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DECEMBER 2006


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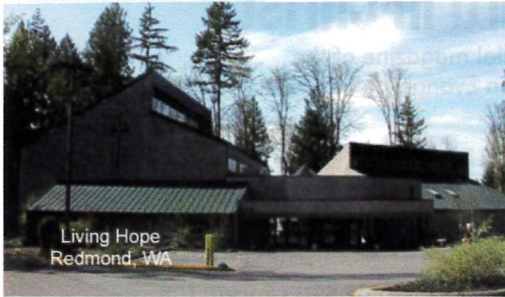
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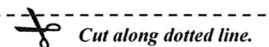
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BE WITH US AS HE WAS  
WITH OUR FATHERS;  
MAY HE NEVER LEAVE US  
NOR FORSAKE US.

1 Kings 8:57

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DECEMBER

**WHAT'S INSIDE** by Julie Wietzke

We always sing of peace at Christmastime, even though Christmas usually is not a peaceful time. With the hustle and bustle of shopping, baking, decorating, wrapping, and card-writing, most people are lucky if they have a few minutes to reflect on the peace that God brought to our lives, through his son Jesus.

Why not take a few minutes this month with *Forward in Christ* to remind yourself of that peace. In our cover story, Pastor Doug Tomhave talks about God's perfect gift to us—his son, Jesus—and how that gift brings us peace with God (p. 10).

Other articles reveal how even in times of actual war in this world, we still have peace in our hearts. Pastor Peter Panitzke talks about that peace while sharing stories about his recent trip to Bethlehem, a not so peaceful place (p. 7). Military Mom Deslee Holzwarth and her son, Greg, a second class petty officer in the Navy, reflect on how they remain peaceful in Jesus, even in times of war (p. 30). And even though war is raging in this physical world, Paul Ziemer, a WELS civilian chaplain, points toward the Prince of Peace and the calm he brings to our spiritual lives (p. 21).

May God's peace rest in your hearts this Christmas and always.

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**KEEP UP THE GREAT WORK**

I am compelled to write today to thank especially all people working in the art director and the designer departments of *Forward in Christ*.

Sometimes one picture is worth 1,000 words. The September issue is another excellent example of what I am attempting to put into words. Thank you all!

*Doris Schumann  
Jefferson, Wisconsin*

I thought I had never read a more powerful story than “The Joy of Forgiveness” [Oct.]. But then I got to the back page and read “A Clear Choice.” Breathtaking describes both articles.

And thanks to Ken Cherney for the statement, “It’s thrilling and exciting what God is doing in far flung places around the world, but it is just as exciting when someone comes to faith in Kenosha, Wisconsin.” I needed that.

*Mark Porinsky  
Dexter, Michigan*

**DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN**

It was discouraging to read September’s Q&A response about discrimination against women. The opportunity to explain three messages was lost. These messages include:

1. Explaining women’s roles in church.
2. Explaining the importance behind responses that are based on Scripture.
3. Detailing the unique roles women do have to serve in the church.

I was taught to take control of the message and develop it focused on research. As pastors, teachers, and Christians, the message we must always lead back to is from the Bible—even when we are asked not to. This is the message our beliefs are built on. The Word in the Bible never fails, and as Christians, our religion is based on Scripture.

*Amy Duff*

I’ve just read the Q&A by Richard Gurgel [Sept.]. I must say, well done.

He gave law and then gospel without quoting Scripture per the request in the question.

*Greg Buxa  
Waldorf, Maryland*

**CHURCH AND STATE**

John Braun’s article “Will You Vote” [Oct.] made a great point. His summary statement put it best: “As the government does its job of providing order, stability, and protection, the church will be able to do its work of using the gospel.” This is a perfect description of how church and state are meant to interact. I agree 100 percent!

*Kirsten Peters  
San Francisco, California*

I enjoyed the article entitled “Will You Vote?” [Oct.]. It has become more timely than the author could have imagined. There is now public debate of what a Christian’s role should be in politics.

While I agree with all the author states, I think the example of Daniel is a bit misplaced. While Daniel’s humble witnessing of his faith is one to follow, we must remember that Daniel was from the tribe of Judah taken captive into Babylon. We in America are citizens of the greatest nation. It is our duty to help keep it that way. It is our duty to uphold the Christian values this nation was founded on.

*Dennis Wagner  
Palatine, Illinois*

**CAN WE MAKE JESUS HAPPY?**

I am always troubled by phrases that could lead one to believe that we can make Jesus happy or sad. The article, “Do you think Jesus is happy?” [Oct.], is a case in point.

Am I or is anyone capable of making Jesus happy or sad? I find it especially distressing when I hear of children being told that what they did or didn’t do makes Jesus happy or sad. I cannot find it anywhere in the Bible that says what a person does or does

not do will affect Jesus’ disposition. Matter of fact, the word “happy” in the Bible is used in reference to human action.

Jesus loves us whether he is calling us to repentance or whether he is forgiving our sins. Jesus is in his exultant glory and does not look upon his people as parents look upon their children. Parents do punish their children when they do wrong, but Jesus has suffered and died as punishment for all our wrongs and God accepted that suffering and death as payment for all sin. Therefore one should not look upon Jesus as one would look upon a parent, but one should look upon Jesus as the One who is always welcoming his children with outstretched arms.

*Dave Dahlke  
Port Orchard, Washington*

**SHARING JESUS**

The writer of the “Sharing Jesus” letter [Oct.] seems to be concerned with the terms “share” and “reach out” when it comes to evangelism. He appears to feel that telling, proclaiming, and confessing are the correct terms in regard to evangelism.

Please help me to understand. If I “tell” someone what I know about Jesus, am I not “sharing” with them the knowledge that I have about Jesus? Are we not told to “go into all the world . . .”? Is that not similar to reaching out? As a layperson, I sadly admit that telling others about Jesus does not come naturally for me. Now I am reading that I need to be concerned about being more careful with my “sharing” versus “telling” and “reaching out” versus “proclaiming, confessing.” . . .

*Mary Deyo  
Sparta, Wisconsin*

Send your letters to *Feedback*, *Forward in Christ*, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee, WI 53222; fic@sab.wels.net. Letters between 100 and 200 words are preferred. Include full name and address. Letters are edited for clarity, conciseness, and relevance. Not all letters received can be acknowledged or used. Writers’ views are not necessarily those of WELS or *Forward in Christ*.



# A visit to Bethlehem

*"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem." Luke 2:14,15*

Peter A. Panitzke

**W**hen we were in Israel, we followed the path taken by the shepherds and went to see where the Prince of Peace was born. But we did not find peace in Bethlehem.

## Sin separates us from God and our neighbors

As we approached Bethlehem, we saw the concrete barrier that separates the Palestinian West Bank from Israel. Armed guards asked to see passports. Our Israeli tour guide and bus driver were not allowed to enter. There was no peace.

We stooped to enter the Church of the Nativity. Did we bend low out of reverence for Jesus' birth? No, we stooped because the church door was so small. Centuries before the large door had been sealed to keep invaders from riding into the church on horseback. There was no peace.

In the ancient Orthodox church, the traditional site of Jesus' birth was being used for worship. Fortunately a portion of the cave is accessible from the Catholic church next door. In that side of the grotto we noticed a passageway that seemed to link the two sides. "Can the Orthodox priests come through here?" we asked. "Oh no! If we allow them to come over once, they'll think they can do it all the time." Even in the grotto where the Prince of Peace is said to have been born, there was no peace.

What happened to "peace on earth"? Sin separates nations, cultures, and denominations. That separation reflects the lack of peace that exists between sinful humans and the holy God.

## Jesus brings peace with God and our neighbors

But 2,000 years ago the angels were right. There is "peace on earth." Whether it was in the cave that we saw in Bethlehem or in some other place nearby, the Lord himself came into this world, "making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Colossians 1:20). Your sins have been paid for by the God who became a human being so he could shed his blood for you. In your relationship with God the separation of sin has been removed. There is peace.

That peace with God creates peace among Christians. "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:14). We experienced that peace in Bethlehem. The Palestinian Christian shopkeeper asked if he could pray for us and asked us to pray for him. Our cultural differences were vast, but he recognized us as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Christians from a variety of denominations could not worship together for the sake of a clear confession. Yet their faith was clear by their presence in that Church of the Nativity. We recognized the peace that Jesus brings.

The situation in Bethlehem is little different from that in every Christian family. Often the Christian home is not a place of peace. Sin breaks ties



Grotto of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The star signifies where Jesus was born.

of family love and lifelong commitment. Barriers are erected. Borders are drawn. There is no peace.

This Christmas go back to Bethlehem. See Jesus as the one who brought you "peace on earth." For Jesus' sake, God is at peace with you. Then daily look at your family and friends in a different light. They are people for whom God came into the world. If Christ announces peace through forgiveness to us, treasure that peace for yourself and seek ways to let his peace mark your relationships.

*Contributing editor Peter Panitzke is pastor at St. Paul, Muskego, Wisconsin.*



# Peace through Jesus, not peace on earth

Douglas J. Engelbrecht

Come to WELS . . . you might be surprised at what you hear. You might be surprised to hear that the church offers peace through Jesus, not peace on earth.

The Samaritan woman was surprised by what she heard. Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst” (John 4:13,14). When she heard that, you could almost see the woman’s eyes light up. “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water” (John 4:15). Wow, what a deal! My days of having to come to this dirty old well day after day and lug a big jar of water back to the house will be over. My problems are solved!

But Jesus wasn’t talking about solving all her earthly problems. He was talking about solving her spiritual problems. He says: “Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). Jesus wasn’t there just to make her earthly life easier. He was there to give her eternal life by telling her of the forgiveness of sins that was hers through his sacrifice on the cross. That’s what he meant by saying, “Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst.” The Samaritan woman came to the well and was surprised at what she heard. The Lord offered her peace through Jesus, not peace on earth . . . forgiveness of sins, not a solution to all her earthly problems.

Dr. Bob Moorehead, former pastor at Overlake Christian Church, Redmond, Wash., wrote the following:

“The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings but shorter tempers; wider freeways, but narrower

viewpoints. . . . We have learned how to make a living, but not a life; we’ve added years to life, but not life to years. . . . We have conquered outer space, but not inner space” (*Words Aptly Spoken*, 1995).

Moorehead makes the same basic point that Jesus made when he spoke to the woman at the well. People today keep looking for the kind of water that will only leave them thirsty again and fail to look for the water that will become a spring welling up to eternal life. And so people come to church looking for something that will make their life easier and their earthly problems go away.

But that’s not what we’re here for! We are not here to help you conquer outer space, but to conquer inner space. We are here to give you the Water of Life that will quench your thirsty soul.

**We are here  
to give you the  
Water of Life that  
will quench your  
thirsty soul.**

We’re here to assure you that Jesus shed his holy, precious blood on the cross that your sins might be forgiven and that you might have peace with God.

We’re not here to help you make a living; we’re here to help you make a life . . . a life that is not constantly thirsty for more but is content with the things God has given you in Christ . . . a life that is filled with peace and happiness because of Jesus . . . a life that, even though it may be difficult and eventually end here on earth, will go on forever in heaven because of what Jesus has done for you.

Come to WELS, and you might be surprised at what you hear. The church offers you peace through Jesus, not peace on earth. The main thing we offer you is what Jesus wants to offer you: water that will become in you a spring welling up to eternal life (John 4:14).

*Contributing editor Douglas Engelbrecht is pastor at Trinity, Neenah, Wisconsin.*





at the foot of the cross. Richard L. Gurgel

## TOPIC: Entering heaven without dying

**Considering that “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life” (Romans 6:23) and that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), why would God take a prophet into heaven without first experiencing death?**

In Scripture there are two believers whom the Lord permitted to enter heaven without tasting physical death. Elijah, whom your question seems to be mentioning, is one example (2 Kings 2). The other is Enoch (Genesis 5:21-24; Hebrews 11:5).

Certainly, neither of them is an exception to the two passages you quoted from Romans. They were both sinners who fell short of the perfection God created us to have. As a judgment on their sin, they had both earned death—physical death and eternal death. Even though they had been brought to faith in God’s promised salvation, they would normally still have had to pass through physical death as the gateway to eternal life. However, by his grace, God allowed those two Old Testament believers, whose eyes were focused on the coming Messiah, to be exceptions to that typical path.

Of course, that begs your question: why did God make those two exceptions? God may have had many reasons, but he has not revealed to us why this was the best way to take these two believers home to heaven. However, allow me to say this much: we can see from Scripture that both of these believers lived at a time of an almost overwhelming flood of unbelief. At such a difficult time for his believers, was God granting a powerful reminder of the reality of eternal life—with glorified soul and body? Such a goal by God’s grace awaits all believers at the end of their earthly life. Did the believers at the time of Enoch and Elijah need such a reminder?

Only God knows if that was even one small part of his purpose for allowing the two exceptions that he did. This much we do know for sure: God’s actions were perfectly wise and gracious.

But there’s one last thought to consider. Elijah and Enoch won’t be the only ones in heaven who will have bypassed physical death! Many Christians will pass from this life to eternity without passing through physical death. All believers who are living on earth when the Last Day arrives will in an instant be gloriously transformed and wondrously translated to the glories of eternity.

