But as you spend time with your family during the season of Lent and as you consider the wonder and mystery of the event that Easter celebrates, remember that God can redeem and restore family ties strained by hurts, disappointments and wounds. May we all experience the transformation of Christ's cleansing blood and the power of his resurrection. ■



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## USMB leaders reject violence

The USMB Leadership Board and U.S. Board of Faith and Life issued a statement regarding the violence Jan. 6, 2021, at the U.S. Capitol. The statement says that the violence of Jan. 6 “does not reflect the values or mission of Jesus entrusted to his followers,” and speaks against all acts of violence. “We are dismayed by all displays of violence in recent years, especially by those who profess to believe in Jesus,” the statement says. The statement concludes with a call to “pray for our nation and to refrain from conflating political ideologies with allegiance to God.”

Read the full statement: <https://usmb.org/portfolio/usmb-leaders-statement-regarding-the-violence-at-the-u-s-capitol/>. —USMB

## Registration opens for national summer camp



Registration is open for ASCENT, USMB Youth’s new annual national high school summer camp, which will be held June 16-20, 2021, at Glorieta Adventure Camps (GAC) in Glorieta, N.M., the location of the 2019 USMB national youth conference. The camp offers more than 36 activities, including white water rafting.

Participants who register by April 30 can take advantage of the early bird rate of \$350 for students and \$175 for leaders. The price will increase May 1 by \$50 per person. Each church can receive one free ticket to ASCENT if their lead youth worker is part of the National Youth Worker network. For more information or to join the network, visit [www.usmbyouth.com/members/register](http://www.usmbyouth.com/members/register). To register for ASCENT, visit [www.usmbyouth.com/ascent](http://www.usmbyouth.com/ascent). —USMB Youth

## NPO postponed

The National Pastors Orientation (NPO), hosted by the U.S. Board of Faith and Life and scheduled for March 22-24, 2021, in San Diego, Calif., has been postponed indefinitely due to COVID-19.

“We don’t have an alternate date to announce at this time,” says Tim Sullivan, BFL chair. “We’ve talked about doing a virtual orientation but that is not an appealing alternative, although it may be necessary if in-person gathering does not become a normal part of our lives in the near future.”

The biennial NPO is designed for Mennonite Brethren pastors and spouses new to the pastorate or new to USMB. The orientation provides an opportunity for pastoral couples to get connected, learn about the MB family and the many resources available as well as to meet national and district leaders and pastors. The event is typically held in a resort setting and is intended to be informational while also providing a time of renewal and refreshment.

Pastors interested in attending the next NPO should contact their district minister. —USMB

## New LEAD Pods guests announced

USMB has announced a new lineup of LEAD Pods, a podcast by and for U.S. Mennonite Brethren. Upcoming episodes in March and April will feature Jenny Akina, GriefShare facilitator at North Fresno (Calif.) Church, talking about grief; Jules Glanzer, Tabor College president, sharing about battling COVID-19; USMB district ministers speaking to the effects of COVID-19 on church staff; and a panel discussion about the challenges currently faced by Congolese immigrants as they minister to their communities and seek to connect with U.S. Mennonite Brethren.



February episodes included a conversation with USMB national director Don Morris, U.S. BFL chair Tim Sullivan and attorney Lyndon Vix about responding to the political climate; and finances and budgeting with Nate Yoder, chief development officer in MB Foundation’s Fresno office.

Hosted by Matt Ehresman, LEAD Pods are accessible on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts and Spotify. To listen on the USMB website, visit: [www.usmb.org/lead-pods](http://www.usmb.org/lead-pods). —USMB

## ICOMB shares prayer requests

A February 2021 update from the International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) includes reports from Malawi and Japan, two countries that have seen an increase in COVID-19 cases in recent months.

Safari Bahati Mutabesha, bishop of the MB Church of Malawi, reports that beginning in December 2020, the number of people testing positive has increased daily and hundreds are dying. With few testing centers in the country, Safari fears there may be many more positive cases.

Specific prayer requests are:

- For daily bread as people cannot go to market centers. Many people are living hand to mouth and depend on daily income.
- For those who live far from hospitals and cannot access medical care.
- For church members who have tested positive and must stay in isolation but have no access to food.
- For church members who cannot afford face masks and soap and are high risk.
- For the food insecurity facing Malawi. Food has run out and harvest season is many months away.

Takao Sugi, president of Nihon Menonaito Burezaren Kyodan, the MB conference in Japan, reports that coronavirus infections in Japan were relatively low until fall 2020, but the number of infected people increased rapidly at the end of the year. Japan's government policies prioritized the economy, and people's sense of urgency about the crisis waned until infections rose drastically.

Most churches have switched to online worship, and spiritual care is needed for older members without Internet access. Some churches don't have the capacity to offer online

services and have been delivering a message summary to each household.

Because ministry and outreach has been based on gathering together, the number of baptisms decreased dramatically and some churches are in financial difficulty. The Japan Mennonite Brethren Conference 70th Anniversary, scheduled for September 2020, has been postponed to Sept. 20, 2021.—*ICOMB*

## SDJHYC goes digital

The Southern District Junior High Youth Conference (JHYC) was presented in a digital format this year, much like what was done for Southern District Youth Conference.



In December, district youth minister Russ Claassen sent a digital package to youth workers. Dustin Mulkey, youth commission member and youth pastor at North Oak Community Church in Hays, Kan., prepared two recorded messages with discussion questions pertaining to the theme of "Home," encouraging youth to have their foundation in Jesus and abide in him. The package also included game ideas and links to Presence Worship music videos.

"We hope you can enjoy the contents of this JHYC Digital Package in whatever context you are able to," Claassen wrote in the email to youth workers. "You will be able to download hard files and videos for the primary content, if you wish. Praying these resources will

help you encounter God's Word, his heart and help create a unique space to propel this generation into joyful service in the kingdom, all in the name of Jesus, for the glory of God!"

The in-person event, normally held in January, was cancelled because of COVID-19.—*CL*

## TC announces search committee

The Tabor College Board of Directors executive committee has announced the seven-member search committee that will guide the college through the process of seeking the Mennonite Brethren institution's 14th president.

Jeff Nikkel, executive coach and Tabor board member, of Centennial, Colo., will chair the committee. Other members include Jerry Kliwer, agribusinessman, Reedley, Calif.; Erica Haude, licensed counselor, Hillsboro, Kan.; Tim Sullivan, Southern District Conference minister, Wichita, Kan.; Sylvia B. Penner, attorney, Wichita; Michael James, vice president of business and finance at Tabor; Wendell Loewen, Tabor faculty member and representative on the board of directors; and, serving as ex-officio member, Susan Franz-Koslowsky of Towanda, Kan., senior vice president with Emprise Bank and chair of the Board of Directors.

The committee will conduct the search to find the successor for Jules Glanzer who recently announced plans to retire after 13 years of service as president. The search committee will review applicants and interview top candidates, eventually making a recommendation to the full board of directors. Information about the presidential search can be found at:

[www.tabor.edu/presidentialsearch](http://www.tabor.edu/presidentialsearch).

—*TC*

# 5 minutes with...

## FPU to return to in-person instruction

Primarily face-to-face instruction will return to all Fresno Pacific University campuses for the fall of 2021.

“Our campuses have felt empty since in-person instruction ended in March 2020, and we look forward to meeting face-to-face again this fall as much as is safely possible,” says FPU president Joseph Jones. “Progress with vaccines has made us more optimistic than ever about prospects for bringing this community physically back together to provide the education we know is most effective.”

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mennonite Brethren institution in Fresno, Calif., has acted in accordance with the latest health information as well as state, city and county orders and guidelines. The university will continue to take precautions to protect students, faculty, administrators and staff.

While instruction has been online, the university completed a \$2 million plan to improve the online experience and to ensure safety, including social-distancing standards, cameras for hybrid instruction, plexiglass shields, cleaning services and personal protection equipment.

A decision about instruction for summer classes in the graduate, degree completion and traditional undergraduate programs is expected in March.

As details for implementing in-person instruction are worked out, updates will be posted on the university COVID-19 website: [fresno.edu/coronavirus-covid-19-news-and-information](https://fresno.edu/coronavirus-covid-19-news-and-information). —FPU



## Ron Braun

Ron Braun is in his 15<sup>th</sup> year as mayor of North Newton, Kan., a position he has held longer than his “day job” as vice president of philanthropy at Tabor College. Located in Central Kansas, North Newton is a community of some 2,000 residents neighboring the larger city of Newton. Braun and his wife, Dena, are long-time members of Koerner Heights Church in Newton. He took a few moments from preparing this week’s City Council agenda to reflect on his experience with local government in light of the political turmoil in the country.

### ***Elections in these times tend to be full of conflict. Has that been your experience?***

Initially, I was shoulder-tapped to consider running and had no ambition to be mayor. But I had a strong voter base among the people and won that 2007 election with 85 percent of the vote. I’m glad this is a nonpartisan position because politics can be vicious and tear us apart. As a follower of Jesus, I’m here to serve others, not to win power. Through three elections since then I’ve not had an opponent.

### ***To what do you attribute your continuing community support?***

Part of the planning and preparation the mayor performs involves knowing the hearts and minds of the people and how to find consensus. In these 14 years there have been very few times when there hasn’t been consensus in the Council’s votes.

### ***Has the unrest and polarization in the country affected the North Newton community?***

Our Council’s agenda always includes a time for citizen comments. Often nobody comes to make a

comment, but this last summer when the racial issues were at the front of everyone’s mind I’d have a roomful of people wanting to speak—calling for defunding the police or setting up an advisory commission.

### ***What was your strategy as mayor in that situation?***

I had to ensure that everyone had a voice. I wouldn’t cut the speakers off even if they went over the time limit. That’s the role of local government. We have to listen intently and build understanding. That’s how we help the community find a common solution to the problems we face, to protect everybody’s rights and freedoms.

### ***How has the unrest over national elections looked from your point of view as a mayor?***

Each time I’m elected and sworn into office I affirm that I will support the constitution of our country. That constitution starts with “We the People. The violence at the U.S. Capitol in early January—people tearing at the foundation of our democracy—shook me to the core.

*Interview by Kathy Heinrichs Wiest*



## God provides again and again

Sioux Falls church sees God at work during difficult times

To say the past year has been challenging for churches and pastors is an understatement. Preaching and leading worship to empty chairs has been interesting, to say the least. At Christ Community Church in Sioux Falls, S.D., we held online-only services for about six weeks from March to early May 2020. Overall, it went well. Our sound people and worship team stepped up during a difficult time. But it was God who really stepped up for us.

The first Sunday we met virtually we had sound issues—the sound kept cutting out intermittently. Monday, I called a local company that handles audio/visual issues for churches; we had used them before. After checking out the system, they informed me that we would need to buy a new component that would cost \$2,000. We did not have \$2,000.

The next day I received a call from our landlord. He has called me one time in the nearly four years I've been at the church, so I thought this couldn't be good. He asked how we were doing with the pandemic. His own church was having a hard time, he said, and he figured we were as well. That's when he told me that he was going to mail us back half of our rent, which is...\$2,000! I was emotional and overwhelmed. God provided.

A few weeks later our digital mixer went out, and we were going to be dead in the water without it. Later in the week a good friend of mine who pastors an Assemblies of God church in Sioux Falls called me. He said that his people had really blessed the church with their giv-

ing, and they wanted to share it with some other churches in town. They mailed us a check for \$2,500, which covered the cost of the new digital mixer. Again, God came through for us.