The apostle Paul speaks of this in 1 Thessalonians 4:16,17. As he contrasts what will happen to dead believers and living believers on the Last Day he says: “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, . . . with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

Looking at it this way, Elijah and Enoch, translated alive from earth to eternity, are a glimpse of what untold numbers of Christians will experience on that Last Day. If our Lord comes very soon, we’ll be among the believers who will join Elijah and Enoch as those who entered heaven without ever tasting physical death! The privilege to be numbered among them is just one more reason we lift our voice with all the Church on earth and pray: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

*Contributing editor Richard Gurgel, a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, is a member at Calvary, Thiensville.*

Have a question? Send it to **Q&A**, *Forward in Christ*, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222; fic@sab.wels.net. Look online at [www.wels.net/jump/qa](http://www.wels.net/jump/qa), for more questions and answers.





# The PERFECT Gift

The gift of Jesus to us at Christmas comes from the heart of our dear heavenly Father. Douglas C. Tomhave

**T**his is the season of gift giving. Have you found the perfect gift yet? There's that someone on your list that appears to have everything and doesn't need anything. Yet the gift that reveals your heart and warms theirs is an unspoken expectation.

I already sense your frustration. So put down the list. Listen to the truth of Christmas told from the perspective of a Father—a Father who knew exactly what to give in an impossible situation. His gift perfectly reveals the heart of the giver.

### His heart during Creation and the Fall

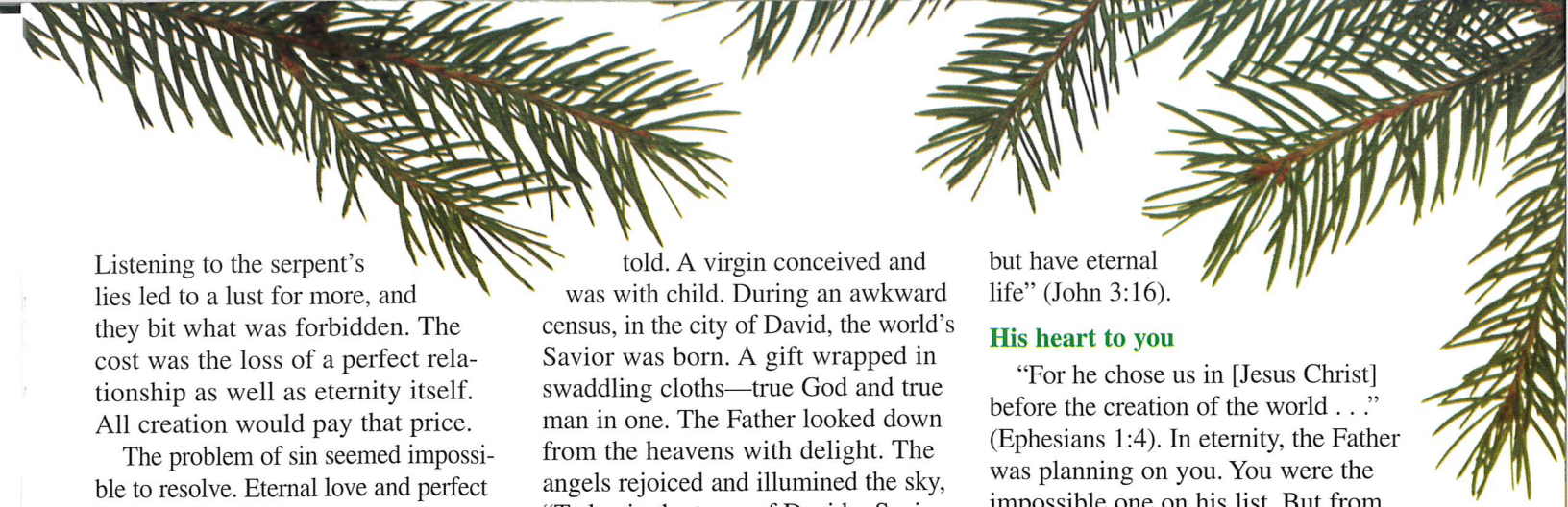
Peer for a moment into a distant eternity. Before the tick of a clock, before the words, "Let there be . . .," the Father devised a plan. Foreseeing a need, the Father, Son, and Spirit planned a gift of grace:

"This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time . . ." (2 Timothy 1:9).

Perfect unity in love moved them to create our beautiful world, but they looked further into the future to your creation and entrance into the world. The Father was committed and then spoke, "Let there be . . ." The Word was with the Father (John 1:1,2), and the Spirit hovered over the waters as the Trinity created the world and life. In his love, he prepared for your life too.

The Father's commentary on the world revealed perfection—"It was very good!" (Genesis 1:31). But the man and woman who had everything determined that they needed one more thing. They decided to shop for themselves and made a hasty purchase of "knowledge."





Listening to the serpent's lies led to a lust for more, and they bit what was forbidden. The cost was the loss of a perfect relationship as well as eternity itself. All creation would pay that price.

The problem of sin seemed impossible to resolve. Eternal love and perfect justice collided. Man and woman hid in hopelessness. They expected the Father to immediately punish them, to perhaps start over. Instead the LORD recalled his plan from eternity and put it into words: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). The Father's heart of love was revealed in the gift that he would give. The problem of sin could only be solved in the giving of himself—in the giving of his one and only Son.

### His heart is committed

For so long, the Father's heart ached in disappointment and pounded with righteous anger. A tower built in defiance. His creation dirtying itself to the point where only a flood could wash it clean. The Father judged, but always with his heart on his promise. God the Father was committed to his gift. The parting of the sea, manna and water in the wilderness—God took such patience and care raising a stiff-necked people. But then there was a golden calf and a broken covenant. Captivity in foreign lands was necessary to preserve the family line that would lead to the Savior. God the Father planned that this rebellious nation would one day serve as the cradle for his Son.

### His heart is given

"When the time had fully come, God sent his Son . . ." (Galatians 4:4). When he saw to it that politics and population presented just the right setting, the Father said, "It's time." In unity, the Son and Spirit took action. The genealogy was still intact. Every prophecy must be fulfilled. Then the angel fore-

told. A virgin conceived and was with child. During an awkward census, in the city of David, the world's Savior was born. A gift wrapped in swaddling cloths—true God and true man in one. The Father looked down from the heavens with delight. The angels rejoiced and illumined the sky, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you . . . Glory to God in the highest!" (Luke 2:11,14). A plan from eternity brought into time, yet the world hardly noticed. Except for the parents, some shepherds, and a few of the world's wisest, no one came to worship. A gift so divine given to a world so lost. How humans always tested the patience of a merciful Father.

## In the city of David, the world's Savior was born. A gift wrapped in swaddling cloths.

Yet the Father knew well the path ahead. The Son was tempted by that same serpent, yet lived a perfect life. The Father looked down from heaven with delight: "This is my Son, whom I love; . . . Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5). He wanted nothing more than to draw the world to himself. But again the world, which needed the gift of the Son, hardly noticed. God's gift was rejected, thrown away on a cross. The Father turned away. The world's sin remained on the Son. Alone he died, triumphant he rose—to victory and life! A Father so moved by love to give everything to save the world. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish

but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

### His heart to you

"For he chose us in [Jesus Christ] before the creation of the world . . ." (Ephesians 1:4). In eternity, the Father was planning on you. You were the impossible one on his list. But from eternity he was anticipating just what you would need. He knew that you would be born with the same sin of the first man and woman. He knew that you would still listen to the slithering serpent in the world. He knew that without this gift there would be no peace for you—ever.

The Father's heart was moved to give once again. No, you weren't there to receive the Father's gift on that first Christmas. But that first Christmas was all about you.

Actually, your first Christmas was celebrated when the Word was spoken and the Spirit hovered over the waters of your baptism. So with a splash of water and his Triune name that gift given for the world was applied to you by faith. How your Father looked down from heaven with delight and the angel choirs rejoiced. Your Father had been planning this day from eternity—so committed is he.


So now, every moment of every day, God the Father is thinking of Christmas—the gift that changed the world, the gift that has changed you. With sins forgiven, you now have peace with God. You have a reason to celebrate Christmas each day!

Yes, 'tis the season of gift giving. But don't let the hunt for those hard-to-find gifts for others rob you of seeing God's perfect gift. A Savior has been born. Exactly the gift you need this Christmas—a gift given from the heart of your Father.

*Douglas Tomhave is pastor at Resurrection, Verona, Wisconsin.*







**"A**men. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20). From the time the apostle John ended the revelation given to him by the Spirit of the victorious Lamb of God, every generation has repeated this prayer, looking forward with longing to the better country that is our inheritance through faith in the Lamb.

More often than not this longing is prompted by a survey of the sin-corrupted world that surrounds and threatens to engulf each generation of believers.

In our own time we see the alarming rise in terrorist attacks that threaten our well-being, our way of life, and our physical safety. When someone calls us "Infidels!" and seeks to do us bodily harm, it makes us uneasy and even fearful. Daily we face the reality of endangered or broken relationships—strained marriages, parent-child strife, divisions in congregations, dear fellow members wandering from the fellowship of faith—and it is discouraging to us. The gospel only arouses hatred and attacks from the unbelievers around us. We sigh and conclude the end must be near: "Come, Lord Jesus."

And to each generation, the Lord Jesus says, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to

give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). "Behold, I am coming soon" (Revelation 12:7). In the meantime he promises us, "I am with you" (Haggai 1:13; Matthew 28:20).

"I am with you." God has spoken those four, little, power-packed words to his people throughout history, typically at critical times in their lives. Remember Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Joshua? God assured them directly, "I am with you."

Sometimes those words resulted in immediate deliverance from imminent danger. Consider Gideon, Samson, or David. Other times it was a long process of faith-strengthening training. Think of David, Elijah or, time and again, the entire Israelite nation. During the time of the Old Testament prophets when it appeared to believer and unbeliever alike that the whole world was crashing down around them, God enabled Samuel and his successors to set up companies of prophets for spiritual training and encouragement. It was yet another way for God to declare to his people, "I have not forgotten you. I am with you."

#### **Our system is unique**

For the past 143 years one of the special ways God has said to his people in WELS, "I am with you," is through the ministerial training system.

# LOOKING AHEAD

Peter H. Kruschel

For the past 143 years one of the special ways God has said to his people in WELS, "I am with you," is through the ministerial training system. But what does the future hold for ministerial education?



He has enabled us to create, maintain, and support it. This system of preparation has three levels of training that begin already in high school and continue on through college and then the seminary for pastors. The system is unique among church bodies today. It has resulted in a steady stream of reliable ministers of the gospel to feed the lambs and sheep of the kingdom and to gather the straying and the lost.

As these gospel proclaimers speak God's truth, they are God's testament to us that he is with us and is granting us the honored privilege of declaring to all the praises of the One who sent his own Son to save sinners.

In a series of *Forward in Christ* articles over the past eight months, you have read about these pastors, teachers, and staff ministers and how they have been prepared to proclaim peace through Jesus to the world. You have seen pictures of them at work in familiar and unfamiliar settings across North America and around the world. It is

the kind of report that leads us to proclaim in humility, "Praise God for this extraordinary blessing of his grace!"

#### **The future of ministerial education**

But what about the future?

As we, our children, and our grandchildren wait for the Savior to appear, how will God enable his kingdom to continue to flourish and grow among us? At its heart, the answer to that question is simple. We will rely comfortably and confidently on God's promise to be with us to the very end of the age.

At the same time, we will continue to use the resources God gives us—his people with just the right spiritual gifts, their offerings of money and goods, our time, our partners in the gospel, and faith—to maintain, adapt, and even re-create, if necessary, a system that will proclaim God's truth to the world.

So how will WELS ministerial education look in the future? Only God knows for sure. We have no crystal ball that assures us that in the future our system of training will look exactly the way it looks today. Judging from our synod's past history as well as the history of God's church throughout Old and New Testaments times, we can be fairly sure that there will be changes. We have often adapted our system to meet the challenges of the changing world in which each generation lives.

Some changes will be forced on us by factors outside the church—wars, disease, natural events or catastrophes, move-

ments of peoples around the world, rise and fall of governments and nations, among other things. Some changes will result from human factors—changes in living standards, spread of technology, and societal mores. There are variable factors within the church—financial capabilities of members to support education; challenging priorities brought about by an abundance of God-given ministry opportunities; people willing to consider a vocation in ministry; or, may it not be so, theological divisions in our midst.

With all these variables, how can we begin to plan to maintain a system of ministerial education among us? In a world of change, there is one constant. Our God is with us. He has given us a single mission: to preach the gospel. For that reason we will continue to work with every ounce of strength that God gives us to train people who are themselves faith-filled people of God, people whose spirit-born faith fills them with the peace and joy of salvation, people who desire to help others grow in their faith and to invite still others to believe in the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.

Then we will pray to find the best ways to help such men and women of God learn how and what it means to bring this good news to each new generation.

We already have hints how ministerial training—the "how-tos" of gospel ministry—is changing. Distance learning, smartboards, and PowerPoint are changing the way the ministers of the gospel are trained and changing the way gospel ministry is conducted. Both newly-crafted and rediscovered worship styles require training and honing of new skills. Contacts with peoples of other cultures, collaboration with sister mission churches around the world, and new mission opportunities in new lands require knowledge and wisdom for gospel witnessing in new cultural settings. Financial challenges facing our schools will likely mean creating and expanding partnerships that will take us beyond the walls of our campuses to provide education in neighborhood settings where our people are located. These are a few of the challenges that appear to lie ahead for us.

And yet, one thing remains the same. That is God's promise: "I am with you." No matter what the future holds, God, who showed just how much he is with us by becoming Immanuel (God with us), will guide and gather his flock until he returns.

*Peter Kruschel, the administrator of the Board for Ministerial Education, is a member at St. Paul, Muskego, Wisconsin.*





TOGETHER WE HAVE UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITIES TO

# SPREADING the Word of the Lord

Pieter G. Reid

Through your prayers and offerings, you are part of the outreach that is taking place in more than 20 countries. One of the WELS world missions is Indonesia. This field is just a small part of the worldwide mission work you support through our synod. This is your mission, and this is what is taking place in your mission.

## God's blessings in spite of persecution

The Lutheran Church of Indonesia, Gereja Lutheran Indonesia (GLI), is working toward standing on its own. A missionary-advisor continues to assist it, and it still has a ways to go, but it has come so far. None of this would have happened without the prayers, support, and financial gifts of you and other WELS members.

Thirteen years ago there were no national pastors, no national evangelists, and 10 men at the seminary in Indonesia. The Lord has caused many good things to happen. Those 10 men, who had been trained by WELS missionaries, are now the leaders of the

national church. They are the instructors at the seminary preparing the next generation of pastors. Today there are 10 national pastors, 17 national evangelists, and 13 men at the seminary. Together they serve 24 congregations that cover a 2,000-mile area.

Indonesia is the fourth largest country in the world with 230 million people, 85 to 90 percent of whom are Muslims. Christianity is one of the five legal religions, but Christians face various forms of persecution. Several of the exploratory posts have been shut down because some of the neighbors felt that having a Christian congregation in the area would be disruptive to the religious harmony since most of the people in the area belonged to the dominant religion. One of the GLI church buildings was totally destroyed when fanatics came with sledgehammers and leveled the concrete walls.

The devil can destroy a church building, but he can't destroy the church. The members have the desire to live for Jesus and show Christian love and friendship to those around

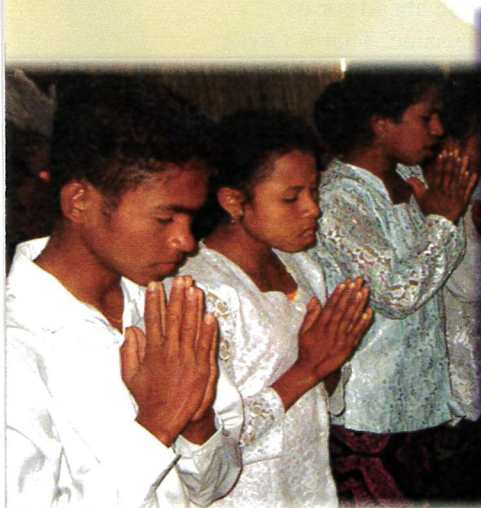
them. It might be illegal to initiate a conversation about Jesus, but one by one the church is growing.

In the last seven years the GLI membership has increased from 300 to more than 1,000 members. This summer more than 100 adults were confirmed. In addition to numerical growth, the members are growing spiritually. The number of adults in worship and in Bible class is rising; a year ago 75 percent of the adult members were in Bible class each week.

## Souls brought to Jesus

But this is not about statistics. This is about souls who were without hope and without salvation—individual souls who were spiritually dead and now are spiritually alive. These souls were children of Satan and now are children of God; they were under God's wrath and now are completely saved and have the certainty of heaven.

The new members are so thankful for all that WELS has done, especially for sharing the gospel. At the newest congregation in West Timor the mem-



In West Timor, 53 adults were confirmed this summer after completing the Bible information course.

Members of our congregation in West Timor at Nunusunu stand outside of their church after a service declaring fellowship with GLI and with WELS.



# REACH PEOPLE IN INDONESIA AND OTHER FOREIGN LANDS.

bers worship in a building with a thatch roof, partial bamboo walls, and a dirt floor. This summer 53 adults were confirmed, and 36 children were baptized.

The members expressed how thankful they were for the Lutheran church. For the first time they learned that it is not our works and not our reason or feelings that assure us of our salvation, but the truth of the Bible, as centered on Jesus. They are so thankful to know that they are one in faith and one in heart with their brothers and sisters in WELS. Even though they won't meet very many WELS members on this earth, they have the certainty that through Jesus they will go to heaven and will meet us there. These new Christians are reaching out to others and sharing Jesus, the only way of salvation.

At another congregation in West Timor villagers had threatened our national pastor. They used a motorcycle to break down his parents' front door and destroy their furniture. Our national pastor and his parents would not be intimidated; they continued to worship in their home, and the pastor kept instructing those who wanted to learn what the Bible says. This summer, 51 adults were confirmed after going through the Bible information course. The members are thankful they can gather to hear about the amazing grace God has shown them, and they are reaching out to their neighbors.

So much can be done, but we are limited by the funding available. The national church currently has congregations on three islands and wants to reach out to the people on the islands of Batam, Rote, Flores, and Sumba. These are not just four more islands; these represent souls who need to hear about Jesus, the only way to heaven. Each congregation is being asked to do exploratory work about a half hour from its existing congregation and consider starting a new post. Then the pastor or evangelist, with the help of the elders in both congregations, could serve two congregations.

## Blessings throughout the world

The Lutheran Church of Indonesia is just one of more than 20 world missions that your offerings support. Here are some of the things that your offerings are making possible:

- Outreach is taking place in mainland China.
- More than 1,200 people are enrolled in Bible correspondence courses in Pakistan.
- In Taiwan, an English-as-a-second-language program attracts more than 100 students a week—an excellent evangelism tool.
- The seminary and Bible institute programs to train national pastors in India are filled to capacity.
- Asian evangelists, trained in the United States, are bringing

the gospel to friends and relatives in northern Thailand.

- Outreach to Muslims is taking place in world mission fields.
- The Apache Lutheran Council is assuming more responsibility for overseeing the mission work taking place.
- A five-man traveling team provides theological training throughout Latin America.
- Exploratory work is taking place in Siberia.

Doors of opportunity are opening all over the world. But we don't know how much longer these doors of opportunity will remain open.

Each of us is a missionary. We are to reach out in our own community. But we also want to work together to send missionaries to foreign lands in our place, and we want to provide the funding necessary for this to happen. Christ's love motivates us and compels us, because Christ "died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:15). Let's be about our Father's business and take the gospel throughout the world.

*Pieter Reid, missionary-advisor to the Lutheran Church of Indonesia, lives in Wisconsin and travels to Indonesia almost every other month.*

BACKGROUND ILLUSTRATION: SHUTTERSTOCK



Congregation members stand in front of their home.



Two young adults were confirmed in September at the exploratory post in West Timor.



Members are thankful for their new church in West Timor, which is still under construction.



# Predestination— a doctrine rich in comfort

**Nothing in life and nothing in death can rip those the Father has chosen back in eternity from his loving embrace.**

Richard E. Lauersdorf

Was it Shakespeare who wrote, “An old man is twice a child”? We enter this world as needy children. As the years advance, some of us revert to that needy stage again. For us, as the elect of God, there is a third childhood, one that never ends. In his grace and love the heavenly Father has elected us to be members of his family and heirs of his heaven. As believers we are always children of God. Like children, we need to grow in faith and knowledge of our loving God. Like children, we need to mature in living for our loving God and following his righteous ways. But, best of all, as his children we

enjoy blessings that are out of this world. All this because the Father has elected us in eternity to be his very own!

## The certainty of my election

How do I know that I’m among God’s elect? Was I there back in eternity when God did his choosing? No, but I’m here now, both hearing and believing the gospel of salvation. That’s the answer Scripture gives to this serious question. God doesn’t want me peering back into eternity to try and find out whether I am among the elect. Instead God wants me to look at right now and consider what he is doing for me. Because I am called and converted, because I am a child of God through faith in Jesus, I am one of the elect. The certainty of my election comes from what God is doing for me now.

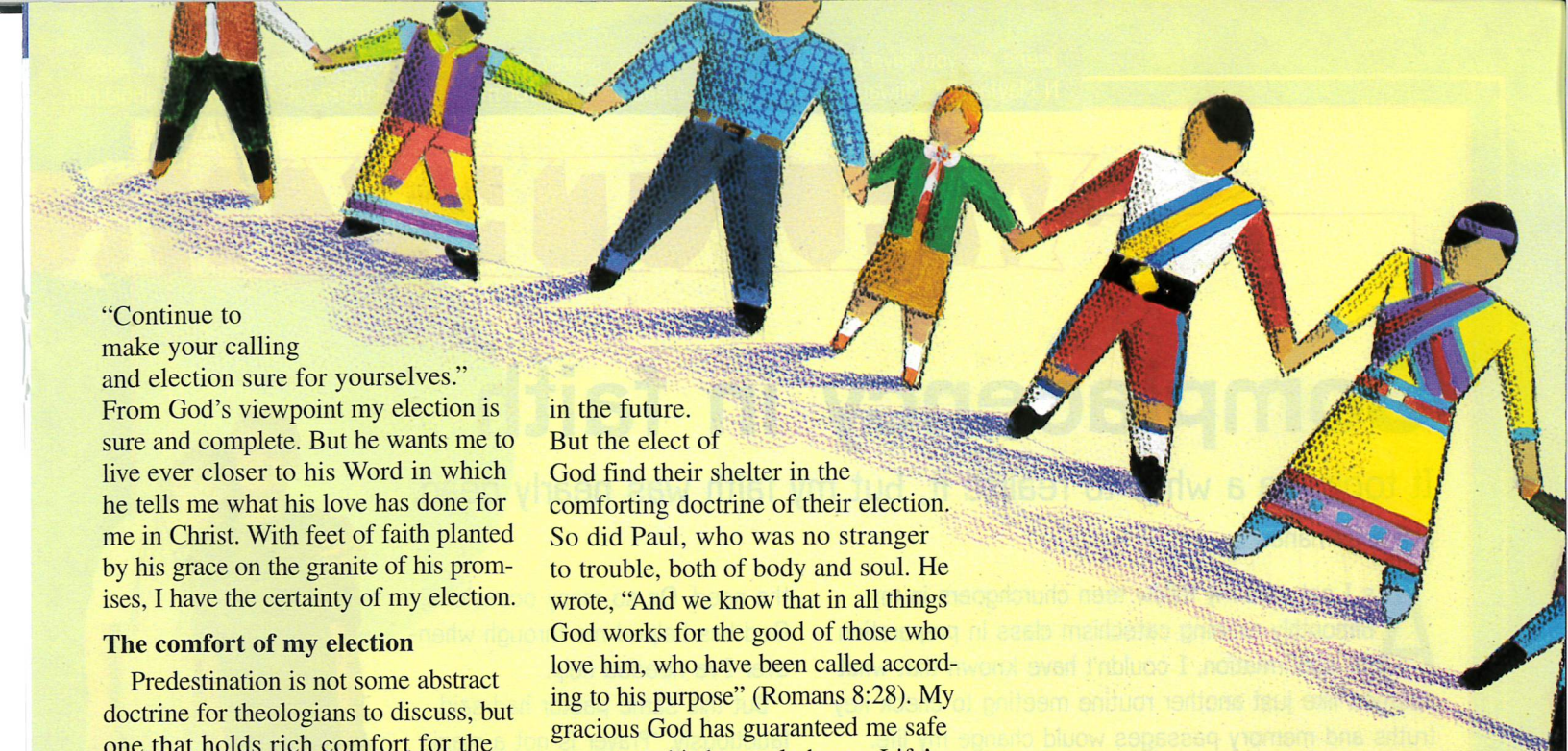
Listen to Paul, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (Romans 8:29,30).

See where the focus is and always must be! On God! When he predestined me, he also promised to call me to faith by the Spirit’s power through the gospel. When he called me, he also justified me—that is, gave me the faith to embrace his verdict of forgiveness through Christ’s redemptive work. When he justified me, he also glorified me, assuring me of a final home in glory and a share of that glory already now. In eternity God in his grace wove a golden chain that links together the entire way to heaven for me.

So am I among the elect of God? Answer by asking, “Am I hearing the gospel message of my salvation? Do I believe in Christ Jesus as my only Savior and way to heaven?” When Satan makes me doubt, I need to zero in on God’s promises in Christ. I need to remember that God has taken my salvation into his own gracious and powerful hands. Now he wants me to take him at his Word. He wants me to look at what he has done and is doing for me through his powerful gospel. When his apostle urges me, “Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10), he’s not lowering my eyes from his grace to myself. In the Greek Paul wrote,







“Continue to make your calling and election sure for yourselves.”

From God’s viewpoint my election is sure and complete. But he wants me to live ever closer to his Word in which he tells me what his love has done for me in Christ. With feet of faith planted by his grace on the granite of his promises, I have the certainty of my election.

### The comfort of my election

Predestination is not some abstract doctrine for theologians to discuss, but one that holds rich comfort for the believer. For example, it has something to say to me about my daily life. Paul wrote, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful” (Colossians 3:12-15). What greater incentive can I have for living the Christian life? I’m one of God’s “chosen people.” His grace has promised me eternity. Now he wants me to live as his child in my daily life. And I want to! Though my footsteps can never fully match his, I try out of gratitude for what he has done for me.