We live streamed our services. Though the quality was not the best, it was better than nothing. We had a small camcorder in the back of the sanctuary and the mic picked up the sound through the house speakers. Unfortunately, it also picked up the sound technicians no matter how quiet they tried to be. We were awarded a \$2,500 grant from MB Foundation to purchase a new camera and upgrade our sound. Now our sound runs directly to the soundboard from each instrument and microphone. Our audio and video are drastically improved, and that improvement has increased our online audience. While it is not a huge increase, it is an increase, which means people are tuning in—and having good quality helps. Again, God provided.

Our online presence continues to grow. People are finding our website from all over the country and even the world. I've had an email and a phone call from a woman in Pennsylvania who was looking for help in her relationship with Christ.

God's provision showed me two things. First, that he wants Christ Community Church to continue growing the kingdom and making disciples. Second, that God knows what we need and how to provide for those needs. This was incredibly encouraging to me and our church in the midst of a difficult time. Soli Deo Gloria! ▀



Jeff Turner  
has been the pastor at  
Christ Community  
Church, Sioux Falls,  
SD, since 2017.  
He came to faith in  
Christ in 1991 while  
in Alcoholics  
Anonymous and  
continues to work  
with those struggling  
from drug and  
alcohol addiction.  
He is a graduate of  
Trinity Bible College  
and Sioux Falls Sem-  
inary. He and  
his wife, Angela,  
have two  
teenage sons.



# From jail to Jesus

God gives meth dealer a second chance

I lay on the floor of the jail cell crying. Isolated from everyone. I was coming down off of meth and felt so broken, so devastated. I looked back at the times I was sober and wondered: Why did I slip? Why did I relapse? How did I get here?

On June 5, 2019, two drug task force officers had pulled me over outside my house. They told me they knew I was selling meth, arrested me and put me in jail for three days. But God redeemed me in that jail cell, and now I'm preaching his Word.

My mom was very devout in dragging me and my siblings to church. I started playing drums at church in seventh grade, and I was saved in my teenage years. But I don't think you can really own your faith until you become an adult and venture into the world for yourself and find Jesus there.

My stepdad was physically, mentally and emotionally abusive. I remember getting pulled from the top bunk and slapped around. I grew up, basically, across the street at a friend's house. I wanted nothing to do with being at home.

I graduated high school and moved to Rochester, Minn. That's when I stopped going to church and started smoking weed, drinking and sleeping around. I disowned my faith, but if you had asked me, I probably would've still said I was a Christian.

I got a full-time job as a general manager of a pizza franchise. My paycheck supported my habits: drinking and smoking weed. When my sister had major back surgery for scoliosis, I got hooked on her pills. That led to a methamphetamine addiction.

Meth took me to a place I've never known. It felt like I had found what I had been missing all my life—peace and joy. I can tell you now, it was a false hope, a false illusion, a snare of Satan.

I was working and using meth, and nobody knew. I could give you a lot of horror stories. A friend of mine overdosed

two hours after he left my house. I got so depressed with where my life was going, and I couldn't stop using meth, so I checked myself into a treatment center in Texas. I stayed there for about 30 days, graduated and came back to Rochester.

After another treatment, I moved home to Owatonna, Minn., and lived with my mom. I had about seven months clean and began drumming for a church. It was an amazing experience, and I was definitely proud of it, but I wasn't doing it for God. I wasn't reading my Bible. I wasn't really praying. I was literally going to church to drum because drumming's my passion.

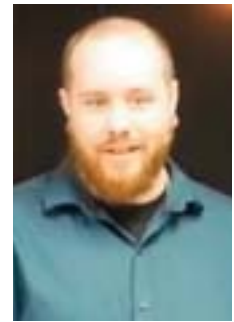
Eventually, I hit a wall with my depression. I wasn't taking antidepressants, and I made a poor decision to message the wrong friend. I relapsed that day. For the next year, I still drummed for the church, but I was using and selling meth. It was a depressing, revolving circle of emotion. I felt conviction for it, but I was addicted.

Then, I got arrested.

Jail is a man-made, earthly punishment for crimes you've committed. I hated it. In jail, I got this overwhelming feeling that God was with me, and he kept asking me: What will your punishment be for your sins eternally against me? That's when I lost it. I knew I was sinning. I knew I wasn't living for God. I knew God was alive and asking me to turn my life around.

Once I gave my life to Christ in jail, God has had his hand in everything.

My mom had recently opened a credit card, and the limit was for the exact amount as my bail, so she bailed me out of jail. My sentence was five and a half years in prison for selling methamphetamine. It was a first-degree felony. But through sentencing, I stayed sober. After a month or two, the court saw that I was still sober,



Steven Keller is a pastoral resident at Redemption Church, a USMB congregation in Owatonna, Minn., where he serves as video and sound tech and drummer and helps lead a men's Bible study. His wife, Kali, is the worship leader at Redemption. Together, the couple helps lead children's church, a prayer and worship night and a recovery meeting, in addition to hosting home groups and a weekly family dinner. Keller is a disciple, hungry to reach the lost and draw closer to God and be used by him.

See TESTIMONY, page 30

# Stepparenting with the mind of Christ

By Jessica Rutkosky

## Playing a supportive role in stepchildren's lives

If I'm honest, the thought of being a stepmother has long terrified me. Disney movies are indeed formative, for at the age of 5, Lady Tremaine of *Cinderella* became my stepmother archetype. As an adult, I recognized the severe flaws in this caricature (thankfully); however, the idea of being a stepmother was still unsettling.

When I met my husband five years ago and discovered he had a six-year-old daughter, my heart sank a bit. Up until this moment, my fear of stepparenting had been theoretical—I never *actually* thought I would be a stepmom. I never envisioned myself playing this part or sharing the responsibility of raising someone else's child. Though I didn't *actually* fear turning into the "Wicked Stepmother," I definitely feared being perceived as the antagonist in a child's life, particularly in my soon-to-be-stepdaughter's life.

Before we took our vows, my husband and I had many conversations about this new role I was taking on. I wanted a bullet-point job description as well as a plan of action for every situation we might encounter. In response to these fear-driven demands, my husband often responded, "For now, I need you to be like an aunt. Or a mentor. Someone that can encourage, listen, and be a friend to her." At the time, I didn't realize how much truth this statement contained. Instead, I often felt dissatisfied by his responses, as they weren't as detailed as I'd hoped.

It wasn't until one of my therapy sessions that I gained some clarity on this part I was about to play. In response to the question, "What does it look like to have the mind of Christ towards stepparenting?" I began to think about Joseph, Jesus' stepfather.



### The example of Joseph

The Bible says little about stepparenting. Actually, it gives no directives at all. That is unfortunate considering one in three Americans is either a stepparent, stepchild or in some form of a blended family. Yet, the Bible does give us a glimpse of a stepparent in the story of Joseph.

Most of what we know about Joseph comes from Matthew and Luke's gospels. In these two accounts, we learn that Joseph was engaged to Mary prior to her pregnancy, was righteous, experienced fear, listened to divine communication in dreams, was present at Jesus' birth, protected his newly born son and wife in fleeing to Egypt, made a home for his family (Matt. 1:18—2:23), descended from the house and family of David, was present at Jesus' circumcision and temple dedication and worried about his stepson (Luke 2:1-52).

What strikes me most about Joseph's character is Matthew's description of him as "a righteous man" (Matt. 2:19). We often think of being righteous as being upright, virtuous, guiltless or following God's laws. This isn't

wrong. However, *dikaïos*, the Greek word behind “righteous,” also means “him whose way of thinking, feeling and acting is wholly conformed to the will of God.” I think this definition is most fitting, as this was Joseph’s very mindset.

As a Jewish male in the first century, Joseph had every right to call off his engagement to Mary. Upon finding out his fiancé was pregnant, the only logical conclusion he could’ve drawn was that she’d been gallivanting around Nazareth. Considering betrothal was just as binding as marriage, this adulterous act would’ve shamed Joseph, threatened his reputation and damaged his ego. The only way to save face was to cut ties with Mary. This is what Joseph intended to do until an angel of the Lord appeared to him and provided a behind-the-scenes explanation of Mary’s miraculous conception. In response, Joseph acted obediently and took Mary as his wife. In so doing, he became Jesus’ stepfather, dedicating himself to helping Mary raise God’s Son.

Joseph’s decision revealed his willingness to participate in God’s bigger plan. Joseph recognized that doing God’s will was more important than preserving his own reputation or pursuing his own agenda. He understood God’s plan for the world and sought to carry it out in his role as husband and stepfather. And ultimately isn’t this what having the *mind of Christ* is all about?

If I hadn’t become a stepmom, I don’t think I would’ve developed such a respect and admiration for Joseph’s role. Granted, stepmothers and stepfathers experience different challenges and hurdles; yet there is much overlap between these roles. I think this is why Joseph is often referred to as the “stepparents’ patron saint.”

### **A supportive protagonist**

Unlike Lady Tremaine, Joseph wasn’t the antagonist in Jesus’ life. Rather, he was a supporting protagonist. In this supporting role, Joseph was faithful, understanding and helpful. He was a steadfast spouse and a dedicated stepparent. Had he said “no” to playing this role, he would’ve missed out on the opportunity to participate in the life of a precious child. He would’ve forsaken the offer to partner with the ultimate Protagonist in his divine drama.

This is how I’ve ultimately come to define and understand my role as a stepmom—a supporting protagonist. In the past three and a half years, I’ve been privileged to be the supporting protagonist in my stepdaughter’s life. This has looked remarkably similar to what my husband suggested in our early conversations. I’m a friend, a mentor, a coach and an encourager. I’ve been present for significant moments and have rejoiced, cried and celebrated alongside my stepdaughter. I’ve supported the lead protagonist, my husband, and partnered with the ultimate Protagonist,

relying on his wisdom and compassion to best love my stepdaughter.

There’s no doubt that stepparenting is hard. It’s messy. It’s daunting. It often feels like a relational teeter-totter. And it never looks the same from one blended family to the next or one stepparent to the next. I’ve relied on books, blogs, prayer and the advice of other stepmoms and stepfamilies to help navigate both the practical and challenging sides of this complex role. I would have floundered without the guidance and wisdom from these incredible resources.

Yet, I still find the most solace in Joseph’s story and experience.

### **The mind of Christ**

I never got to directly answer my therapist’s question, but if I had, I would say to have the mind of Christ towards stepparenting is to think, act and feel as Joseph did, for he was wholly conformed to God’s will.

I don’t think any stepparent really knows what they’re getting into. I don’t think Joseph probably did either. As humans, fear and the unknown are intimately connected to a need for control. I experienced this firsthand at the prospect of becoming a stepmom. I think Joseph experienced it too.

Yet, in the midst of his fear, rather than grasping for control, Joseph surrendered his control to God. He didn’t allow fear to eclipse his role in God’s plan, prevent him from acting out God’s will or stifle his love for God’s Son. This surrendering of fear created space for acceptance, sacrifice and trust—all characteristics desperately needed in stepparenting.

While my task isn’t as monumental as Joseph’s, recasting my role in the grander scheme helps me see past the daily minutia of stepparenting. It helps me see God’s perspective on this role, which helps me surrender my fear, creating space for acceptance, love, sacrifice and trust. It helps me have the mind of Christ toward my stepdaughter, my husband, myself and our unique triad.

God entrusted his greatest gift to a stepparent. In my most challenging moments as a stepmom, I remember this. Children, whether biological or not, are one of God’s most valuable gifts. Loving a child always falls within God’s grander, overall scheme. God’s will is to love, therefore, whether a biological parent or a supporting protagonist, to lavish love upon a child is to have the mind of Christ.