Predestination also has something to say to me about the trials of this life. Trials will come. Some of us have had them swirl around us like a tornado ripping loose the shingles in life. Others will have that happen


in the future.

But the elect of God find their shelter in the comforting doctrine of their election. So did Paul, who was no stranger to trouble, both of body and soul. He wrote, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). My gracious God has guaranteed me safe passage to his heavenly home. Life’s storms may bring water into my boat, but they can never drive me off course or sink me. He who elected me in eternity will bring me safely into heaven’s harbor.

Best of all, predestination assures me of final salvation. In John 10 the Savior promised, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand” (v. 27-29). When my Savior promises, I can count on it. Nothing in life and nothing in death can rip those the Father has chosen in eternity from his loving embrace.

*Richard Lauersdorf serves as a visitation pastor at Good Shepherd, West Bend, Wisconsin.*

Go to [www.forwardinchrist.net](http://www.forwardinchrist.net) for more information. A second Bible study on predestination will be available after Dec. 5.



“Among all the commands of God the foremost is that we should place his dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, before us. He must be the daily and foremost Mirror for our hearts. In him we see how God does indeed love us and how, as a good God, he has so thoroughly provided for us that he even gave his dear Son for us. Here, here, I say, one really learns to understand predestination, and nowhere else. You will note that you believe in Christ. But if you believe, you are called; if you are called, you surely are also predestinated. Let this mirror and throne of grace not be taken away from your mind’s eye. But when such thoughts (of rejection) come to you and bite as fiery serpents, then, whatever you do, pay no attention to these thoughts or serpents, but turn your eyes away from them and look at the brazen serpent, that is, at Christ, who was given for us” (*What Luther Says*, Vol. 1, p. 456).



# WHATEVER

## Complacency in faith

It took me a while to realize it, but my faith was nearly dead.

Blake Samanas

**A**s I sat with my fellow teen churchgoers in my bimonthly evening catechism class in preparation for confirmation, I couldn't have known that what seemed like just another routine meeting to check key truths and memory passages would change my life.

**My pastor, always one for new ideas, decided to start off the night with a discussion question.** He referred to it as "the test of faith." He asked everyone, "If you were going to die tonight, are you confident that you know where you're going?"

At the time a 13-year veteran of Bible history and catechism courses, it was easy for me to simply say, "Heaven." Surely all of my Sunday school teachers had been telling the truth! But as the night wore on, I gave a little bit more thought to the question. I'd been told that I was going to heaven, but was that really true? Did I even believe it myself? It was time, I realized, for a little "soul-searching."

I've been a Christian for as long as I can remember. I was born into a family of Lutherans, baptized Lutheran, and attended Lutheran schools since preschool. I go to church every Sunday. Almost everything about my life has involved Christianity in one way, shape, or form. But, as I thought over these questions, I couldn't help but come to a startling revelation—I hardly actually believed in what I'd been told to believe. Yes, I understood that Jesus was my Savior and I was saved by grace, but I was not an active believer. I didn't pray on my own, beside the occasional desperate plea for a blessing on a test I didn't study for. I never gave any thought to how truly amazing it was that Jesus had in fact saved me. It took me a while to realize it, but my faith was nearly dead. I wondered if it was alive simply because I believed it was.

**So what did I do? I put my faith into action.** I started praying—often. Now I pray whenever I feel

the need. On so many occasions, God has helped me through whenever I've needed help.

But this same pastor had said, facetiously, "Prayer is not a magic whacking stick that you can hit God with and a bunch of candy falls down." I don't just pray to God when I need something anymore, like I had been doing. I actually take time just to thank him for everything he's done for me. Prayer is one of God's great gifts to us, and by not using it, one misses out on a great and boundless blessing.

Prayer is not the only way I've found myself coming closer to God. Whenever I have a doubt about something spiritual, I'll find a Bible and look for a fitting passage.

Okay, I'm sure you're thinking, "This guy must be some sort of 'preacher's pet' that sits at home and writes hymns in his spare time," and I can see where you're coming from. It's not like an average teenager to bubble over about God so much. But most likely my classmates and acquaintances have no idea what kind of changes I've made in my faith. I haven't outwardly changed my entire life just because I finally realized how important faith is—with the exception of a bit more boldness on the evangelism scale. I'm still just a normal teenager fighting the same daily social battles we all do. But I can say that it's all a little bit easier, now that I've firmly put my trust in "the Man Upstairs."

Blake Samanas, a junior at Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills, Wisconsin, is a member at St. Andrew, Middleton, Wisconsin.

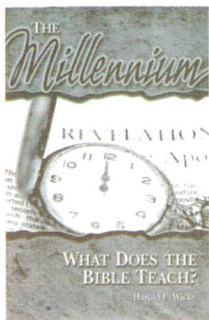




# Booknook

A look at new books published by Northwestern Publishing House. For more information, visit [www.nph.net](http://www.nph.net) or call 800-662-6022. Note: These reviews are not meant to represent the opinions of WELS or Forward in Christ.

## Learn about the end times



\$4.50

bled by flamboyant televangelists hyping “prophetic” visions of a literal and imminent thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, give this pamphlet a read. If ever you’ve been tempted to take with any degree of seriousness the wildly popular novels in the “Left Behind” series of books about life on this planet after something called “the rapture,” turn instead to this booklet. And if anyone tells you to support the nation of Israel politically and economically because Christ can’t return until the Israelis build a new temple in Jerusalem, take refuge in Wicke’s little treatise. This booklet—a 42-page update of six articles the author originally published in *The Northwestern Lutheran*—clearly and concisely points us to the one source for end times teachings that all of us can trust: God’s Word.

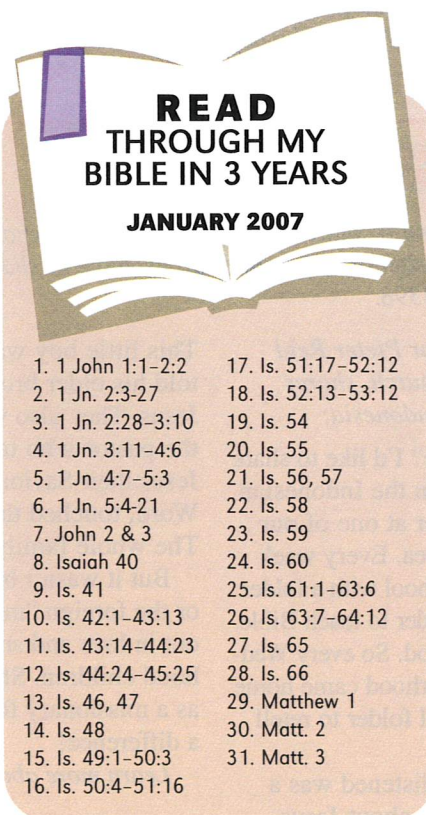
In a readable and well-reasoned style, the booklet traces the development of false teachings about the end of the world from times before Christ to doctrinal pronouncements by Billy Graham. Letting the Bible interpret itself, the author applies the words of Scripture—including the often-misunderstood language from Revelation 20—to guide the reader to a clear and

*The Millennium: What Does the Bible Teach* is a short but sweet rebuttal by Pastor Harold Wicke to one of history’s most enduring false teachings about the end of the world. If ever you’ve been trou-

comforting understanding of what the Lord has in store for us. Hint: there is no pre-judgment day rapture, and there’s no earthly kingdom of God coming down the road. Christ’s spiritual kingdom (a figurative thousand years) is now. In the words of Wicke, “Don’t let those who with a show of wisdom preach another kind of millennium rob you of what Christ wants to assure you of in Revelation 20.”

For a more thorough review of this topic, see the excellent companion Bible study, available free at [www.nph.net/millennium](http://www.nph.net/millennium). Also consider reading *Revelation* by Pastor Wayne Mueller.

Peter Dorn  
Grace, Portland, Oregon



## Obituaries

### Gerhardt Paul Kionka 1921-2006

Gerhardt Paul Kionka was born April 20, 1921, in Denmark, Wis. He died Sept. 21, 2006, in Milwaukee, Wis.

A 1945 graduate of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Thiensville, Wis., he served congregations in Rewey and Potosi, Wis.; Grace, Nelson, Wis.; St. Matthew, Stoddard, Wis.; St. John, Newburg, Wis.; Christ, Menominee, Mich.; a congregation in Maitland, Fla.; and St. Paul, Stevensville, Mich.

He is survived by his wife, Lois; one son; two daughters; 10 grandchildren; one great-grandchild; a sister; and others.

### Stephen Charles Hintz 1950-2006

Stephen Charles Hintz was born April 1, 1950, in Neenah, Wis. He died Sept. 27, 2006, in Racine, Wis.

A 1981 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he taught at Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills, Wis.; Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., and Shoreland Lutheran High School, Somers, Wis.

He is survived by his wife, Kathryn; five daughters; three grandchildren; his mother; one sister; and one brother.

### Roy W. Brassow 1927-2006

Roy Brassow was born in Saline, Mich., on Aug. 24, 1927. He died Oct. 8, 2006, in Scroggins, Texas.

A 1955 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he served at St. Mark, Richwood/Immanuel, Hubbleton, Wis.; St. Paul, Cudahy, Wis.; Redeemer, Huntsville, Ala.; and Shepherd of the Hills, Fredericksburg, Texas. In his retirement he served several vacancies.

He is survived by his wife, Wilma; four daughters; one son; and 21 grandchildren. He was preceded in death by two daughters.



## Preparing hearts for Christmas

You come in from the cold to a nice cup of tea and a table beautifully adorned. Soft Advent melodies bring familiar words of anticipation to your mind. As you listen to words from God's Holy Book, you long for Jesus' arrival just as ancient believers did—just as Mary did. Jesus is coming. You can almost hear the baby's cry even though you are well aware that you left your little ones at home with Dad. Jesus is born. You can relax amidst the hustle and bustle of the season. God has come to earth. Surrounded by candlelight you are assured that Jesus is the light of the world. He is in control.

Advent by Candlelight. What a wonderful concept. But it is certainly not a new one. Women in many WELS congregations have been gathering for such programs for many years. Mary Sparacino of Star of Bethlehem, New Berlin, Wis., shares that their program started in 1987 when her mother told of her church's program. St. John, Wauwatosa, Wis., and St. Paul, Amherst, N.H., both have established programs

and are actively sharing the concept with other congregations.

"The purpose of Advent by Candlelight," explains Sparacino, "is to prepare the hearts of our women for Advent. Along with that we offer Christian fellowship and dessert for all to enjoy. The setting, of course, is candlelight, which creates a very peaceful atmosphere." Women who volunteer to host set their tables with dessert plates, cups and saucers, Christmas décor, and candles. Held on an afternoon or evening early in the Advent season, the program begins with a devotion. Songs and readings accompany the lighting of each candle on an Advent wreath.

"Our women use this means to invite some of their friends who may go to other churches or may not go to a church at all," says Lois Becker of St. Paul, Amherst, N.H. "It is a safe environment for the unchurched, and still they hear about their Savior."

Women who have experienced



A woman prepares her table for the annual Advent by Candlelight event at Star of Bethlehem, New Berlin, Wis.

Advent by Candlelight say that it helps them reconnect with their families and look forward to the season, rather than dreading it. "Today's women have so many activities and responsibilities, especially around the holidays," reflects Sparacino. "This program provides an afternoon of quiet reflection on everything our Lord has done for us."

*Are you interested in starting Advent by Candlelight in your congregation? You can find resources at [www.wels.net/jump/adventlight](http://www.wels.net/jump/adventlight). If your congregation is already holding an event like this and you have resources to share, contact the Commission on Worship at 414-256-3226; [worship@sab.wels.net](mailto:worship@sab.wels.net).*



### LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE

*In the spirit of Matthew 5:16, we're sharing examples of people who live their faith. May they inspire you to let your light shine even brighter. If you have an example to share, send it to us at 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398.*

*Marlys Reid, wife of Missionary-Advisor Pieter Reid who serves the Indonesian Lutheran Church, shares how one woman made a difference in Indonesia:*

Can one person really make a difference? I'd like to share with you a story about a young mom in the Indonesian mission field. This mom was a member at one of our Lutheran congregations in the Jakarta area. Every week her daughter came home from Sunday school with a folder. The mom decided she would use that folder to teach Bible lessons to the children in her neighborhood. So every Wednesday when the children in the neighborhood came home from school, she used the Sunday school folder to retell a Bible lesson to the children.

Among the children who came and listened was a little Buddhist boy. He had never heard about Jesus.

This little boy was so excited that he went home and told his older brothers and sisters and his parents about Jesus. They also wanted to learn more, so they went to the pastor who taught them about their sin and about Jesus their Savior. The Holy Spirit worked through his Word, touched their hearts, and brought them to faith. The whole family was baptized and confirmed.

But it wasn't because of the pastor, or the evangelist, or the foreign "missionary." It was one mom reaching out in love and sharing God's Word with the neighborhood children. She put her faith into action and lived as a missionary for Jesus! One person can truly make a difference!