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“*Joseph acted obediently and took Mary as his wife. In so doing, he became Jesus’ stepfather, dedicating himself to helping Mary raise God’s Son.*”



A stylized illustration of a tree with a dark grey trunk and branches. The leaves are in shades of orange, yellow, and blue, scattered across the upper half of the page. The title 'The gift of God' is written in a large, bold, grey sans-serif font, with the words 'The gift' on one line and 'of God' on the next. Below the title is the subtitle 'My relationship with my elderly parents is a gift' in a smaller, bold, black sans-serif font.

# The gift of God

## My relationship with my elderly parents is a gift

“**T**hat every man may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God” (Eccl. 3:13).

This verse is easily overshadowed by the first eight verses, infamously recorded in the 1960s song, *Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)*, by the rock ‘n roll band The Byrds. But verse 13 holds something for all of us. It’s a reminder. It is “a view of God’s sovereignty which both reassures and yet sober,” says theologian Michael Eaton. The writer intends for us to understand that “contentment...is a gift from God,” says Eaton. This is the story of how I have realized my gift.

I care for my elderly parents who are both 86 years old. They have been married for 66 years. It has been quite amazing to see a marriage of the 1950s grow and change over the decades. But what I didn’t quite expect was how my relationship with both of them would change too.

In the spring of 2015, when my three grown daughters moved out of my house within a month of each other and left me an “empty nester,” I invited my parents to move in and share my house. They were beginning to need a little more care. So, they sold their mobile home and paid off some debt and moved in. With foresight, they arranged for the tub-shower in the common bathroom in my house to be completely remodeled with a low-threshold shower and a very tall commode to accommodate Mom’s mobility issues.

Soon after, Dad was diagnosed with prostate cancer and needed monthly infusions and appointments with the oncologist. He began to



develop other illnesses, which resulted in more medical appointments and visits to the emergency room. There were appointments with the cardiologist, the vascular specialist, the podiatrist, the gastroenterologist, the dermatologist for skin cancer, the oncologist and primary care visits. My mother has not driven in decades, so it became my responsibility to accompany my dad on his various doctor visits. I keep track of his appointments so that they will fit into my busy full-time teaching schedule at Fresno Pacific University.

My mother now also sees the cardiologist, vascular specialist, podiatrist and dermatologist, besides seeing our common nurse practitioner. Almost two years ago, Dad stopped driving altogether, and I became a soccer mom in reverse, struggling to maintain a full teaching load and responsibility of caregiving for two aging parents. We have made this arrangement easier for all of us by doubling up on the doctors they see. They share most of the specialists, and we all share the same nurse practitioner for primary care that we have had for the last 25 years or more. That has been a gift. In the beginning, Mom and Dad went to basic check-up appointments at the same time.

### Changing relationships

Over the last five years, our relationships within this triad have changed. I am now the one to make financial decisions and medical decisions and supervise their daily living activities. Four years ago, my youngest daughter and family moved back to Fresno, and they provide sweet support to this evolving relationship and set of responsibilities. My daughter has shared the responsibility with me while going to school at FPU, being a wife and a mother to four-year-old Evelyn. My daughter focuses on Mom's basic needs, and I focus on Dad's care, and we work together to be sure things run—not smoothly—but at least we can keep going.

It is quite interesting when all four generations are in the house together. From the youngest on up, we manage to meet everyone's basic needs and cover for one another when something unexpected happens.

Still, we are stretched thin at times. Jessica, our family's nurse practitioner, took note of this stress and referred us to a Certified Senior Advisor and Geriatric Care Specialist, support I would have never even thought of. Jeri provided a full evaluation for both mom and dad in the form of interviews, a detailed written report and a folder full of suggested next moves. With additional grab bars installed in the bathroom for Mom, their Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST) and advanced health care directives completed, we advanced into the summer of 2020. After an intensive series of tests and evaluations by a neurologist, mom was diagnosed with dementia. Fortunately for us, Mom and Dad have always been believers in every insurance imaginable, long-term health care insurance (LTC) included.

I filed a claim with Jeri's help on my mother's behalf for an in-home care provider three mornings a week. Jeri assisted in finding and hiring a company that provides such a caregiver. This allows my father to go into the yard and spend

time with his bonsai when he feels well and the weather is good. It also allows me to set student advising appointments and attend other required meetings via Zoom. I teach my courses in the evenings, and my parents are usually settled into recliners by the time class starts online. I am not sure what I will do when I am required to attend meetings in person again. I am concerned that my mother's LTC may run out in the next year.

This past fall, Dad was diagnosed with severe carotid stenosis and severe aortic valve stenosis. He has undergone a series of medical diagnostics to determine his suitability for a heart valve replacement procedure. I worry. My dad has chosen Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) on his POLST, and I know a day will come when he may not wake up.

It has been a heavy load to carry—full-time teaching, overseeing two teaching credential programs with all of the responsibilities that brings and living alone with two octogenarians. It hasn't always been smooth waters for the three of us. We are luckier than most that we live in a four-bedroom house with two living rooms—one for them and one for me.

We get on each other's nerves at times. I prefer not to watch television nor discuss my bathroom habits. They prefer their recliners and a good bowel movement. I prefer to maintain my modesty. Being a former athlete, Dad has no modesty to speak of, and as mom's mobility has declined, she has become more and more dependent on my daughter and me for bathing, laundry and meal preparation.

### The gift of God

I remember, though, when I was working on my doctoral degree years ago. I was alone with three teenage girls in the house for the four long years it took to complete the degree. But like every other time in my life, Mom and Dad were there to support and encourage me. Since my classes were on the weekends, I would pick Mom and Dad up from their mobile home at 5 a.m., and we all piled into my Toyota to go to a country coffee shop for a hot breakfast before I headed off to class.

Those years are a blur like graduate school can be, but I remember how attentive my parents were to me; devouring each word I uttered as if each phrase was as savory as the biscuits and gravy the Country Junction famously served.

It's not just at that time in my life, but since I was a wild child, that my parents have protected me yet encouraged me to take chances, follow my dreams and fight for what I know to be the next right thing. When annoying little habits irritate me, I remember what I was like growing up in their house and wonder what I will be like when I am 86. I hope my daughter will take care of me then. It's at times like those that I remember Ecclesiastes 3 that God is the only one who knows how long I will have them. I try to remember to take each day and enjoy it—and be content—for this is God's gift to me.

*Lisa Keith is an associate professor of education at Fresno Pacific University and is the program director for the Master of Arts in Special Education. Keith is a member of Butler Church, a USMB congregation in Fresno, Calif.*



# HELP!

## How to survive extended time with family

**A**ll of us have redefined life in one way or another in the past 12 months thanks to school closings, layoffs and public health mandates prompted by the global pandemic. Each cancelled event or restriction created a sense of loss in our inability to connect in relationships, complete important work or pursue the things we enjoy. Each disappointment built increasingly exaggerated energy until we were surprised by a surge of emotional intensity (frustration, sadness, hyperactivity) that was often unexpectedly directed at those closest to us.

Feelings arise spontaneously and considerably faster than thoughts, limiting our understanding of ourselves or our struggle until we have had time to reflect. Those closest to us often observe our emotions before we ourselves even realize the feelings motivating our downturned expression, frown or sheepish smile. Better understanding of ourselves and others offers an undeniable advantage to supporting the family relationships in our lives, relationships in which we often filter less and feel more freedom to let comments fly.

Our complicated bond with family comes in part from our lack of choice. We are bound to these people imprinted on our DNA, creating loyalty and security unlike any other relationship. In the movie *Uncle Buck*, neighbor Marcie alludes to this bond when she comments on Uncle Buck's agreement to babysit his brother's children: "You need a relative for an imposition of this size." The movie also illustrates the dynamics of diverse personalities in each family that both enrich our relationships and provide a source of conflict.

Having shared in the most formative years of our life, our families know us better than anyone else. These truths inspire the clichés "blood is thicker" as well as "friends are the family you choose." There are no guarantees that family members will have similar perspectives or communication styles or even approach their beliefs in the same way. At some level we all want

By Matthew Gallagher

to belong somewhere, or at the very least not be left out. But how do we inspire relationship growth or successfully navigate conflict?

### **A goal we'll never master**

The most direct answer will involve unconditional acceptance of ourselves and others as well as managing our words and actions to make sure we are not simply reacting with emotion. But this answer is more of a goal and a process that takes our whole lives to develop—and never truly master.

In the best of times, we can get along with almost anyone and find something to enjoy together. But under prolonged stress with dynamics of fear and pain—like a quarantine—we struggle to manage even ourselves and get pulled into conflict that neither of us could see coming.

These moments of unintended conflict grow like a fire through mutual misunderstandings and when left unresolved, resentment can follow. Much has been written over this past year about the impact of the pandemic on relationships, from increased divorce rates to tragic instances of abuse and domestic violence. These are the extremes that make the headlines, but there is much to be said about the nuances of our interactions that become amplified during times of stress.

We can see this in the irritability that most of us can relate to on some level. We see it in frustrations that make disappointments feel unbearable or prompt us to respond gruffly to the person that has the nerve to sit there breathing in and out right next to us. They're not doing anything wrong, but our frustration often attacks or blames the closest targets. This irritability usually signals we are “out of gas” and in need of either something simple like food or sleep or, in some cases, something more complicated like time alone, connection with loved ones or a sense of meaningful accomplishment.

There are also positive stories—examples of family game nights resurrected out of the lack of other options or more meaningful conversations during time spent together. The unique challenges brought by the pandemic have highlighted and amplified the dynamics in all of our families, spotlighting differences that lead to conflict as well as inspiring new commitments to one another. We have been forced to come to terms with our needs and to puzzle over conflicted motivations when one need competes with the other. One energetic, gregarious family member may want to play games until late at night while another family member who is quiet and reflective wonders why everyone is asking him so many questions.

### **Family relationships**

Picture yourself several days into an extended visit with your family—the point at which you start to crave some alone time despite the fact that you love the people around

you. Simple differences in preference take on a life all their own in debates over what game to play, which movie to watch, or what to eat, and in the best situations these conflicts end in compromise. More complicated examples involve heated discussions of politics, religion or recent public health decisions and make compromise far more difficult.

While some of us look forward to family gatherings as a chance to relax and feel appreciated by those closest to us, other family members are focused on protecting those they love and see the gathering as an opportunity to warn against threats in flawed political policies or impending doom of public health policies. And some of us just like to watch as others mix it up or have fun with the debates and get reactions out of others.

Like an elaborate meal with multiple courses, the diversity of our approach can add to the enjoyment, giving us each something to appreciate. But in times of distress our exaggerated emotional energy can lead us to demand the behavior we need most, essentially insisting that everyone eat our favorite course (imagine a table filled with platters of broccoli).

All of these behaviors are exaggerated expressions of our honest, unconscious needs, and we don't need to apologize for these needs. Unfortunately, we sometimes need to apologize for our exaggerated behaviors that attempt to overtly or passively pressure others to act in the way we prefer, which usually sounds like “why won't you just....” Dynamics of control are one of the most common sources of relationship conflict, and relationship conflict is one of the most commonly reported sources of psychological distress. This might be one of the reasons the book *Boundaries* by Cloud and Townsend has sold millions of copies with multiple versions for different family dynamics.

Family relationships present a moving target as we progress through life, almost like changing a tire while we are still driving. We see this when we try to parent our adolescent like we did when they were 8 years old or the awkward negotiation of house rules when our college student moves home after months of managing their own life.