*Learn more about the Indonesian mission field on p. 14.*



## Where there are wars . . .

*Pastor Paul Ziemer, a member of the Military Services Committee of WELS Special Ministries, has made a number of trips into the war zone in the Middle East as a WELS civilian chaplain to the military. On these trips he attempts to meet with as many WELS troops as the military gives him clearance to. During a trip this past fall he had the opportunity to lay the foundation for future ministry as he developed plans with representatives of the military coalition forces and the nation of Kuwait. He will return to Kuwait in December.*

*For security reasons, he is limited on what he can report, but he has written some articles on his reflections from the war zone. This is one of them:*

I flew in a British plane across the English Channel and then over German soil yesterday. No flack from anti-aircraft guns filled the skies. No Messerschmitts dove at us. No fires flared up in the cities below. We dropped no bombs on this flight. This is no longer a place of war.

I wonder what went through the minds of Americans who made the same trip in the year I was born—1944. I know they were remembering a “Day of Infamy.” I know they wondered how this would all end. I’m sure they wondered if they would come out alive. I know many of them prayed. Some may have used the words that often rise from our Sunday morning pews: “Where there are wars, may there be peace” (*Christian Worship*, p. 42).

Not all of those people came back. But the prayers for peace in the land were granted—not to those who fell, but to us who inherit the blessing.

I flew across Iraq last night. I could see the flames from the oil fields that litter the landscape. I could see lights where I knew American troops were watching, and waiting. I knew that prayers were rising from this land of sand. Prayers to the Living God that families will be safe at home, that they and their comrades will be safe on missions—that peace will come where war is raging.

What about these prayers? Are they more than wishes? Will peace come?

There is a saying that the people in our military are either fighting a war or preparing for one. There is another saying that “wars and rumors of wars” will continue until Jesus returns to this scarred and scared planet. This doesn’t seem to bode well for those who pray for peace on earth.

But the angels who sang that proclamation of peace over fields in the Middle East were not mouthing empty words. There is a peace that can come even in battle-places. It is not ushered in with the silencing of guns. It cannot be bought with diplomacy. It is the work of the Prince of Peace.

A leather-tough sergeant confided to me that in dangerous times he would find himself softly singing, “Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so.”

“Kinda silly!” he said. But he was wrong. Those words bring power and truth. They were true for him as a child; they are true for him as a soldier. He is the object of the love of the all-powerful Son of God. He was at peace—and he knew it.

Let there be peace in lands of war! More importantly, let God’s peace rest in hearts of faith.

*Go to [www.forwardinchrist.net](http://www.forwardinchrist.net) after Dec. 5 to read more of Ziemer’s reflections from the war zone.*



Bombed out buildings in Kuwait City. This is not a normal sight in Kuwait but common in other countries in the war zone.



Luke, a WELS member, was recently activated as a member of the National Guard to serve in the Middle East. Go to [www.forwardinchrist.net](http://www.forwardinchrist.net) to read about Luke as well as more of Ziemer’s reflections from the war zone.



## Q&A with District President Vilas Glaeske

*The 12 district presidents of WELS have a three-fold responsibility—to serve as members of the Conference of Presidents, to administer their specific district, and to be a pastor of a congregation. But what are their roles in each of these areas? And how do the district presidents juggle these responsibilities? Forward in Christ talked with Pastor Vilas Glaeske, the president of the South Central District, about these questions as well as about the ups and downs of being a district president.*

### QUESTION What are some of your duties as a member of the Conference of Presidents?

**ANSWER** – On a synodical level, the discussion of supervision of doctrine and practice takes place in nearly every one of our meetings. Strategic placement of pastors and teachers is something we discuss regularly as well. We also react to questions that are brought to the Conference of Presidents in regards to practices and issues. . . .

At the district level, the buck stops with the district president. We work with and through the circuit pastors in carrying out the basic responsibilities that we discussed before—the supervision of doctrine and practice and funding the budget. . . . Probably a very significant element is the preparation of lists when congregations call for a pastor.

### QUESTION How much time do you spend in your role as a district president?

**ANSWER** – The Conference of Presidents meets in January. . . , in May for assignments at Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, and in October. We also have teleconferences just about every month, as needed, but it turns out to be about every month. . . .

It's also really important for a district president to attend special services like anniversaries, dedications, installations, and so on in the district. We need to be together with the brothers in the ministry and to visit with them and encourage them and then also to become as familiar as a person can with the membership of the congregations.

### QUESTION You also are pastor at Grace, Scroggins, Tex. How do you handle a congregation as well as all your other duties as a district president?

**ANSWER** – It would be very difficult to do that if we didn't have some assistance. Four years ago because of budget restrictions I lost my associate pastor. So I have a vicar now. Without him, it would not be possible.

### QUESTION Do you feel that it is an advantage to be a parish pastor as well as a district president?

**ANSWER** – Oh yes. If the resolution ever was passed that district presidents would become full-time, I would resign. I think the feet of a district president have to be set in a congregational setting for him to be in touch with ministry. Otherwise it is easy to become bureaucratic and maybe autocratic too.

### QUESTION How do you manage the conflicts for your time?

**ANSWER** – I have to make use of my vice presidents in the district to attend meetings when I need to stay in the congregation.

I also have outstanding circuit pastors. Circuit pastors are really a wonderful blessing for the district president. . . . When you have good circuit pastors it just makes everything run that much more smoothly. In dealing with issues in a congregation, the circuit pastor is the first person they would come to. Because of their good work, it precludes me having to deal with the issues. The other thing they do is go to congregations with the ministry plan of the synod and the budget needs to support it.

### QUESTION What do you enjoy the most about being a district president?

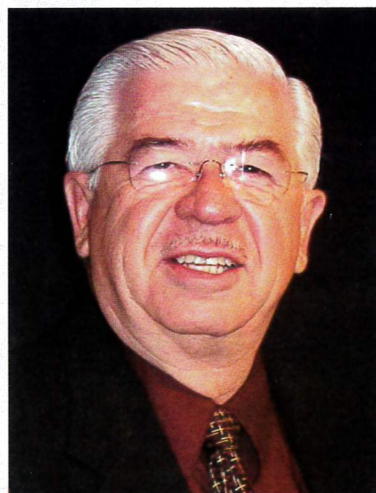
**ANSWER** – The work of the Assignment Committee. You're always involved in the work of the Spirit when you're using the Word and working with God's people, but it's very apparent in the framework of the work of the Assignment Committee and the give-and-take among the district presidents in trying, as best we are able, to strategically place the gifts that God has given to his church in these candidates.

### QUESTION What would you say is the most challenging thing?

**ANSWER** – Probably dealing with controversy within congregations. . . . Nobody likes to do that. I would rather take a whipping then go to one of those meetings, but it's got to be done.

### QUESTION Any last thoughts?

**ANSWER** – People need to recognize that perhaps from where they sit they don't always have the full picture of what's going on. They need to be a little more charitable in regard to the work of the Conference of Presidents or the synodical leadership. Trust the leadership. But also remember we're all just regular people. We put our britches on one leg at a time, just like everyone else.



South Central District President,  
Pastor Vilas Glaeske.



## Online Q&A proves to be popular

The WELS Web site, [www.wels.net](http://www.wels.net), has more than 75,000 pages of information, including belief statements, informational articles, news stories, and more.

But perhaps the most popular section of the site is the Topical Q&A, a service that provides biblical answers to questions of faith and practice or general information about WELS. Started about 10 years ago, the Topical Q&A now contains almost 9,500 questions and answers and continues to grow.

“Our ability to provide solid biblical responses to very specific and sometimes tough questions is a resource not found elsewhere on the Web,” says Martin Spriggs, WELS’ chief technology officer. “No book or Web FAQ provides that flexibility.”

The format is simple. WELS members as well as nonmembers submit issues ranging from general questions about WELS beliefs to personal questions about Christian living. Professors at Wisconsin

Lutheran Seminary then answer the majority of the questions that come in—an average of 130 questions a month. The questions and answers are then either posted online or sent back privately to the questioner.

“This isn’t a bulletin board or a chat room or a blog,” says Prof. John Brenner, who assigns the questions to the appropriate person for answering. “This is meant for simple questions that we give the kind of answer that a pastor would in a Bible class.”

He continues: “We aren’t a substitute for the parish pastor. But I think we help people outside and inside our circles learn a little more about the Bible, our synod, and what we believe and confess.”

Although the answerers of the questions are volunteers, they still gain from the process.

“It’s certainly something that keeps me fresh as far as knowing what’s on peoples’ minds today . . .,” says Brenner. “I often will use some of

these questions in my classroom.”

The people asking the questions are learning as well. One user e-mailed to say, “I am not sure who is behind the wonderful open forum—but thanks! It is a total blessing to be able to ask questions (and sometimes some very difficult ones) and get biblical answers.”

WELS is working to improve navigation on the site by recategorizing the questions and answers as well as by highlighting frequently asked questions.

### Topical Q&A, in short

- Accessed at [www.wels.net/jump/qa](http://www.wels.net/jump/qa).
- Is completely searchable.
- Displays the most recent 50 questions answered as well as links to the almost 9,500 questions and answers.
- Includes questions from places such as China, Germany, and India.

## WELS news briefs

### Board for World Missions 414-256-3233; [bwm@sab.wels.net](mailto:bwm@sab.wels.net)

At its October meeting, the Board for World Missions presented summaries from the world mission fields. Here are a few updates:

**Malawi**—Instead of replacing a vacant bush missionary position, a third position will be added to the Lutheran Bible Institute to allow for more distance education for pastors and for the writing of materials.

**Central Africa Medical Mission**—In November 2006 the Central Africa Medical Mission will mark the 45th anniversary of WELS medical mission work in Central Africa. Visits to a fifth clinic site in Malawi have begun. The area is visited twice a month. Visits to the other four clinics enable the medical mission to continue serving rural areas outside of Lilongwe.

**Japan**—The first year of the three-year lay training program in Tokyo has an enrollment of eight people. Two men will graduate from the lay training program in Tsuchiura in March 2007.

**Mexico**—WELS Kingdom Workers in Monterrey have made more than 500 contacts through English as a Foreign Language classes. About 150 attend English classes on a weekly basis. Between 10 and 15 of those students attend Sunday worship. In Puebla over 30 prospects are participating in membership classes.

**Native America**—The Apache Christian Training School is offering classes at East Fork, Cibecue, Peridot, and Bylas. Six men and one woman are enrolled in the worker training program, and five men and 10 women are in the congregational leadership program.

### Multi-Language Publications—

Eight hundred students are now participating in the Bible Correspondence Course in Nepal, and 3,000 are enrolled in Pakistan. Efforts are now underway to initiate a new correspondence course for outreach to Spanish-speaking people in the United States and Latin America.

### Board for Home Missions 414-256-3284; [bhm@sab.wels.net](mailto:bhm@sab.wels.net)

The Board for Home Missions has announced its goal to help with **150 new ministry opportunities** during the next two years. This includes offering mentoring and resources for local congregation initiatives, giving limited access to the WELS Church Extension Fund, and providing limited funding. Opportunities could range from cross-cultural ministry to multi-site locations to preschool outreach.



## Reaching out to the Chinese in Canada

Zhongmei Cao stood in front the group at Divine Word, Ottawa, Canada. “I feel very nervous to speak in front of people, but that day I felt very excited . . . no stress,” she reflects. As a Chinese Canadian, Zhongmei spoke in Mandarin about how the Bible had changed her life.

Zhongmei wasn’t always a Christian. It was only just over a year ago that she first brought her son Jim to Divine Word for vacation Bible school and sat visiting with Pastor Wayne Halldorson and a Chinese woman who was a Christian. “When Pastor Halldorson first told me about the Bible, I had no feeling,” she recalls. But in the fall, after beginning Bible class, she said, “I never knew there was this kind of love in the world, and at this time I just want to cry.”

Divine Word began its outreach to the Chinese about a year and a half ago. Halldorson saw an advertisement at the public library for the Chinese Cultural Centre of Ottawa and asked if the centre would send someone to

the church to answer some questions and help them understand Chinese culture better. Halldorson and others learned much from the two women who came and also had the chance to share the gospel with them. The centre brought Divine Word into contact with other Chinese as well—one woman taught a class on simple Mandarin



A Chinese child enjoys dinner at Divine Word’s open house this past September.

and another designed a Web site.

This past September, Divine Word held an open house at which Zhongmei spoke. Forty of the 45 attendees were Chinese. The goals were many, according to Halldorson: “We wanted to network in the community and bring people to the church; to get solid Lutheran Mandarin/English materials into their hands; to help Chinese Canadians meet new friends; to put Christians in contact with non-Christians; to give new members a chance to share Jesus in their native language; and to give me a chance to share what our church is all about.”

Zhongmei is only one of many Chinese this church has reached with the good news of Jesus. Her son Jim and another boy are in confirmation class. Three souls have been baptized. Two women are in Foundations Class. Others who have heard the gospel have returned to China and are spreading it there. By God’s grace, Divine Word will continue to share God’s Word with the Chinese in their community.

## Synodical Council discusses preliminary plans and budgets

At its November meeting, the Synodical Council reviewed plans and the resulting summary budgets for each area of ministry. The council confirmed the allocation percentages approved last spring, which earmarked 75 percent of the total operating budget to ministerial education and mission outreach.

To ensure a balanced budget, the council limited ministry plans to available funding. Plans for the operating budget show small increases in ministry support for each of the next four years. Significant ministry needs, however, are unfunded in these proposed budgets, including minimum support for mission work and tight funding for Parish Services, the Conference of Presidents, the Ministry of Christian Giving, and Communication Services.

Most challenging is the anticipated projected deficits at the ministerial education schools. Primarily because

of lower enrollments, the schools are facing shortfalls of \$2-\$4 million in each of the next four years. To minimize the impact these shortfalls will have, the Synodical Council approved a special one-time grant to Ministerial Education of an additional \$2.6 million for the next biennium (July 1, 2007-June 30, 2009). Ministerial Education is to return in February 2007 with a plan to manage the remainder of its budget shortfalls. That plan may have to include defunding Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich., and only partially funding Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis., after the 2007-08 school year. In late February 2007, the council will give final approval of all ministry plans and budgets for the next biennium—including the ministerial education plan—and then submit the informa-

tion for consideration at the 2007 synod convention.

The Lord, however, continues to provide great blessings to WELS. Home Missions is planning to help with 150 ministry opportunities in the next two years. World Missions has added a friendly counselor to India and a mission professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. Enrollments at the ministerial education schools continue to provide the workers WELS need for the harvest fields.

Says WELS President Karl Gurgel, “As we struggle with our human frailties, our eyes rise heavenward in thanksgiving and with trust that the Lord of the Church will bless our efforts for the salvation of many souls and the coming of his kingdom.”



## District news

### Minnesota

On Sept. 17, **Shepherd of the Lakes, Milford, Iowa**, dedicated its new facility. The congregation purchased the facility from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for \$300,000. Shepherd of the Lakes is the only WELS presence in that corner of the state. It currently has 40 members and shares a pastor with Shepherd of the Lakes, Fairmont, Minn.—an hour away. Area congregations have provided financial as well as spiritual support to the congregation since it started meeting in 1999.

### South Atlantic

On Sept. 24, **Abiding Grace, Covington, Ga.**, had a Fall Family Fun Day at its new property. Visitors came for food, games, face painting, a moonwalk, and a great chance to get to know one another. One hundred thirty-five people attended worship, including 55 visitors—30 for the first time.

Pastor Mark Birkholz was installed as associate pastor of **Grace, Grenada**, on Sept. 24. Grace is an independent congregation in fellowship with WELS. Its current pastor, James Radloff, conducted the rite of installation. Pastor John Guse, South Atlantic District President, was the preacher.

**Crown of Life, New Orleans, La.**, whose church was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, held its first service in its rebuilt sanctuary on Aug. 20. The official rededication service was held on Oct. 29. (Look for more on the rededication in the January 2007 issue.)

## DEFINING RELIGION

**Postmodernism:** a societal shift in attitude beginning in the mid to late 20th century away from the "Enlightenment" reliance on human reason and scientific proof and acceptance of objective truth to a belief that truth is relative and determined by the community to which one belongs and by that community's experience and feelings.

### Southeastern Wisconsin

On Sept. 26, **Lois Silverman** received a "Faithful Servant" award from the Christian Stewardship Foundation in recognition of her 26 years of volunteering at Risen Savior, Milwaukee, Wis. The dinner and program recognized six volunteers from six different Christian organizations in the five-county area around Milwaukee. The evening's program highlighted the outreach ministry of Risen Savior before hundreds of people.

### North Atlantic

**Tree of Life, Cary, N.C.**, dedicated its new church on Nov. 5. The congregation, which began worship in a hotel in 1998 and has rented space since 2003, purchased a building in January 2006 and renovated it. WELS Church Extension Fund provided a grant and a loan to help the congregation acquire the building.

The North Atlantic District held its **38th annual Labor Day Retreat** at Camp Taconic, Hinsdale, Ma., on Sept. 2-4. One hundred and forty-four people attended from 12 different congregations.

In September, **Cross of Life, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada**, began offering a weekly worship service at a local community center in the nearby town of Milton, just a few miles west of the congregation's current location. Forty-five people attended the first Sunday, and attendance has been around 20-25 in following Sundays.

### South Atlantic



On Sept. 22, Trinity, Castries, St. Lucia signed a sales contract to purchase land in Bissee. Trinity has been worshipping out of the Vide Boutielle Secondary School. In addition to the construction of a sanctuary, Trinity also plans to construct an educational building and sports facility. WELS Church Extension Fund provided a significant grant and loan to help the congregation acquire the property. Pictured are (l to r) Missionary Tom Spiegelberg, Staff Minister Erik Landwehr, Mr. Rainsford Smith, and Mr. Deopaul Paul (both directors for Trinity).

### Happy anniversary!

**NA—Good Shepherd, China Grove, N.C.**, celebrated its 25th anniversary on Aug. 20. Pastor Fred Archer has served the congregation since its inception.

Peace, King of Prussia, Penn., celebrate **Pastor Roger Huffman's** 25th anniversary in the ministry on July 23. Huffman has served Peace for his entire ministry.

These pastors are the reporters for the districts featured this month: MN—Jeffrey Bovee; NA—Harland Goetzinger; SA—Christopher Kruschel; SEW—Scott Oelhafen.

Don't just read this magazine!  
**GET INVOLVED**  
 Let us know what you're thinking. Send questions for our **Question and Answer** column. Submit a letter to **Feedback**.  
 Tell us how you or your congregation is spreading the Word for possible use in our **News** section.

We want to hear from you! Contact us at *Forward in Christ*,  
 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222;  
 414-256-3210; [fic@sab.wels.net](mailto:fic@sab.wels.net).



## CHANGES IN MINISTRY

### Pastors

**Koester, Larry N.**, to St. John, Colfax/St. John, Eagleton, Wis.

**Lindner, Mark P.**, to St. Matthew, Janesville, Wis.

**Witte, David A.**, to retirement

### SYNOD CONVENTION

The 59th biennial convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod will be held July 30-Aug. 3, 2007, at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. The convention delegate fee, usually paid by the congregation the delegate represents, is \$175.

Memorials may be submitted anytime before the 2007 convention begins. A memorial—usually composed in the format of “whereas” and “resolved”—is a formal petition to the synod convention that asks consideration for a particular item of business. Memorials to be included in the *Book of Reports and Memorials* need to be submitted to the President’s Office by Feb. 1, 2007. Send memorials to President’s Office, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222; carla.martin@sab.wels.net.

### CALLS FOR NOMINATIONS

The Synod Nominating Committee will meet at the synod administration building on Jan. 3 and 4, 2007. The committee will propose three candidates for each of the following positions:

- Synodical Council: pastor-at-large (pastor)
- Synod Board of Appeals: chairman (pastor); three board members (one layman, two pastors)
- Board for Ministerial Education: two board members (one layman, one area Lutheran high school representative)
- Luther Preparatory School Governing Board: chairman (parish pastor)
- Michigan Lutheran Seminary Governing Board: chairman (parish pastor)
- Board for World Missions: chairman (parish pastor) and member-at-large (layman)
- Board for World Missions administrative committee members: Latin American (pastor, teacher); Native American (pastor, layman); Africa (pastor, layman); Japan Europe Asia (pastor, teacher); Southeast Asia (pastor)
- Board for Home Missions: chairman (parish pastor)
- Commission on Evangelism: chairman
- Commission on Parish Schools: chairman
- Board for Parish Services: teacher member
- Northwestern Publishing House Board of Directors: three board members (one layman, one parish pastor, one Martin Luther College professor)

Descriptions of these positions are available at [www.wels.net/jump/nc](http://www.wels.net/jump/nc). Any synod voting member is invited to send names with pertinent information by Dec. 10, 2006, to Pastor Robert Pasbrig, 876 Fairview Dr, Hartford WI 53027. Or you can fill out the online form at [www.wels.net/jump/nomform](http://www.wels.net/jump/nomform). The list of candidates nominated will be posted online by May 15, 2007, at [www.wels.net/convention](http://www.wels.net/convention). The delegates will elect one candidate for each position at the synod convention on July 30-Aug. 3, 2007.

**There will be vacancies in several WELS boards and commissions as of July 1, 2007.** The Synodical Council is seeking names of individuals to serve on these boards and commissions:

- WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc.
- WELS Investment Funds, Inc.
- Pension Commission
- VEBA Commission

All pastors, professors, male teachers, and congregations are invited to nominate qualified individuals. Position descriptions can be found at [www.wels.net/jump/sc](http://www.wels.net/jump/sc).

Nominations should be sent by Jan. 15, 2007, to Roger Crawford, Human Resources Director, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222; roger.crawford@sab.wels.net. Or you can fill out the online form at [www.wels.net/jump/nomform](http://www.wels.net/jump/nomform). The list of candidates will be published at [www.wels.net/jump/nomalert](http://www.wels.net/jump/nomalert) in late January. At its Feb. 23-24 meeting, the Synodical Council will elect the board and commission members from the slate of candidates who have consented to serve.

### NOTICE FOR CONGREGATION TREASURERS

The cutoff date for Congregation Mission Offering receipts in the synod’s post office lock box is the last business day of each month. December 2006 offerings sent to our lock box will be credited as 2006 receipts through Jan. 9, 2007, as long as they are received in the lock box on or before that date and are clearly labeled as “December” offerings on the remittance coupon. We ask that you continue to mail your offerings to the lock box. That location, our bank, will provide you with the fastest deposit process for your congregation.

*Todd Poppe, chief financial officer*

### COMING EVENTS

**Living Nativity**—Dec. 1-3. Runs every 20 minutes from 6 to 9 P.M., on Dec. 1-2 and from 4 to 7 P.M., on Dec. 3. St. Paul, Howards Grove, Wis. Free admission, parking, and refreshments. 920-565-3780.

### Christmas concerts:

- **Wisconsin Lutheran College**—Choral concerts, Dec. 1 & 2, 8 P.M. & Dec. 3, 3 P.M. Band concert, Dec. 8, 8 P.M. Tickets: adults, \$5; seniors, \$4; students, \$2. 414-443-8802.

- **Lakeshore Lutheran Choral**—Dec. 2, 7:30 P.M., at St. John, Maribel, Wis., and Dec. 3, 4 and 7 P.M., at Bethany, Manitowoc, Wis.
- **Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis.**—Dec. 10, 3 & 7 P.M.
- **Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.**—Dec. 17, 3 P.M.
- **Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich.**—Dec. 15, 7 P.M.
- **Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis.**—Dec. 17, 3 P.M. & Dec. 21, 10 A.M.

**Mid-year graduation service**—Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., Dec. 20, 9:30 A.M.

**Estate planning/charitable gifting educational seminars**—Jan. 13, 2007, in Phoenix, Ariz. Hosted by Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. Additional seminars will be held in 2007. Diane Brutlag, 866-397-4627 ext. 360; brutladl@mlc-wels.edu.

**Women’s retreat**—Feb. 23-25, 2007. Paradise Shores, Holcombe, Wis. Hosted by St. Mark, Eau Claire, Wis. Rebekah Carey, rebekahcarey@sbcglobal.net.

**Mexico Mission Partners donor trip**—March 17-26, 2007. Includes worship at three churches and the seminary of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Mexico. Sightseeing includes the Cholula pyramid, several cathedrals, and the El Redentor statue in Torreon. \$1,190 dbl. room (sgl + \$300). Sponsored by WELS Ministry of Christian Giving. Registration deadline, Feb. 1, 2007. Pastor Dennis Kleist, 920-740-5899; dennis.kleist@sab.wels.net.

**WELS Church Librarians Organization spring conference**—April 21, 2007. Peace, Sun Prairie, Wis. \$10 per person. Betty, 608-837-7468, or visit [www.wels.net/clo](http://www.wels.net/clo).

**Women of WELS retreat**—April 20-22, 2007. Willow Valley Resort and Conference Center, Lancaster, Penn. Eileen Bartels Hadden, 703-430-8873; wow3@stjohnsde.org

**S.E.E. TOUR 2007**—Oct. 3-14, 2007. Travel through western Turkey and Greece along the route of Paul’s third missionary journey from Ephesus to Athens and Corinth. Includes the historical sites of Istanbul. Sponsored by Woodlawn Men’s Club, West Allis, Wis. Hosted by Pastor Joel Gerlach and Gene Schultz. 414-774-3711; eschultz20@wi.rr.com.

### NAMES WANTED

**People moving to or vacationing in Bella Vista, Ark.**—Neil Hansen, 479-855-7853; neil.hansen@cox.net.

To place an announcement, call 414-256-3210; [bulletinboard@sab.wels.net](mailto:bulletinboard@sab.wels.net). Deadline is eight weeks before publication date. An updated bulletin board is available at [www.wels.net/jump/bulletinboard](http://www.wels.net/jump/bulletinboard).



# Helping those who aren't home for Christmas

This month you'll probably sing along with the popular song, "I'll be home for Christmas." Many, however, are singing a different tune. Here are some ways you can be a blessing to those who are away from home at Christmas. But remember, the good news of the Savior is too good to celebrate only in December. Why not start now on a resolution to witness in love throughout 2007? Pick one of these to focus on all year or do a different one each month. After all, it's easy to think of others at Christmas, but people are lonely in February, August, and October too.