We are free to experience the joy of these transitions when we accept the natural progression of our changing role and embrace the unique perspectives and motivations of those around us. My profession and my faith are probably most in sync when offering unconditional acceptance to those I meet. The few examples in which Jesus used force or harsh words were reserved for those who already claimed righteousness. To the rest of the world, he offered compassion and grace. We are faithful in showing his love when we do the same.

*Matthew Gallagher is a licensed clinical professional counselor at Restoration Counseling & Consultation, P.A. in Wichita, Kan. He and his wife, Lori, attend First MB Church with their two daughters, Maddie and Gracie.*



# Defining family

Not all  
family units  
look  
the same

By Caitlin Friesen

When was the last sermon you heard that included the blessings of being childless or the joys of single adulthood? There are few positive examples of childless or single-adult families in the Bible. We often see barrenness as a curse and singleness as something to be overcome. (Think of Sarai in Genesis 11 or the story of Ruth wooing Boaz). Jesus is an unmarried person with no children, but we rarely highlight these aspects of his life.

We highly value the traditional view of family—two married individuals raising biological offspring—and sometimes forget to honor those who do not resemble that structure. Yet we still believe that God is at work in people who will not be parents, we see the Holy Spirit moving in unmarried people and Jesus reaches out to large and small families alike.

A few years ago, I went to a routine medical check-up and got some jarring news: I can't get pregnant. My heart health had just started to deteriorate, and my doctors explained that a weak heart means a weakened body, one unable to support another life. I was crestfallen and honestly a little afraid of what that meant for my role within the church. I was worried this might make me less able to encourage parents and invest in the lives of their children, especially as a family pastor.

When I started dating my husband, Ben, I was up front about my well-being and the fact that I will never be a biological mother. He decided to join me and gave up his chance to be a biological father. After four years of marriage and the ups-and-downs of my medical care, we also realize we are not (and may not ever be) in a place to be foster or adoptive parents. It is just the two of us and the two of us is a full family.

People like me and Ben have the choices made for us in our circumstances. Others are choosing, and prayerfully so, to not marry and/or be parents. Some are welcoming nonbiological members into their family unit. There are many different ways to be a family!

Ben and I connect with our extended biological families and church family as two adults. Our church community has welcomed us and given us opportunities to be part of a larger spiritual family. They understand the words of Paul: "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:4-5).

We have experienced pain from being childless adults, yet we have been given opportunities to be mentors, to connect with people of all ages and to live into generosity that fits well with our state of being.

As a church community we recognize not all of our family units will look the same. With that in mind, there are ways we can better care for each other:

**Be cautious of prying questions.** Please don't ask "Why are you not married yet?" or "When will you have children?" Realize that these inquiries imply that something is wrong and can be very hurtful.

**Include the full family of God.** Encourage those outside the traditional family structure to serve as leaders. Walk with those who are fostering or in the process of adopting children. For those preaching, talk about singleness and childlessness without negative tones.

**Celebrate together.** Extend your child's birthday party invitation to those who are not raising kids. Reimagine traditional holidays like Mother's Day and Father's Day and make changes to better fit your community. Rejoice in weddings and new babies, but also celebrate graduations, job promotions and all the other pieces of church family life.

Fullness does not come from our biological family but from being connected to Jesus Christ. God has a calling for all of us whether we are single, part of a large family unit, raising children that we did not birth or living as empty nesters. Praise God.

*Caitlin Friesen has a passion for Jesus and a heart for children, both of which she has put to use as a backpacking guide, camp counselor and associate pastor of children and family ministries at North Fresno Church. She and her husband, Ben, live in Topeka, Kan., where Ben serves as lead pastor at Cornerstone Community Church. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in ministry, leadership and culture at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary.*





## A new way of doing church

Microchurch model offers Pacific Keep new approach

When COVID-19 and its ensuing shutdowns hit the State of Washington, Pacific Keep Church in Spokane became homeless. Renters of the art-deco style Bing Crosby Theater, this church community was no longer permitted to gather in the space where it was accustomed to worshipping each Sunday. So, the church turned to its small group leaders and asked them to meet on Zoom during the shutdown—it would be a prelude to a new way of doing church at Pacific Keep.

Even as shutdown restrictions eventually loosened, Pacific Keep still wasn't able to meet in the theater, which prompted lead pastor Boris Borisov to look at a church model that had been on his mind before: the microchurch.

A microchurch could be considered a small group on steroids, as Borisov puts it. "The small group becomes the place where church happens in all of its forms," he says.

Borisov asked his small group leaders to consider evolving into microchurches. Some did while others decided to merge with other small groups.

Planted in 2015, Pacific Keep began as a daughter church of Pilgrim Slavic MB Church, geared toward 20- and 30-something young adults. The church's pre-pandemic attendance numbers were hovering around 120 per gathering. According to Borisov, attendance is similar post-pandemic, with four microchurches meeting in neighborhoods around Spokane and two additional emerging microchurches.

In Pacific Keep microchurches, small groups of people safely meet together in homes on a Sunday morning for worship, community and missions. In some cases, they even meet over Zoom. The



At Pacific Keep Church in Spokane, Wash., microchurches consist of small groups of people meeting together in homes or online. The church model is missional minded, says lead pastor Boris Borisov. *Photo by Pacific Keep Church*

microchurch watches a recorded message from Borisov and each microchurch leader guides the group through a study guide. Borisov checks in with the microchurch leaders each month, providing leadership and accountability.

Recently, Pacific Keep found a church space to rent on Thursday evenings where it hosts its Fellowship Gatherings.

"It's like a service for believers with traditional worship and a sermon, but we've also created a third space for testimonies about what's happening in the microchurches," Borisov says. Many of the leaders attend these gatherings.

Since implementing the microchurch model, Pacific Keep has seen five people make first-time decisions for Jesus.

### Model is missional minded

Microchurches as a model are very much missionally minded, which coincides well with Borisov's missional vision for Pacific Keep.

"We've always had a missional vision for the church," Borisov says. "Everybody has a place in God's story. We help people find what that is, grow in

their calling and share their mission based on their calling. We want people to share Jesus in normal rhythms of life.

"Pre COVID-19, we implemented this through the traditional church model," Borisov says. "People could find their place through Sunday morning church. They could grow in small groups and share that by volunteering in one or two or three missional initiatives. COVID-19 has forced us to reach into that on the granular level. So, we can't go to church services, but there are still ways to find God's calling on your life. COVID made us move away from your traditional church planting model, but the overall mission remains the same."

Borisov says he asks his microchurch leaders at their monthly meetings what they are doing to own the lostness of their neighborhoods and engage in problem solving. In his own microchurch, Borisov says all sense of community has been lost thanks to COVID-19, so his group is taking steps to start a neighborhood garden and host block parties to in turn share the love of Jesus with neighbors.

## Meeting needs

The microchurches at Pacific Keep have been trained to listen and look for the needs of their group and their neighborhoods, which is why the missional component of each group looks different. For example, one microchurch took a woman with chronic mental health issues under its wing while another microchurch identified foster children in need to bless with warm clothes and gifts at Christmas.

Kristin Wilkinson, a microchurch participant who was involved in helping these foster children, recalls the blessing of the way her own children were able to participate in the missional activity. To her, the microchurch is a fantastic way to give children a voice in the church. A

mother to 8- and 10-year-old girls, Wilkinson says she loves watching her daughters engage in the microchurch.

"That's been one of my favorite parts," she says "My oldest shares prayer requests just like the adults. She has experienced the rest of her church family praying for her by name. She's part of the discussion and loves to share her insights."

Wilkinson says she also really enjoys the openness of the microchurch. "People bring friends without relationship with Christ and it's not overwhelming and doesn't seem like a different language. I think it's really a beautiful bridge between worlds," Wilkinson says. "We check in with each other and are known."

## An alternative system

Borisov is quick to deflect credit for the church model. He says he learned about the concept when he read the *Underground Network* by Brian Sanders.

Jeremy Stephens, one of the original Underground Network founders, says microchurches are an alternative system for the organizational components of church and the organic parts of church to interface and coexist. He says it is designed to obey all of the New Testament and addresses authority, money, heresy and organizational construct.

According to Stephens, microchurches are done to local calling but he says every microchurch has to have worship, community and missions.

"They don't have to be perfect, but they have to be aspiring toward those things," he says. "How do we be missional, love each other in community and work in mission. What purposes is God inviting us into?"

"The whole ecosystem of the microchurch is based on people praying and discerning what God is asking them to do," Stephens says. "People are going to be human and make mistakes but because we give Jesus space to speak, he convicts people."

So, what constitutes a church to Pacific Keep? According to Borisov that is: First, the worship of Jesus as Lord, which entails the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus as ruler over all of creation. Second is the Great Commission—going and making disciples—and third, the Great Commandment—loving your neighbor as yourself.

Borisov admits the microchurch isn't perfect.

"There are people who have left because they want the traditional thing," he says. "We've lost people because of the switch, but we've gained people too, and they're the unchurched and dechurched. We have to change our metrics of what success looks like," Borisov says.

While the microchurch is a great fit for Pacific Keep, Borisov also hasn't ruled

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out returning to a larger gathering when possible, but likely with a different twist.

“We think there is still huge value in having a public gathering of all the saints,” Borisov says. “What COVID-19 has taught us is that in terms of resource allocation 80 percent went to Sunday morning and 20 percent went to small groups and discipleship class. This made us realize that we really should be shooting for a 50/50 split. Both should be elevated at the same time,” he says.

—Allison Rodriguez

## Saying goodbye

### Dinuba church concludes radio ministry

With its 3,862nd broadcast, a Dinuba, Calif., radio ministry came to a close as listeners heard Dwight Heier’s voice bid the audience farewell for the final time. Heier, who has served as chief audio engineer at Dinuba’s New Life Community for more than 50 years, can recite his standard closing from memory:

“You’ve been listening to the live broadcast coming to you from the Dinuba Mennonite Brethren Church. We trust that you were blessed by today’s music and spoken word, and we ask that you join us again this same time next week. This is Dwight Heier saying goodbye and God bless you.”

DMBC—now New Life Community—broadcast its final service Dec. 27, 2020, marking the 74th anniversary of the church’s radio ministry and ending what may have been the longest running live broadcast in the United States, Heier says.

Lead pastor Mark Isaac says the radio broadcast provided some listeners’ primary church contact.

“For decades this radio ministry was the primary way our shut-ins and those unable to attend worship were able to participate with us,” he says. “Communication was almost entirely by phone



Dwight Heier, pictured here in the church sound booth, has served as chief audio engineer at New Life Community in Dinuba, Calif., for more than 50 years. NLC’s live radio broadcast, which began in 1946, came to a close with a final service in December 2020, stitched together by Heier. *Photo by NLC*

and mail for all those years, so the live radio broadcast from the church allowed people to be present with everyone there.”

#### Going on the air

NLC began broadcasting its Sunday morning services live Dec. 29, 1946, one week after the KRDU radio station went on the air in California’s Central Valley.

“They had invited us, when they started transmitting, if we would like to broadcast our Sunday morning service live,” Heier says. “So back then, the church accepted that challenge.”

KRDU was the first commercial Christian radio station in the U.S., Heier says. Its signal reached from Bakersfield to Lodi and as far as the central coast.

The station’s founders, David Hofer and his brother, Egon Hofer, former Krimmer Mennonite Brethren and members of Zion MB, eventually came to DMBC.

“When we first started, the service got to the radio station by way of the telephone lines,” Heier says, adding that the church later got an FM transmitter and now uses an interface to send audio from the church’s mixer.

In the early days, the first 15 minutes of the service was in German, so the radio broadcast began with the 45-minute English service that followed. The church transitioned solely to English services around 1957, Heier says, and KRDU expanded the broadcast to 60 minutes soon after.

Heier accepted the role of chief audio engineer at DMBC in 1964, where he serviced and maintained the sound equipment.

“They knew I was interested in electronics and microphones and recordings,” he says, laughing as he adds: “They asked if I would be willing to step in and fill in until they could find somebody permanent.”



Heier's wife, Carol, a former church choir director and soloist, says Heier knew how to keep the equipment working.

"As it progressed, there was always more and more equipment, so he spent so many hours there at church, making sure it was working," she says. "If something didn't work right, he would go and fix it. He not only knows how to turn those knobs, but he knows how it's made and put together."

## Realities of radio

Each radio broadcast began and ended with Heier's pre-recorded remarks.

KRDU requested that NLC not alter its services to accommodate the radio, but an awareness of starting on time and silence was necessary.

Although Heier could add music during periods of silence, being on air impacted ways Isaac and others carried out services.

"We've had a highly structured worship service for all these years, with constant alertness by the audio technicians, worship leaders and musicians to cover any periods of silence or unmiked speakers," Isaac says, adding he regularly modified his application points to include suggestions for the "unseen audience."

Heier also recorded services for historical preservation and online.

Digital recordings helped keep the church on the air during the coronavirus pandemic when NLC no longer met in person. For nine and a half months, Heier kept the radio broadcast going from his home studio, pulling together

old content on everything from wire recording reels, records, reel-to-reel tapes and cassettes and incorporating a current message from Isaac.

## Ending well

Over the years, Heier served with several others to produce the broadcast, including his son-in-law, Tim Smith, who has served as a sound operator the past 25 years.

"Our church has had an enjoyable business relationship with the management of KRDU over the years," Heier writes in a historical reflection. "We have also had great cooperation with their great professional engineering team. They have always been committed to providing us with the best possible up-to-date equipment for quality radio sound broadcasting."

Heier's work on the broadcast has been a labor of love, he says, and the decision to go off the air was not made lightly. Heier says while he wishes someone would take over, the reality that he has all the files would make that transition difficult.

As the radio ministry neared its end, Heier stitched together one final broadcast, using a combination of songs, prayers and messages from past recordings as well as current music and a message from Isaac.

When the final broadcast aired, the Heiers and their daughter and son-in-law gathered around the radio to listen.

"I knew what was coming obviously, because I put it together, but I couldn't help tearing up quite often," Heier says, adding later: "I put a lot of heart into it."

## Far-reaching impact

The impact of the radio broadcast has been far-reaching.

Heier says he has received cards and gifts expressing gratitude for his service. For some, the broadcast was their worship service during the pandemic.

"It's touched a lot of people's lives over the years," Heier says, adding: "We know people that came to the Lord from listening to our broadcast."

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A listener wrote this in a letter to Heier: “Thank you for all the years you did in working the sound system at DMBC, especially the radio broadcast. Being I am now alone and don’t get out much, my only source of contact with the church was through radio. ... That will be missed.”

### What’s next?

The end of the radio program marks a shift in strategy as NLC invests in technology to reach younger generations.

Since the start of the pandemic, NLC has offered its services online and plans to livestream services and add them to its website and Facebook for on-demand viewing. NLC is also working on a new website and app.

Isaac acknowledges that some older church members and radio listeners may not have computers or be familiar with the Internet, but says he hopes the app provides a relatively easy way to access services.

“We aren’t opposed to returning to radio broadcasting in the future, especially once we’re able to capture better audio indoors,” Isaac says. “For now, though, we’re investing in technology and training to reach the generations growing up around us. Our community’s population has an extremely low average age. We know they’re online, and that’s where we’re aiming to reach them.” —*Janae Rempel*

Listen to the final service here:  
<https://www.dmbc.org/sermons.html>

## Christmas creativity

USMB congregations celebrate Christmas indoors, outdoors and online

Whether virtual, outdoors or in-person, the way USMB congregations celebrated Christmas may have looked a little different in 2020. Guide-

lines related to the coronavirus pandemic varied from place to place, but in each location, whether offering options, doing outreach, or worshiping online or outdoors, congregations found creative ways to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

### Options

Some churches, like Community Bible Church (CBC) in Olathe, Kan., and Kingwood Bible Church in Salem, Ore., offered options to allow as many people as possible to participate.

CBC planned an outdoor Christmas Eve service with a livestream.

Although CBC has offered in-person Sunday services and a livestream since summer 2020, the church saw greater in-person attendance at five outdoor services, says staff pastor Russ Friesen.

“As Pastor Aaron (Halvorsen) and I were thinking about a Christmas Eve service, which is normally a high-attendance event, we considered the idea of

going back outside to allow for more people to safely gather,” Friesen says. “Of course we had no idea what the weather would be, but we pressed forward with the idea.”

Despite below-freezing temperatures and a 7-degree windchill, 75 to 100 people gathered in the church parking lot near a stage in a sheltered area.

CBC provided hot cocoa and hand-warmers. The service included selections from *The Jesus Storybook Bible* and Christmas carols and ended with CBC’s traditional candlelighting, although Friesen says everyone quickly learned butane lighters don’t work below freezing.

“So, it was a combination of a handful of lit candles and a number of phone flashlights while we sang *Silent Night*, closing with *Joy to the World*,” Friesen says.

Kansas and local guidelines limited large gatherings with exceptions for reli-



The Hiebert family huddles together with their candles during the outdoor Christmas Eve service at Community Bible Church in Olathe, Kan. The congregation ended the service by singing *Silent Night* and *Joy to the World* by candlelight. Photo by CBC

gious institutions, provided social distancing and masking efforts were in place, Friesen says, adding the service was shorter than usual and involved fewer people.

"It was received pretty well by those who came and endured the cold," Friesen says. "The hot chocolate and handwarmers were a big hit."

Even the livestream had a higher than average number of views, he says.

As for whether CBC will celebrate Christmas Eve outdoors again, Friesen says he hopes it's not needed.

"We have no regrets, but we'd prefer not to deal with potential winter weather," he says. "People missed seeing how amazing the worship center looked, so we look forward to hopefully doing a more traditional indoor service for Christmas Eve 2021."

Kingwood Bible Church (KBC) also offered in-person and virtual opportunities, as well as outreach.

Before Christmas, the KBC congregation delivered gifts to neighborhood families, including the Gospel of John, a children's Christmas storybook, candy and a letter, says lead pastor Nathan Ensز.

In Oregon, restrictions for church gathering numbers were lifted in mid-December—social distancing and masks remained requirements—leaving little time to plan.

"The Christmas program and Christmas Eve service are both expected at Kingwood," Ensز says. "I really didn't know if we could pull off a Christmas program in time, but people (were) excited to participate, wanting some sense of normalcy."

KBC held an in-person Christmas program with a livestream.

"The evening included music from various age-brackets, poetry, Scripture reading and a virtual video recording from our children retelling the story of Jesus entering our world," he says. "The night brought people together, providing much needed love and laughter."

Ensز emailed a short Christmas Eve devotional to the congregation.



Kingwood Bible Church held an in-person Christmas program with a livestream option and delivered a short Christmas Eve devotional via email. "As in any church, some might say we did too much or too little...I'm just glad we did something," says lead pastor Nathan Ensز. "This last year was a hard year on everyone, and it gave people a longing for some sense of nostalgia. So far I have only heard a lot of positive from our people regarding our Christmas celebration." *Photo by KBC*

"A COVID-19 Christmas is unlike any others we have celebrated, so it provided an opportunity to try something new and unique," Ensز says. "A virtual devotional won't happen every year, but perhaps once every few years is appropriate. A simplified Christmas program brought just as much love and laughter, proving to be healthier for those involved. That part I'd definitely like to do again!"

## Outreach

For some churches, including Redemption Church in Owatonna, Minn., and The Life Center in Lenoir, N.C., outreach was a main focus.

Redemption donated more than 400 pairs of socks to the homeless. Senior pastor Christian Kohs says the effort wasn't a result of pandemic-related concerns as much as it was about reaching out to those impacted by COVID-19.

"We have someone in our church family who knew the needs of the homeless, especially amidst the Minnesota winter and a tough 2020 for many due to

COVID-19," Kohs says.

Redemption placed a Christmas tree in its lobby with ornaments listing a variety of items, such as toys, underwear and blankets, for the congregation to purchase and put under the tree for homeless people in need.

"We got a few thank-you cards (and) numerous pictures of people accepting them while we handed the stuff out," Kohs says. "It was great."

As Redemption continues to grow, Kohs says the church plans to continue a yearly outreach. Redemption was unable to work with the local hospital for its usual children's outreach as a result of COVID-19.

Meanwhile, The Life Center (TLC) congregation collaborated with five churches to distribute more than 3,000 new and used coats to the local ministries. TLC also donated a box of food from the local farmer's market to families in need for four weeks in December.

## Online

In Omaha, Neb., the Stony Brook



Church (SBC) congregation planned a virtual Christmas Eve service.

Given guidelines pertaining to social distancing and masks, SBC leadership limited in-person attendance to the worship team, audio/visual team, pastor and Kid Life ministry directors and their families, and sought ways to intentionally engage online viewers, says administrator Melissa Hanna.

Leaders planned a light-related theme, with candles and light bulbs filling the stage, and SBC asked the congregation to have candles at home too. To help with engagement, leaders alternated between music and messages, Hanna says.

“Knowing that the church family was at home lighting their own candle (while singing Silent Night) was an incredibly heartfelt feeling that is hard to express,” Hanna says. “People much prefer to meet in person; however, having the primary focus of including the online viewer in each step of the service did make it well received.”

## Outdoors

Some churches, like Ebenfeld MB Church (EMBC) near Hillsboro, Kan., and Zoar MB Church (ZMBC) in Inman, Kan., offered opportunities for people to get out of their homes and participate in their vehicles or outdoors.

EMBC hosted a live nativity drive-up two nights in December. Attendees waited in their vehicles to view the show, tuning their radios to a designated FM station to hear narration while watching a reenactment of the Christmas story, including live sheep and a donkey.

“We felt if any year needed this, it was definitely 2020,” says Collin Quiring, one of the organizers. “(We) had an ample crew that was willing to come to bat and make sure everything was done and done to the best of our abilities, all things considered. From livestock, to costumes/set work, logistics and traffic, everyone pitched in.”

According to Quiring, 184 vehicles or approximately 550 people, came to one of 20 performances in the church park-

ing lot. Sunday’s turnout was more than expected, Quiring says.

“We ended up shaving a wee bit of time off of each performance so we could move cars faster,” he says. “We decided beforehand that we would stay until the last cars went through. We had planned to go for two hours and do eight shows but ended up going for close to three hours and did 12 shows the second night.”

Quiring says Ebenfeld is planning to do a live nativity again in 2021, which might become a tradition.

“God is good, and he wanted his message to be heard,” Quiring says. “That’s what those two nights were all about.”

Meanwhile, ZMBC offered a self-guided Christmas Journey scavenger hunt using Scripture and devotional

readings to tell the Christmas story at stations around town.

Pastor Dwight Carter says ZMBC’s Christmas Eve service is one of its highest-attended services, so he sought a way to allow as many people as possible to participate, given guidelines on capacity and masks. Carter says he assumed many community members would not attend an indoor service.

“We decided a scavenger hunt family activity would be a fun activity that families who weren’t involved in our church could participate in without any pressure,” he says.

Five stations set the scene for the story.

“We included clues to find the next station, but also just a map for those who didn’t want to participate in the scavenger hunt idea,” Carter says.