## MILITARY FAMILIES

- Organize care packages from the congregation. Contact Special Ministries at 414-256-3241 for a list of appropriate items.
- Organize an e-mail campaign. Assign people to specific dates to keep in touch.
- Submit their names to Special Ministries, 414-256-3241; [www.wels.net/jump/refer](http://www.wels.net/jump/refer). They will receive copies of *Meditations* and sermons on tape.
- Join "Mail Call," a place where you can e-mail WELS military personnel and they can request letters. Go to [www.wels.net/jump/military](http://www.wels.net/jump/military) for more information.
- Send thank-you cards to spouses or parents.
- Babysit for younger children to give the spouse a few quiet hours.
- Invite their families to your family outings. Weekends and evenings are the hardest times to be apart.

## HOSPITAL PATIENTS AND NURSING HOME OR ASSISTED LIVING RESIDENTS.

- Visit—and smile. Ask what's happening in their lives.
- Read a devotion and pray with them.
- Offer to help in whatever ways seem appropriate—mow their lawn, buy their favorite take-out meal, bring craft supplies, purchase stationery and stamps.

## MISSIONARIES

- Say a prayer for a different mission field each day this month.
- Become a Mission Partner and get personally involved in a mission field. To learn more about becoming involved, go to [www.wels.net/jump/mission-partners](http://www.wels.net/jump/mission-partners).
- Be a missionary in your neighborhood, country, or around the world through WELS Kingdom Workers, [www.welskingdomworkers.org](http://www.welskingdomworkers.org).
- Adopt a Missionary Kid. This year, eight children of missionaries are attending school in the United States. Contact the Board for World Missions at [bwm@sab.wels.net](mailto:bwm@sab.wels.net) for addresses.

## PRISON INMATES

- Be a pen pal. Contact WELS Prison Ministry, PO Box 452, New Ulm MN 56073-1840; 507-354-3130; [welspm@newulmtel.net](mailto:welspm@newulmtel.net).
- If you know of a family in your community or congregation with someone in jail or prison, give the family food, clothing, and/or presents.
- Begin a jail or prison ministry in your church. WELS Prison Ministry also provides leadership training for this outreach.

## Picture this



For the past few Christmases, members of the Jesus Cares group in St. Paul, Tomah, Wis., have provided a "Living Christmas Card" in the narthex before church on the Sunday before Christmas. In 2005, nine out of 10 members from the Jesus Care group participated in the display.

*Submitted by Jean Buch*

Send pictures to **Picture This**, *Forward in Christ*, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222; [fic@sab.wels.net](mailto:fic@sab.wels.net). On a separate sheet, give us information about the photo. Those whose photos are chosen will receive a small gift.

## WON'T BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS?

Don't miss out on worship. Here are a few congregations who have live or archived sermons and services on their Web sites:

**Shepherd of the Hills**, Anchorage, Alaska;  
[www.shepherd-of-the-hills.com](http://www.shepherd-of-the-hills.com)

**Christ Our Redeemer**, Aurora, Colo.;;  
[www.corchurch.com](http://www.corchurch.com)

**Peace**, Boulder, Colo.;;  
[www.peacelutheranboulder.org](http://www.peacelutheranboulder.org)

**Shepherd of the Hills**, Greeley, Colo.;;  
[www.sothgreeley.org](http://www.sothgreeley.org)

**Beautiful Savior**, Topeka, Kansas;  
[www.topekawels.com](http://www.topekawels.com)

**St. Mark**, Lincoln, Neb.;;  
[www.stmarkwels.org](http://www.stmarkwels.org)

**St. Paul**, Plymouth, Neb.;;  
[www.stpaulsplymouth.org](http://www.stpaulsplymouth.org)

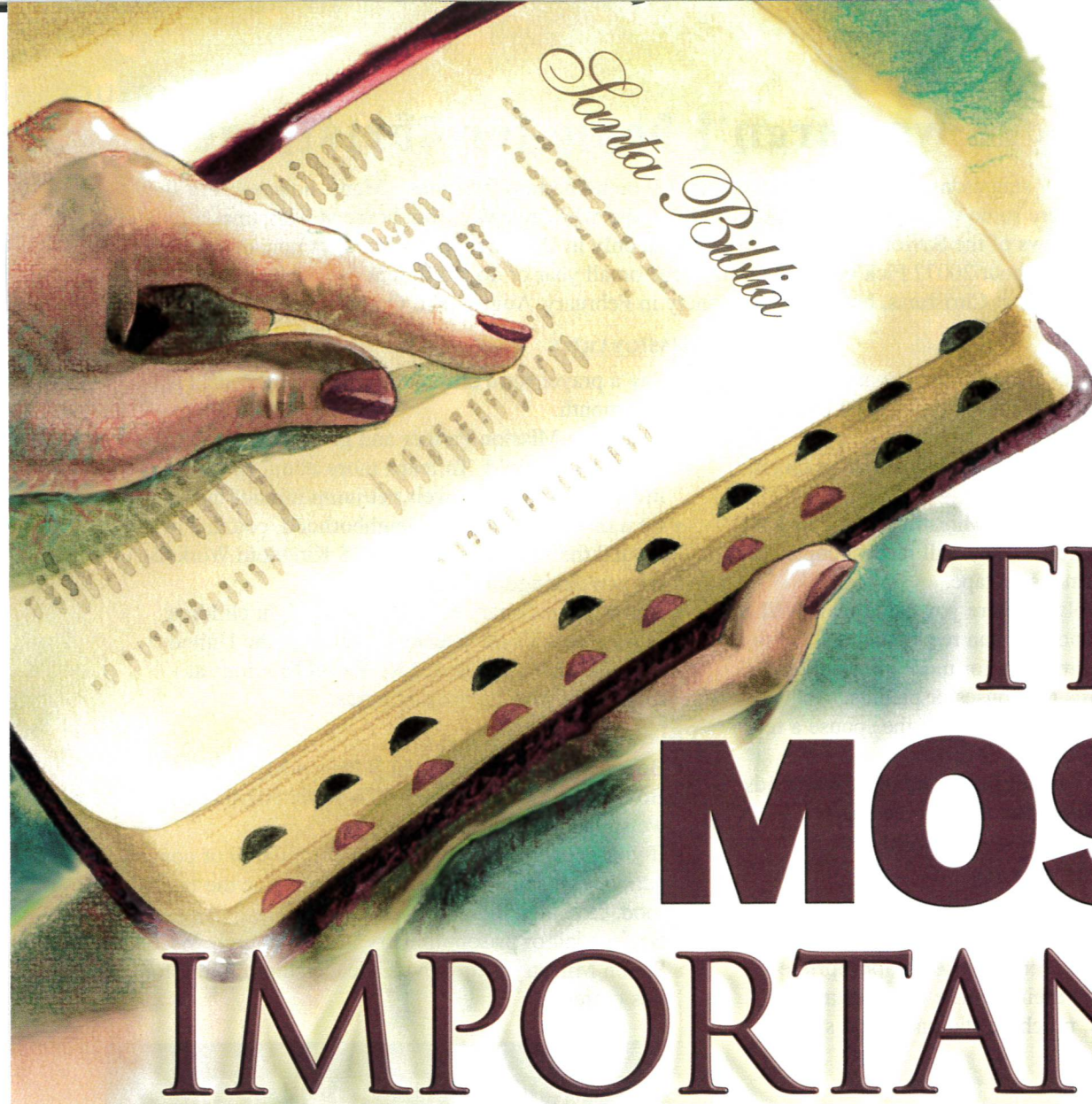
**St. Marcus**, Milwaukee, Wis.;;  
[www.timeofgrace.org](http://www.timeofgrace.org)

(also on American Forces Network)

Other churches offering online worship can be found at [www.wels.net/jump/onlineworship](http://www.wels.net/jump/onlineworship).







# THE MOST IMPORTANT

We don't always know what our most important contribution may be.

Chris J. Pluger

**W**hat's the most important thing you've ever done? Perhaps you have never thought about it, and perhaps you have thought about it and can't think of *anything* important that you've ever done.

I'm not really sure what is the most important thing I've ever done. Maybe it was becoming a father. Maybe it was going to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. For that matter, maybe it was dropping out of the seminary. I have no idea if those things were actually important, or just significant in my life. Maybe something I didn't even notice—a word of encouragement or a compliment, a quiet example, a small act that I didn't even notice doing—will turn out in the end to have been my most important contribution to life on this planet.

But maybe, just maybe, the most important thing I've ever done happened on my first mission trip to the desert of Northern Mexico.

## **An unexpected challenge**

It was the second day, sometime in the early afternoon. Little kids were showing up by the dozens at the Children's Center in Sasabe, and the students from Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wis., that I was chaperoning were getting really excited about their first big teaching gig. My job was to videotape everything for posterity. We had just rounded everybody into a huge circle to sing, when the other chaperone came up and tapped me on the elbow. I paused the tape to see what she needed.

"Chris," she said, "about a dozen teenagers just slipped in. Do you think you can do a Bible study with them?"

I swallowed hard and said sure, mostly because I never say no to anything. Of course, I had no idea what to do or say. I had led only a handful of teen Bible studies in my life. For that matter, I only had participated in a handful of teen Bible studies in my life, and all of them were in English and



# Maybe the most important thing I've ever done happened on my first mission trip to the desert of Northern Mexico.

had important things like lesson plans and teacher's guides and books and . . . well, preparation for one thing. Yikes.

So, very slowly, to buy myself time to pray, I gathered up the 10 or so Bibles at the Children's Center and brought them to a small classroom at the back of the converted house. Then, just as slowly—since I hadn't thought of anything to do yet—I gathered some metal folding chairs. Finally, I took a deep breath. Enough stalling. I asked the teens standing in the back, who showed expressions somewhere between amused, appalled, and bored stiff, if they'd like to go in the back room and chat for a while. Sure. Why not? They followed me.

I eased into things by talking about myself and asking them a few questions about themselves. They actually laughed when I told them I was a Spanish teacher—I guess my nervousness was really undermining whatever Spanish ability I had. They couldn't believe that there were people who knew so little Spanish that this stuttering gringo could actually teach them something.

## God's Great Exchange

Anyway, to make a long, painful story a little shorter, I managed to transition into God's Great Exchange, using the classic question, "If you were to die tonight, where would you go?"

I've used that question with Americans before without much success. The worst experience was when a lady yelled, "To hell—like everybody else!!" and slammed a door in my face. But to my surprise I got my students' attention in a way that I hadn't before.

Working slowly through the Bible passages, I started to explain to them that what should happen is that we should all end up in hell for what we've done. They understood the sin part pretty well, but then I started talking about how God fixed our problem by sending Jesus to live perfectly in our place.

It was pretty obvious that there was more getting in the way than my bad Spanish. These kids had never heard Christ and his work described that way before. "We don't have to do good works to be saved?" they asked, a little skeptical of this "new" doctrine. But there it was, in black and white in their Bibles, and even my bad pronunciation couldn't make it any less clear. They asked me all the textbook Roman Catholic questions, and, by God's grace and my partial seminary education, I gave them all the textbook Lutheran answers. It was a good couple of minutes.

Don't get me wrong. The Holy Spirit didn't descend like a dove on anyone in that hot, dark, little room. My

stick-figure drawings on the whiteboard didn't cause anyone to leap out of their desks and

sing for joy, and my broken recitation of 1 John 1:7 did not make anyone sign up for the seminary that afternoon. But I left that room pretty sure that I had told them something that was new to them, something that I knew by God's grace would change their lives.

## The gospel touched a heart

And here's the postscript, the part of this story that always chokes me up when I try to tell it.

I breathed a prayer of thanks to God for allowing me to survive my first extemporaneous Spanish-language teen Bible class. I went into the kitchen for some water. There I saw one of the "kids" from my Bible class talking to one of the Mexican ladies who works for Mission to the Children. (Actually, it turns out that "the kid" was their 27-year-old teacher.) The teacher was asking the volunteer if she could take the Bible home with her, since she didn't have one. She wanted to reread the parts we had been studying. She was asking the lady how to read the Bible: Do you start at the beginning? Where were all of these different "books" he was talking about? The volunteer gave her the Bible, opened it up, and showed her the table of contents. The smile on the teacher's face makes me pretty sure that, by God's grace, I did an important and meaningful thing that day.

But what I really wonder is how in the world did I end up in Mexico, pointing a video camera at a bunch of singing kids, when the perfect opportunity to tell someone about the Savior came up? Does that make learning Spanish the most important thing I've ever done? Or dropping out of the seminary so I could eventually end up teaching at Wisconsin Lutheran High School? Or was it volunteering at a home for the developmentally disabled one summer with my friend, an experience that led me to decide to go to Martin Luther College where I learned God's Great Exchange in Spanish? Maybe it was something else, even before all that.

Only God knows how all the loose ends tie together. Only God knows how everything will ultimately come full circle. Only God knows what the most important thing you've ever done is. But maybe, just maybe, when I get to heaven and ask him, he'll introduce me to that Mexican teacher who was in my class that day. Maybe that class was the most important thing I've ever done—and I don't even know her name.

*Chris Pluger is a member at Resurrection, Centerville, Ohio.*



With two sons in the Navy, a mom is on a mission of her own.

# OPERATION

## Keeping the Faith

Linda R. Buxa

*"Sleep well tonight for my sons are protecting your freedom."*

That's how Deslie Holzwarth ends her e-mails. Why? She has two reasons—one named Greg and the other named Richard. She doesn't want you to forget that her sons—and all those in the military—pay a price to protect the rest of us. Yet more importantly, she's on a mission to make sure her sons don't forget the One who paid a price for them.