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Approximately 45 to 50 groups of people went through the Christmas Journey on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

“There were quite a few community people that we heard from that loved it,” Carter says. “The only negative feedback we heard was from people who complained that we weren’t doing our traditional Christmas Eve service.”

Carter says while the church may do a scavenger hunt again, it likely will not replace its regular programming.

—Janae Rempel

## CCT helps “Launch” Central Valley businesses

Center for Community Transformation equips business leaders

Keshawna Nelson wants to brew coffee and serve a caffeinated jolt to Fresno’s future. She’s an entrepreneur with a new business: The Java Bar. Her vision is to share knowledge, experience—and yes, profits—so others can build generational wealth where perhaps none existed before. The effect—multiplied by like-minded entrepreneurs—could be a stronger community with less poverty, increased education and greater economic vitality.

Nelson, an accountant, boosted her efforts by participating in a new program developed by the Center for Community Transformation (CCT) at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary, part of Fresno Pacific University in Fresno, Calif. Its focus: helping people in underserved communities successfully launch small businesses.

“We feel we can have an impact helping people turn a side hustle into their main gig and at the same time helping families generate more income and move up the economic ladder,” says Carlos Huerta, CCT associate director.



CCT associate director Carlos Huerta (left) and Fresno business man Doug Davidian (right), who serves as a Launch Central Valley coach, stand with Matthew Blackwood, a member of the first Launch Central Valley cohort. *Photo by Jocelyn Marquez.*

The new program, Launch Central Valley, offers nine sessions over as many weeks covering topics like marketing, sales, loans and how to deal with attorneys, accountants and government officials.

“These are the tough things in starting a business that a lot of folks don’t know about or need a little hand-holding to get through,” Huerta says.

### Launching more entrepreneurs

Nelson and 11 others in Launch Central Valley’s first cohort graduated in November 2020, and the second cohort began in January 2021. Over the next five years, CCT plans to take 300 more entrepreneurs from Bakersfield to Merced through the program. Their participation will be underwritten, in part, by grant money from the Lilly Endowment, one of the world’s largest private philanthropic foundations. CCT recently received a nearly \$1 million Lilly grant, which will be used for several faith-based initiatives.

In Launch Central Valley, Nelson’s most important lesson centered on achieving and maintaining a good credit record.

“When I first started on this journey, that was an issue with everything I was trying to do,” she says.

Nelson also learned the importance of sticking to a budget as well as knowing her customers’ need for quick service.

The Java Bar is in a business park near Fresno Yosemite International Airport and specializes in coffees from around the world. It opened in early December 2020 but only for takeout in the morning because of COVID restrictions.

“I’m a coffee connoisseur, and my idea was to open up people’s tastebuds,” Nelson says. “But this journey to opening The Java Bar isn’t about me. The idea is to make money, save money and invest in others. My greatest reward will be to give back to my employees.”

In addition to passing along what she’s learned in Launch Central Valley, Nelson envisions investing in businesses her employees might one day want to open.



“When they are ready to leave me, I want the money to invest in their futures.” That also could include helping pay for their pursuit of college degrees. “This is about community and pulling us in all together,” Nelson says. “Then Fresno will be better because others will take what I have to give, and they’ll pour it back into the community.”

### Coaches come alongside

That ripple effect is what Launch Central Valley hopes to achieve, says Fresno businessman Doug Davidian, who serves as lead facilitator and a business coach in the program.

“Participants’ attitudes go from ‘I don’t know what to do’ to ‘I have a right to be at the table, and I know what the next step is,’” Davidian says. “And those entrepreneurs influence 25 to 30 other people, who say, ‘If they can do it, I can do it.’”

Davidian founded California Business Furnishings (later Contract Interiors) and has served as president of the Fresno Chamber of Commerce and the Fresno County Economic Development Corp.

“I want to be involved with this program because God gave me a lot of training, and I can pass along that experience and save these people 10 to 20 years of mistakes,” he says.

### Daring to dream

The link between successful small businesses and markers of community progress like higher literacy rates is important.

“Flourishing families contribute to flourishing communities and a host of positive social indicators,” says Randy White, executive director of CCT, and FPU associate professor. “When we seek the financial peace of the family, we experience the benefits of that peace.”

In a larger sense, helping people start small businesses nurtures their God-given impulse to lead a productive life, he adds. “For many, life has beaten them down and discouraged them to

dream. Launch Central Valley is a vehicle to train people to dare to dream again and get the training and mentorship to make those dreams a reality.”

White says CCT plans to begin several other new programs financed by the grant from the Lilly Endowment. They are:

- A ministry certificate focusing on community economic development for Hispanic pastors who lead their congregations part-time while working at other jobs. Curriculum will cover subjects such as improving parishioners’ financial literacy, training people for job readiness and starting small businesses that address community issues or problems.

- Church-school partnerships that train congregations to assist elementary schools through tutoring, sports clubs

and campus improvement projects.

- Congregational training sessions six times a year for pastors and other church leaders. The sessions will explore theological and practical approaches to mental health, racial conflict, concentrated poverty, violence, generational disconnects from the church and other issues facing communities. The Center for Anabaptist Studies at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary will help lead the training.

- CCT also will expand Faith & Finances, an existing financial literacy program that helps churches assist vulnerable church and community members in avoiding exploitation and making good financial decisions. —Doug Hoagland

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## Churches planting churches

### Church plant updates from Utah, California

USMB churches—some that are still church plants themselves—are actively planting new churches using a campus model. Two of these fledgling churches are in Grantsville, Utah, and Clovis, Calif.

#### Lakeview Church - Grantsville

As Lakeview Church, a Mennonite Brethren church plant in Stansbury Park, Utah, led by Phil Wiebe, continues to grow, they are anticipating the launch of a second campus about nine miles west of Stansbury Park in Grantsville. Pastor Jeff Hubrich and his wife, Heather, have organized a team for Grantsville and will be incorporating roughly 65 people from the Stansbury Park campus to get the new church going.

As of early February, the plan was to begin campus services Feb. 21 with a community-wide grand opening Easter Sunday. Completing a build-out of a commercial space has required considerable fundraising. The finished product will provide room to grow, including developing a children's ministry. Purchasing rather than leasing the building has lowered the monthly facility expense by almost half.

Hubrich, previously a commercial airline pilot, is excited about what God has in store. He and Heather are connecting with people, including those currently in

the Mormon (LDS) church. One man, an elder in the LDS church, recently asked Hubrich to explain the armor of God to him and has been watching Lakeview Church sermons online and is "really getting into it!"

#### Mountain View Community Church – Old Town

Scott Gossenberger and his wife, Jackie, never imagined that God would call them to plant a church, especially since Scott, at 61, is not a young guy. But that is exactly what God has orchestrated.

Under the support of Mountain View Community Church, Fresno, Calif., the Gossenbergers are planting in nearby Old Town Clovis. They began meeting Jan. 24 in a chilly outdoor amphitheater at a local junior high school, with more than 100 people in attendance. That amazing start has continued, and more people are coming every week.

Gossenberger began attending a city-wide pastor's weekly prayer group while serving as an associate pastor at another Fresno church. Also in that group were Mountain View pastors Fred Leonard and Dave Thiessen. After a season, that began several years ago, of feeling that something was missing and that God was calling him to something different, Gossenberger asked Leonard for prayer about the situation.

Just after that conversation, the Gossenbergers visited their daughter in Harrisburg, Penn. On an early morning walk along a busy thoroughfare, the couple was talking and praying, wondering if perhaps Scott should return to a previous career in pharmaceutical

sales. Nothing was clear. As they walked, a car pulled up beside them, the driver rolled down his window and said something to them. They didn't hear him, so they moved closer and the driver repeated, "The Holy Spirit told me to stop and tell you that you have a calling as a pastor." Since the only people they knew in the city were their daughter and her husband, the Gossenbergers immediately knew this out-of-the-blue pronouncement was God answering their prayers and their search for direction in an incredibly dynamic way.

Thoughts then soon began to emerge about starting a new church in Old Town Clovis. Checking with the lead pastor of the church in which he was currently serving, Gossenberger quickly realized that the church wasn't in a position to help. During a subsequent conversation with Leonard and Thiessen, they all realized that both parties had dreams of starting a church in Old Town. A strong connection soon formed, and a new MB church became a reality.

Gossenberger's vision? To reach those who don't know Jesus and to help those who do but who have been disconnected from the church.

"I want them to have a church they feel comfortable belonging to," says Gossenberger. "I depend on the Holy Spirit for this new role, praying, trusting, preaching the Word of God and expecting God to save the lost or reenergize and encourage those who are disconnected."—*USMB news story*

# Staying close to Jesus

LAMB churches dream, build

2020! The year of changes, adjustments and new challenges. Plenty of reasons available to just stall and freeze up. In my lifetime I don't remember a time where the church as a whole needed to rethink how to do church. How to continue to reach out to your local community with the gospel of Jesus when your doors were closed. Why continue to dream, to have vision, to make plans when everything just seems so difficult? In the middle of all of the uncertainty God's voice shouts loudly into the depths of our souls, "I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it" (Matthew 16:18.) This is truth. The truth that guides each church as we battle against the demons of darkness.

The beauty, out of what felt at times like the 2020 mess, is that God continued to build his church. Our churches were challenged to think outside the box. To innovate with a parking lot service or even consider an online platform to stay in touch with our members. This actually enhanced our strategy and mission by clarifying at a deeper level who we belong to.

As Paul speaks to us in 1 Timothy 3:15, We are "the church of the living God." The living God who continues to breathe life into his church during a challenging time. He continues to call us toward himself. He continues to show his faithful hand towards his church. 2020 taught us many things but one thought has carried over into 2021: "Stay close to the one that builds his church."

The LAMB District has experienced that and more. Our churches in deep

South Texas have continued to dream, adjust vision and strategy and some have even taken steps of faith in building new facilities or remodeling existing ones.

- Pastor Jesse Hernandez and his church Templo Nueva Vida in Palmview are in the process of building a multipurpose center with a capacity of 200 people. Pastor Jesse says, "We have envisioned our community as a people in need of a Savior! Therefore, we are sowing the seed for the harvest of souls."

- As well, Pastor Rafael Nuñez and his church, Mission MB, are also in the process of building a new facility with a capacity of 200 people. Their partnership with MB Foundation has made this dream a reality. Pastor Nuñez says, "We are trusting, with God's help, that this facility will be a beam of light in the middle of a society that is lost in sin and hope to be an open door where they can find salvation and eternal life."

- The congregation I pastor, Grace-Point in La Grulla, has also undergone a renovation to the main sanctuary. This was a "generational investment." Just like generations before us have invested in the future, we as well felt the need to provide a facility that would accommodate our community and be a safe and relevant place for people to meet Jesus.

Thank you to USMB churches for your continued support and prayers for your family in South Texas. We are a growing diverse community that covets your prayers as we live out the mission of Jesus to reach the lost. May God be glorified as we "Increase Impact Together!"



Aaron Hernandez is the Latin America District Conference (LAMB) minister. He and his wife, Alejandra, and their children live in La Grulla, Texas. Hernandez is also pastor of Grace Point@Grulla and a daughter congregation, Grace Point@McAllen.



## MILESTONES

### BAPTISM/MEMBERSHIP

Forty-three people were received as members at **First MB Church, Wichita, Kan.**

Ashley Garr, Lanaya Jones, Lashayla Jones and Lakylie Jones were baptized Jan. 31 at **Redemption Church, Owatonna, Minn.**

Brynne Taylor and Paris Cole were baptized at **South Mountain Community Church, Lehi (Utah) Campus, Jan. 24.**

Kelly Brown, Debbie Brown and Lucas Haskins were baptized Dec. 13 at **South Mountain Community Church, South Jordan (Utah) Campus.**

Gabriel Gonzalez and Robert Tristan were baptized at **Mountain View Church, Fresno, Calif.**

### WORKERS

Stuart and Anne Curry began serving as pastoral couple at **Salem MB Church, Bridgewater, S.D.**

Josh Gelatt was installed Jan. 17 as lead pastor at **North Oak Community Church, Hays, Kan.**

### DEATHS

**Bakker, Juli**, Hanford, Calif., member of Reedley (Calif.) MB Church, April 16, 1966—Nov. 22, 2020. Parents: Henry and Joanne (Unruh) Laemmlen. Spouse: Brent Bakker. Children: Emily Reynolds, Evan, Travis; one grandchild.

**Bergen, Lydia**, Dinuba, Calif., member of Reedley (Calif.) MB Church, Nov. 7, 1931—Jan. 31, 2021. Parents: Abram and Liese (Matthies) Bartsch. Spouse: David Bergen (deceased). Children: Rick, Gordon (deceased), Carol Holt; six grandchildren, two great-grandchildren.

**Bergman, Betty L.**, Shafter, Calif., member of Shafter MB Church, Nov. 2, 1931—Jan. 1, 2021. Parents: Abraham and Susie (Siemens) Isaac. Spouse: Lowell E. Bergman (deceased). Children: Lucy Frost, Gordon; six grandchildren, 15 great-grandchildren.

**Cardona, Alfredo De Lara**, Reedley, Calif., former MB pastor at Selma (Calif.) MB Church, Feb. 2, 1956—Nov. 29, 2020. Parents: Reyes Cardona and Maria De Jesus De Lara. Spouse: Elva. Children: Irene Davis, Myrna Mosqueda, Alfredo Jr.; 11 grandchildren.

**Carey, Allan "Al" Joseph**, Fairview, Okla., of Fairview MB Church, July 14, 1944—June 20, 2020.

Parents: Stewart and Jean Oliver Carey. Spouse: Barbara Schafer. Children: Chad, Jeffery; two grandchildren.

**Collin, Kelly**, Clovis, Calif., member of Reedley (Calif.) MB Church, July 6, 1966—Dec. 23, 2020. Parents: Joseph and Dorothy (Stanch) McDowell. Spouse: Henry Collin. Children: Amanda Roth, Hank, Hayden.

**Dick, Mervin Allen**, Denver, Colo., former MB pastor in Oklahoma, Minnesota, California and member of the former Carson MB Church, Minn. June 18, 1940—Nov. 26, 2020. Parents: Anton and Viola Dick. Spouse: Jane Lauth. Children: Kevin, Kora Flaming; six grandchildren, six great-grandchildren.

**Enns, Nick**, Clovis, Calif., member of Reedley (Calif.) MB Church, April 15, 1930—Dec. 30, 2020. Parents: Nicoli and Anna (Harms) Enns. Spouse: Rosemary Enns. Children: Michael, Cheryl Herbig (deceased); two grandchildren.

**Epp, Harold Donald**, Buhler, Kan., member of Buhler MB Church, Aug. 4, 1930—Jan. 19, 2021. Parents: A.R. and Esther (Miller) Epp. Spouse: Rose Funk, Lillian Schroeder (deceased). Children: Beverly Sullivan, Nancy Belknap, David, Paul; 12 grandchildren, 10 great-grandchildren. Stepchildren: Janice Smith, Mary Trego, Laura Peterson, Joel Funk, Mark Funk; 17 step-grandchildren, 12 step-great-grandchildren.

**Filler, Viola**, Harvey, N.D., member of Cornerstone Community Church, Harvey, Sept. 23, 1917—Oct. 9, 2020. Parents: Jacob and Marie (Henne) Dockter. Spouse: Alvin Filler (deceased). Children: Jay, Karen Barnett, Connie Pate, Galen (deceased); 13 grandchildren, 26 great-grandchildren, two great-great-grandchildren.

**Frantz, Edwin P.**, Edmond, Okla., member of Corn MB Church, July 26, 1931—Dec. 21, 2020. Parents: Ruben and Martha Frantz. Spouse: Johanna Reimer. Children: Roger (deceased), Jeanette Gordon; three grandchildren, four great-grandchildren.

**Friesen, Mary**, Salem, Ore., member of Kingwood Bible Church, Salem, Nov. 16, 1948—Dec. 10, 2020. Parents: Virgil and Elvina Klinger. Spouse: Cliff Friesen, Mike Hagar. Children: Shawn Hagar, Jeff Hagar. Stepchildren: Rod Friesen, Julie Lange; seven grandchildren, eight great-grandchildren.

**Goossen, Ray**, Reedley, Calif., member of Reedley MB Church, July 30, 1931—Jan. 14, 2021. Parents: Elmer and Alma (Warkentin) Goossen. Spouse: Mary June Goossen. Children: Gail Esch, Kevin, Keith; six grandchildren, 10 great-grandchildren.

**Heidebrecht, Edna Lois**, Corn, Okla., member of Corn MB Church, June 8, 1922—Dec. 19, 2020. Parents: Carl D. and Tena (Boese) Heidebrecht.

**Krehbiel, Robert K. "Bob,"** Buhler, Kan., member of Buhler MB Church, March 2, 1940—Aug. 23, 2020. Parents: Arthur "Art" V. and Linda (Gehring) Krehbiel. Spouse: Peggy Jo Rosebrook, Judith "Judy" Tolar (deceased). Children: Brad, Lori Rayl; four grandchildren, one great-grandchild. Stepchildren: Deana Houses, David Robertson (deceased), Martin Robertson; five step-grandchildren, five step-great-grandchildren.

**Kunkel, Eldred J.**, San Jose, Calif., member of Lincoln Glen Church, San Jose, Oct. 24, 1931—Jan. 7, 2021. Parents: Gust and Marie (Hiebert) Kunkel. Spouse: Evelyn Schellenberg Kunkel. Children: Cheryl Ollenburger, Brad, Bruce; six grandchildren, seven great-grandchildren.

**Miles, Ramona "Mona" Margaret**, Omaha, Neb., of Stony Brook Church, Omaha, Feb. 14, 1942—June 7, 2020. Parents: Robert and Emigene (Christensen) Bartlett. Spouse: Ronald "Ron" Miles (deceased). Children: Steven, Pam Klusmeyer, Melissa Hanna; 10 grandchildren, 11 great-grandchildren.

**Mora, Arcelia**, Clovis, Calif., member of Reedley (Calif.) MB Church, Aug. 22, 1941—Jan. 1, 2021. Parents: Jesus and Cipriana (Cantu Perez) Castillo. Spouse: Benny Mora (deceased). Children: Orlando, Rosalinda, Daniel, Rachel Avila, Virginia Tamez, Margaret Arroyo, Marie Meza, Nancy Anderson; 32 grandchildren, 17 great-grandchildren.

**Neufeld, Elvira**, San Jose, Calif., member of Lincoln Glen MB Church, San Jose, July 2, 1918—Jan. 7, 2021. Parents: Dietrich and Mary Loewen. Spouse: Rev. William Neufeld (deceased). Children: Lowell, Roger; four grandchildren, five great-grandchildren.

**Nikkel, Doris**, Bakersfield, Calif., member of Rosedale Bible Church, Bakersfield, May 3, 1926—Jan. 1, 2021. Parents: Aron and Flora Kliever. Spouse: Clarence Nikkel (deceased). Children: Stanley Kliever, Marcia Giumarra, Marion Molhook; 11 grandchildren, 16 great-grandchildren.

**Penner, Leona**, Clovis, Calif., member of Reedley (Calif.) MB Church, May 13, 1923—Jan. 28, 2021. Parents: John and Susie (Quiring) Dick. Spouse: Walter Penner (deceased). Children: JoAnn Unruh, Burt; one grandchild.

**Plett, Elvira**, Newton, Kan., of Hillsboro (Kan.) MB Church, June 13, 1931—Dec. 3, 2020. Parents: Martin and Helen (Epp) Kroeker. Spouse: David Plett. Children: Cindy Vix, Norine, Bev, Brenda

Rust; seven grandchildren, three great-grandchildren.

**Rall, Sarah (Fuhrman)**, Hot Springs, S.D., member of Bethel Baptist Church prior to its merger with Harvey MB Church to form Cornerstone Community Church, Harvey, N.D., March 10, 1915—Sept. 28, 2020. Parents: Jacob and Rosina (Pfaff) Fuhrman. Spouse: Daniel Rall (deceased). Children: Rosalie Mehlhoff, Juel; 13 grandchildren, 31 great-grandchildren, 16 great-great-grandchildren.

**Rees, Stephen Owen**, Corn, Okla., member of Corn MB Church, Oct. 28, 1948—Jan. 6, 2021. Parents: LaVere and June (Noris) Rees. Spouse: Doreen Worthington. Children: Michael, Nathan, Jessie; one grandchild, two great-grandchildren.

**Regier, Timothy**, Visalia, Calif., member of Reedley (Calif.) MB Church, June 21, 1955—Jan. 11, 2021. Parents: John H. and Louise (Warkentin) Regier.

**Richert, Herbert Edward “Herb,”** Buhler, Kan., member of Buhler MB Church, Dec. 13, 1924—Dec. 31, 2020. Parents: Herbert C. and Mary (Unger) Richert. Spouse: LaVerne Richert (deceased). Children: Ed, Tim, LuAnn Adrian; 14 grandchildren, 17 great-grandchildren.

**Shepard, Jeanmarie**, Sac City, Iowa, wife of former Harvey MB Church pastor Ray Shepard, Aug. 15, 1931—Aug. 28, 2020. Parents: Harry and Ida Richards. Children: Ruth Brylinski, Melody, Melinda Strief, Julie Kitt, Merriann Yering; 15 grandchildren, five great-grandchildren.

**Siemens, Janice Jae**, Buhler, Kan., member of Buhler MB Church, Nov. 18, 1931—Jan. 8, 2021. Parents: Peter W. and Margaret Froese Siemens.

**Swiney, LeRoy**, Reedley, Calif., member of Reedley MB Church, Jan. 30, 1934—Jan. 13, 2021. Parents: Earl and Stella (Cheek) Swiney. Spouse: Vivian Swiney. Children: Denise Aguilar, Dennis, LeAnne Warkentin, Emily Mello, Heidi Moriarty, Jill Beeman; 13 grandchildren, 19 great-grandchildren.

**Thiesen, Hannah Ruth**, Clovis, Calif., member of North Fresno (Calif.) Church, Nov. 7, 1934—Dec. 28, 2020. Parents: John P. and Katherine Buller. Spouse: Alvin Thiesen. Children: Kerwin, Curtis, Kenton (deceased), Delinda Abbot; four grandchildren, two great-grandchildren.

**Unruh, Lola Jean**, Hillsboro, Kan., member of Ebenfeld MB Church, Hillsboro, Feb. 21, 1960—Jan. 25, 2021. Parents: Leslie and Rubena (Franz) Suderman. Spouse: Lyle Unruh. Children: Kelsey.

**Van Buren, Roy Alan**, Hillsboro, Kan., of Hillsboro MB Church, Feb. 16, 1947—Nov. 29, 2020. Parents:

Earl and Alice (Pilgrim) Van Buren. Spouse: Cheryl Lieurance.

**Widaman, Anne**, Reedley, Calif., member of Reedley MB Church, Jan. 4, 1924—Dec. 19, 2020. Parents: August and Katherine (Richert) Schroeter. Spouse: Franklin Widaman (deceased). Children: Sheryl Sawatsky, Keith, Mark, Scott; 10 grandchildren, 14 great-grandchildren.

**Wiebe, Billie Jean (Utting)**, Clovis, Calif., associate professor of communication and English and director of the communication program at Fresno Pacific University, Dec. 27, 1951—Dec. 23, 2020. Spouse: Richard Wiebe.

## REACHING IN

### DISCIPLESHIP

**First MB Church, Wichita, Kan.**, invited the congregation to a month of prayer and fasting in January, supplemented with a new message series, a Facebook group and prayer prompts.

People from **Cornerstone Community Church, Topeka, Kan.**, were invited to a six-week season of listening prayer and a contemplative time of connecting to God, including meditating on Scripture, singing worship songs, journaling or sitting in silence and being still in God’s presence.

### FELLOWSHIP

**First MB Church, Wichita, Kan.**, held a Prime-Timers Valentine’s Banquet Feb. 11 with a meal and piano concert.

**Fairview (Okla.) MB Church** held a Christmas Eve candlelight service Dec. 24. The church held a youth ministries fundraiser silent auction Jan. 30–31.

**The Bible Fellowship Church, Minot, N.D.**, congregation met for a Christmas worship service Dec. 20 with refreshments and sharing of a favorite Christmas story, poem or book or a family tradition. The congregation went Christmas caroling Dec. 21.

**Shafter (Calif.) MB Church** hosted “Christmas on the Green” Dec. 20. The outdoor event included singing, hot beverages, goodie bags for families, a special kids’ feature and candlelighting. The church held its annual Christmas Eve candlelight service Dec. 24.

On Dec. 13 **Enid (Okla.) MB Church** hosted a “Bringing in Christmas” evening of music and its annual tasting party, with goodies provided and served.

The Sisters Ladies Ministry at **Zoar MB Church, Inman, Kan.**, hosted a freezer meals workshop Jan. 9.

**Parkview MB Church, Hillsboro, Kan.**, held a Candlelight Christmas Eve Service Dec. 24 with a photo booth and hot cocoa.

**New Life Community, Dinuba, Calif.**, handed out Advent boxes to 15 families. The church distributed free fritters via drive-thru in the church parking lot Jan. 3.

**Living Hope Church, Henderson, Neb.**, invited people for fellowship and a movie Dec. 27. The event included a devotional, movie and free popcorn.

**Buhler (Kan.) MB Church** held a Christmas Eve candlelight service Dec. 24.

**North Fresno (Calif.) Church** hosted its Christmas Eve Service on Facebook Livestream with Christmas carols, Bible reading and reflections on Jesus’ coming to earth. The congregation also held a Gingerbread House Challenge with a panel of four judges, utilizing Zoom and YouTube.

**Neighborhood Church, Visalia, Calif.**, held two outdoor Christmas Eve Services Dec. 24 with candle-lit carols, live music and fun surprises for kids.

**Community Bible Church, Olathe, Kan.**, held an outdoor Christmas Eve service celebrating Christ’s birth through story, carols and candlelighting. Warm drinks were provided.

**The Bridge Bible Church, Bakersfield, Calif.**, held an outdoor Christmas Eve candlelight gathering Dec. 24.

**Salem MB Church, Freeman, S.D.**, held a Christmas Eve candlelight service.

**Valleyview Bible Church, Cimarron, Kan.**, went caroling Dec. 20 with a soup supper afterward.

## CELEBRATIONS

**Mountain View Church, Old Town Campus, Clovis, Calif.**, held its first Sunday morning gathering Jan. 24.

**Neighborhood Church, Fresno, Calif.**, celebrated its fifth birthday Jan. 31 with a video premier on YouTube including songs, a year in review, sharing from members of the congregation and a message from lead pastor Joe White.

## REACHING OUT

### LOCALLY

**Cross Timbers Church, Edmond, Okla.,** supported more than 40 children and 21 families through the Prison Fellowship Angel Tree program. The church also gave gifts to caregivers.

People from **North Oak Community Church, Hays, Kan.,** made fleece tie blankets for children in foster care Jan. 30.

**Bible Fellowship Church, Minot, N.D.,** collected an offering for the Men's Winter Refuge and the Homeless Coalition.

**New Life Community, Dinuba, Calif.,** offered a free "Grab & Go" lunch Dec. 27, where volunteers handed DeLuna Dogs to people in their vehicles in the church parking lot. As part of its Christmas Giving outreach, the congregation distributed gifts for children.

People from **Bible MB Church, Cordell, Okla.,** helped with Meals on Wheels.

**Cornerstone Community Church, Topeka, Kan.,** collected snack items for the Topeka Rescue Mission in December.

**The Axiom Church, Peoria, Ariz.,** congregation donated gift cards for teachers and faculty at Alta Loma School to say thank you for their hard work. The church invited people to attend a prayer walk in its community Jan. 2.

**Faith Bible Church, Omaha, Neb.,** donated \$520.50 for a Samaritans Purse Project.

**Salem MB Church, Freeman, S.D.,** collected a special Christmas offering of \$8,000 for a new clinic at the Cherished Hope Girls Orphanage Training Center in Kenya.

**Stony Brook Church, Omaha, Neb.,** purchased grocery store gift cards for Release Ministries Foster Care families as part of the church's Christmas outreach.

In January, the **Zoar MB Church, Inman, Kan.,** congregation volunteered to deliver Meals On Wheels to people in the community.

People from **Community Bible Church, Olathe, Kan.,** brought presents and donations and invested time in helping with the Mission Southside Christmas Store as part of an outreach project. The congregation was invited to send Christmas greetings and encouragement to residents in assisted living and memory care assisted living at Cedar Lake Village.

Pastors, staff and Micah Project Interns from **North Fresno (Calif.) Church** delivered holiday poinsettias to more than 80 homes in December 2020. Members of the congregation donated talent, time and money for people in need, repaired bikes and cars, provided space heaters and cards and gifts for 40 children, as well as Christmas Food Boxes for 25 families. The church collected other items and \$2,650.

**The Bridge Bible Church, Bakersfield, Calif.,** held its "Merry Christmas Bakersfield" as a drive-thru event Dec. 18. The church partnered with Plaza Iglesia to provide food for its pantry Feb. 7.

**Kingwood Bible Church, Salem, Ore.,** packaged Christmas bags with the Gospel of John, a children's Christmas book and other items and delivered them to neighbors living near the church Dec. 20. The church held its Christmas program that day, with a bag of Christmas goodies given out following the program. The church prepared a virtual Christmas Eve devotional sent via email and shared on Facebook and the church website.

**Bethel MB Church, Yale, S.D.,** invited the congregation to donate new toys and clothes for distribution by the Salvation Army to children and teens.

The church collected \$4,925 for the Salvation Army and \$7,750 for MCC.

**Corn (Okla.) MB Church** shared Christmas cheer and the love of Jesus with people in its community through Christmas caroling and handing out candy sacks Dec. 23.

### GLOBALLY

**Parkview MB Church, Hillsboro, Kan.,** raised \$8,926 for Armenia Relief at its Mission Eurasia fundraiser Jan. 24.

**Bible MB Church, Cordell, Okla.,** packaged shoeboxes for Operation Christmas Child.

**Fairview (Okla.) MB Church** packed around 200 shoeboxes for Operation Christmas Child.

**Hillsboro (Kan.) MB Church** sent 25 fleece throws, candy, a gift card and money for household supplies to missionaries Jim and Becky Elam and the church they serve in Dallas, Texas.

## CLEARINGHOUSE

### Local Church

**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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engaged in church and trying to get into treatment. I knew these were the right things to do and that God was leading me to a better life. The court gave me an opportunity to join a program that defers prison sentences for people who want to turn their life around. I haven't used since then. So not only did God give me a second chance, the court system and the law gave me a second chance. I should be in prison, but yet here I am with a chance to not only stay out of prison, but to better my life.

Since then, I married a woman with two kids, and we bought a house, have two dogs and a new baby. I joined Redemption Church, and I've been diving into Scripture and continuing to draw close to the Lord. He's been revealing so much to me in my readings, studies and my prayer life. I'm hungry for God's Word.

Jesus never promised an easy, painless life. He said we're going to suffer like he suffered. I remember that no matter what suffering we face on this earth, we will have rewards in heaven. We'll get to

see our Creator. It's going to be so magnificent, and that brings us joy.

It was a God send that Redemption senior pastor Christian Kohs gave me the opportunity to join the church staff. I preached my first sermon on January 3.

From meth addict and dealer to preacher, I've been given an opportunity to not only have spiritual, mental and physical freedom, but to also literally jump into a calling to help glorify God and help other people come to know him.■



## Avoiding burnout

If you don't take care of yourself, who will?

**B**urnout among pastors and ministry leaders is a very real and perhaps escalating problem. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines burnout as “the condition of someone who has become very physically and emotionally tired after doing a difficult job for a long time.” Anyone in any profession can experience burnout, but those who serve churches in leadership positions are particularly susceptible.

“For pastors the pace is relentless, the needs are unending and the expectation that [they] should have the right answer for every question is ever-present,” reports Vanderbloemen, a Christian executive search and advisory firm. Ministry can be draining, and many pastors I’ve visited with recently indicate that they are feeling some or a lot of burnout, especially due to COVID-19 related demands.

You might be asking: “Isn’t it a privilege to be a pastor? Isn’t it fulfilling?” Absolutely! As a person who has been involved in full-time ministry for 30 years, I can easily say that being in ministry is very rewarding. It is a privilege to be in these positions of kingdom work. But that’s also why, when I felt drained from the demands placed on me, I fought off that feeling. I didn’t think I had the right to feel drained or exhausted. Surely Jesus would just give me more energy or perseverance. I found out a little too far into ministry life that this attitude was totally wrong. About that time, a mentor said to me, “If you won’t take care of yourself, who will?”

Pastors and ministry leaders need to take care of themselves by making sure that they pursue time with spouses and family, extended vacations (not just a day or two), hobbies, exercise, reading (not for sermon preparation), healthy eating, counseling, meaningful friendships and a lot of alone time with God. Spouses often experience the weight of ministry as well and should likewise take this to heart. It’s vital that spouses talk to one another

about feeling tired and sapped. It’s much too easy to get caught in the trap of just continuing on and on without processing what’s really happening to our bodies, souls and closest relationships.

To those in the church: please take care of your pastors and ministry leaders. Provide them with down time and paid vacations. I’ve heard of pastors who are required to preach 50-51 weeks out of the year. That’s just asking for trouble. I’ve pleaded with churches to provide sabbaticals for their pastoral staff. These times of disconnect and refreshment can mean the difference between a pastor who burns completely out and one who feels renewed and strong for the task.

Please don’t use the argument I hear too often: “Why should our pastor have a sabbatical? I don’t get one.” If that’s you, I invite you to study how pastors and their churches both greatly benefit from sabbaticals. The two sabbaticals I’ve had over these 30 years have been amazingly restorative for my heart and soul.

If your pastor has been serving for a time, surprise them with a fully paid personal retreat—and include the spouse. If they are the main teaching pastor, give them regular breaks, freeing them from the taxing cycle of research, preparation and presentation. If they’re involved in other kinds of work in the church, provide substitutes from time to time. They will be grateful and healthier in the long run.

I once heard a trustee, not one I served under, say, “We go by the principle of squeezing the most out of him (the pastor) while paying the least he can survive on. After all, he’s in ministry.” The man was dead serious. I hope none of our churches think this way, even a little bit. Honor the men and women in our churches who serve in ministry positions. Encourage them in small and big ways to take care of themselves and do your part to help make that a reality. ▀



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

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