### Keeping in touch

When her older son, Greg, joined the Navy in 2000, Holzwarth, a member of Messiah, Nampa, Idaho, did what any parent would do. She sent cards, packages, prayer books—anything that would help her keep in touch with her son.

Then in 2003, Greg was sent to the Iraq area. "One of the hardest things I had to do as a military mother was watch Greg leave," she says. "It was a challenge to keep from worrying about him. I had to keep reminding myself that Greg was in God's hands—and God loves him more than I do."

While she was understandably concerned about her son's physical safety, she also worried about his spiritual health. "I felt our military members were falling through the ministry cracks," she says. "The devil is working hard on all of us, but sometimes I think he works harder on them. They are out on their own, and it is easy for them to

fall into the non-Christian way of life."

So Holzwarth approached Mark Cares, pastor at Messiah, about starting a ministry for military members. The Board of Elders approved the idea—and added college students to the program. That's when Operation Keeping the Faith began.

### Keeping the faith

Four women serve on the committee to make sure that those away from home don't have empty mailboxes. Members send cards, sermons, *Meditations*, and newsletters. Holzwarth also picks a military or college member to feature in the newsletter and has that person put on the monthly prayer calendar. In addition, Operation Keeping the Faith supports military spouses by staying in touch during deployments.

Even congregation members who aren't on the committee take it upon themselves to serve. "We have a sweet older lady who cuts out inspirational

items from e-mails or newsletters. She touches my heart because she took this upon herself long before Operation Keeping the Faith was started," says Holzwarth. "We have an older gentleman that will send pictures of things going on around the church."

Other members recognize that military parents need support as well. "We have a lady in the congregation who will stop in the middle of what we are doing and say a prayer for whatever is bothering me," Holzwarth says.

That member has said a few more prayers for Deslie and her husband, Don, since their younger son, Richard, graduated from Navy boot camp in June. "Even though I am more of a seasoned Navy mom," she says, "I am sure that if or when Richard goes to those regions of the world, I will have to keep reminding myself God is in control of everything."

To remember that, she holds on to one verse now more than ever. "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

Every time she hears those words it's as if God sent her an e-mail and ended it with,


*"Sleep well tonight for I am protecting your sons."*

*Linda Buxa lives in Waldorf, Maryland, and is a member at Shepherd of the Hills, Anchorage, Alaska. Her husband, Greg, is a pilot in the Coast Guard.*



Deslie and Greg Holzwarth in June 2005.





**G**reg Holzwarth wasn't even born when "Join the Navy, See the World" became a well-known slogan. But this 25-year-old is still proving the Navy's point. In only six years, he has been to 12 countries and more than 20 ports around the globe. "Seeing all the sights, experiencing different cultures, and meeting people of the world is an experience of a lifetime," he says.

While this second class petty officer admits that the Navy is not for everybody, "I enjoy doing what I do." As an operations specialist, he carries out the day-to-day operations of the ship and is involved in all combat operations. That includes operating the radar and the radio, controlling aircraft, and firing guns and missiles. Putting it in civilian terms, he explains: "I work in that dark room with all the radars that you see in movies where everyone is always on edge when something stressful is about to go down."

As much as he enjoys his job, military life can pose challenges, especially to his faith. "Being around people that don't come from a religious background, and being around people that use profanity and have lower morals, sometimes I find myself lowering my standards," Holzwarth admits. "Then I think to myself, 'Is this what I would say or act like at home?' Or more importantly, 'Is this what the Lord would approve of?'"

He also finds it hard because he doesn't hear God's Word on a regular basis. Though he is stationed on the USS Port Royal, in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, he isn't home

consistently. His deployments have ranged from two to eight months. Still he looks at it positively. "The military can put a strain on my faith at times, but I don't let it get the better of me," Holzwarth says. "The long time away from home makes me closer to God, and I focus on my faith to get me through."

His family also helps. Married for almost three years, he and his wife, Sarah, keep in touch through today's technology—e-mail is available 24/7, and a satellite phone can be used for 15-minute phone calls. But he doesn't take that for granted. "I know the soldiers in Iraq can't sit down to a computer or make a phone call out in the field every day," he says, "so I thank the Lord and count my blessings."

Holzwarth, by the way, uses Revelation 2:10—his confirmation passage—as his e-mail signature. "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."

That passage reminds him that God is on a mission too—and, not coincidentally, it's called Operation Keeping the Faith.



Greg Holzwarth on his ship, the USS Port Royal. He was returning home to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, after being deployed for five months to the Persian Gulf area.

## How you can help

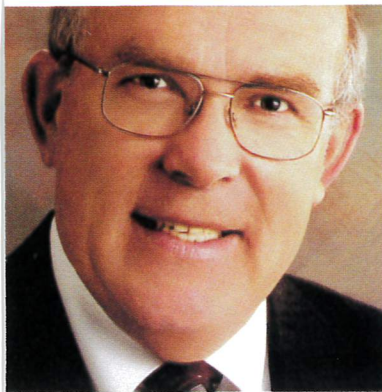
When asked how WELS members can support those in the military, Greg Holzwarth gave the most powerful suggestion—pray. "Please pray for the safety and well-being of all our military," he says, "that the Lord would protect us from all harm and danger."

His mom, Deslie, offered a second idea—say "Thank you." After her younger son, Richard, graduated from Navy boot camp, strangers at Chicago's Navy Pier shook his hand and thanked him for his service. "One gentleman took the time

to stop his bike ride. Even though Richard just graduated, he was honored," she says. "It gives our military the strength and encouragement to keep doing what they do to protect us."

For information on starting your own congregational ministry for military and/or college students, contact Deslie Holzwarth through Messiah Lutheran Church, 534 W Iowa Ave, Nampa, ID 83686. To see how the WELS Military Services Committee of the Commission for Special Ministries spiritually supports WELS members in the military, go to [www.wels.net/jump/military](http://www.wels.net/jump/military).





*Karl R. Gungel*

## One gift for everyone

It's a pitiable scene. It's the Christmas season. A young child is kneeling, praying at his bedside. His Christmas stocking hangs limp—empty—on the cracked wall behind his bed. Since 1918 the *Wisconsin State Journal* has used this poignant scene to appeal for funds for the Empty Stocking Club. It's a notable attempt to have each stocking filled with at least one gift.

Now our scene shifts perceptibly. Another young person isn't kneeling, humbly praying. He isn't asking for anything. His Christmas stocking isn't empty; neither is his closet nor his room. His life is filled with things. He, seemingly, has everything.

Can there be one gift for two such different individuals? More than anything else the first child seems to need the most basic necessities of life. The second, seemingly, needs almost nothing. In the first case, it would seem, you could give this child anything. For the second child it might seem difficult to give him anything he does not already have.

Surely, for the first individual, we don't want to ignore his obvious, temporal needs. The love of the Christ Child compels us to be lovingly concerned about human need. And if we don't know someone in this category personally, we can certainly supply aid through those who do. Within our synod, groups like Mission to the Children (aiding poverty-stricken children and their families in northern Mexico), the Committee on Relief, and the Humanitarian Aid Committee can aid us providing temporal help for the less fortunate.

But these charitable agencies and others have an even higher purpose. They would seek to satisfy earthly needs while bringing eternal blessings to others. That poor child, kneeling, praying at his bedside, with his empty stocking hanging limp

nearby, needs to hear of a Savior's love for him. He needs to trust that even without anything, he has everything in Jesus.

Where no physical charity is needed, perhaps a different message should be spoken. Although the other young person seemingly has everything, the greatest charity would be to tell him that without Jesus, the Savior, he really has nothing. In the words of Jesus, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36).

It's the same gift for everyone. Shouldn't that make gift giving easy? It can be if you truly believe that you can have nothing and still possess everything, or, its converse, you can possess everything and yet have nothing. Faith in Jesus makes all the difference in the world.

It's human for our hearts to go out to someone who has nothing, wanting to give him something. It's divine for our hearts to want to give him everything—to give him Jesus. It's an earthly desire to be envious of someone who seems to have everything. It's a godly delight to be eager to give that person everything by telling him about the Savior's love.

Every member, in every way, can be a missionary, including how we give our gifts. In giving gifts to our family and friends or to someone we don't even know, we want the reason behind the giving to be evident. It's in recognition of the Savior's gift to us. His giving of himself motivates our loving response—our giving to others.

The Savior's gift of himself to us is the one gift for everyone. Doesn't it make gift giving easier? When opportunities come this Christmas season as you gather with family, friends, and neighbors, just give the same gift—Jesus—to everyone.



**A** juicy steak. A bag of potato chips. Chocolate candy bars. A jar of peanut butter.

After eating nothing but fruit for a few months, the mere mention of such foods would make most Americans salivate. On the TV show *Lost*, the survivors have to make do for months with a steady diet of fruit and water.

#### Hurley's secret

One survivor, however, doesn't seem to lose any weight. Hurley, the one in charge of the camp's food, doesn't seem to lose a pound. His secret is finally revealed. Hurley had discovered a large stockpile of food. While he gave small portions to the camp, he kept the giant portion for himself, safely hidden in the jungle.

Tormented by the guilt of keeping this secret from his new friends, Hurley eventually confesses his secret. He then provides the camp with the best and happiest feast they've enjoyed in a long, long time.

#### Ananias & Sapphira's secret

The Bible tells us about a man and his wife in the early Christian church who kept an awful secret from the disciples (Acts 4:32–5:11). Ananias and Sapphira had been blessed with land—a very valuable commodity in short supply for followers of the Way. The early Christians were able to survive because people shared possessions with one another.

Ananias and Sapphira shared some of their possessions with the disciples. Like Hurley, however, they kept a portion for themselves while leading everyone to believe that they had shared everything they had.

Their secret greed controlled them to the point that they lied to God in front of Peter. No confession came from Ananias and Sapphira when Peter gave them every opportunity to do so. Their secret greed not only controlled them but also condemned them forever.

**JOSEPH'S HEART ...  
WAS CONTROLLED  
BY GRACE TO GIVE  
A GENEROUS GIFT  
TO HIS FELLOW  
BELIEVERS.**

#### Joseph's secret

Secret greed competes with faith for control of our hearts. Hurley overcame his secret greed by confessing his secret to his friends. Just before we learn about Ananias and Sapphira's greed, we learn of Joseph from Cyprus who overcame

his greed and became known for his generosity. "Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 4:36).

Joseph's heart wasn't controlled by secret greed. It was controlled by grace to give a generous gift to his fellow believers. The verse preceding our introduction to Joseph reveals the cause of his generosity: "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all" (v. 33).

Much grace was given to Joseph through the news of a Savior who not only died for him but who also lived again to generously give the gift of heaven to his followers. Jesus gives Joseph and all believers the best and happiest feast we will ever enjoy.

No longer lost to heaven, may we confess any secret greed in our hearts and then with great power testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, trusting that much grace is upon us all.

*Contributing editor Philip Kieselhorst is pastor at Gethsemane, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.*

*This is the fifth article in a seven-part Bible study on God's answers when we're feeling lost.*

*Next month: Lost in anger*

**LOST  
IN GREED**

PHILIP L. KIESELHORST

**SECRET GREED  
COMPETES WITH  
FAITH FOR CONTROL  
OF OUR HEARTS.**





*John A. Brann*

## God steps into history

The name of Caesar Augustus is on the lips of our children every Christmas. We recognize him as the leader who issued a decree that a census should be taken of the Roman world. From the perspective of Caesar Augustus, the census was a reasonable step in his plans to govern all Roman territory.

Named Octavian, he was the grand nephew of Julius Caesar and emerged as the sole master of the Roman world in 31 BC when his forces defeated Marc Antony and Cleopatra's navy at Actium. He took the name Caesar Augustus, and for 45 years he was the head of state. For some, the era became known as the Age of Augustus.

Yet the most important event of that time did not occur because of the leadership of Caesar. For most of us, Caesar Augustus simply is an interesting footnote to a much more important event. A little baby was born in Bethlehem where Mary and Joseph had to go in order to comply with Caesar's decree.

By Roman imperial standards, the birth of another child somewhere far away from the Roman Forum was unimportant. The child, placed in a manger, did not fit into Roman plans except as another person to count in the census and another taxpayer.

But the birth of Jesus has become more significant than the Age of Augustus. We even count our years according to his birth, marking them before Christ and after Christ. Even if contemporary scholars want to change that to BCE (before the common era) and CE (the common era), the importance of Jesus cannot be overlooked.

Why? The birth of Jesus marks the entrance of God into human history. He became flesh and blood like us. Luke carefully places the birth of Jesus into history—in the days of Caesar Augustus. Don't let

anyone fool you into thinking that the New Testament was made up by some uneducated fishermen. The New Testament is a reliable historical document with references that can be verified for authenticity.

The real problem is that some readers of the New Testament don't like what it says. If God did enter human history, then we have to pay special attention to what Jesus—God made flesh—has to say, and we dismiss his words to our own peril.

The Christian concept of God becoming flesh in Bethlehem is just too much for many to believe. Many of the Jews in the days of Jesus did not believe Jesus was God in the flesh. They took up stones to kill him when he asserted he was God. Today some simply dismiss the concept as a myth proposed by overly dedicated followers.

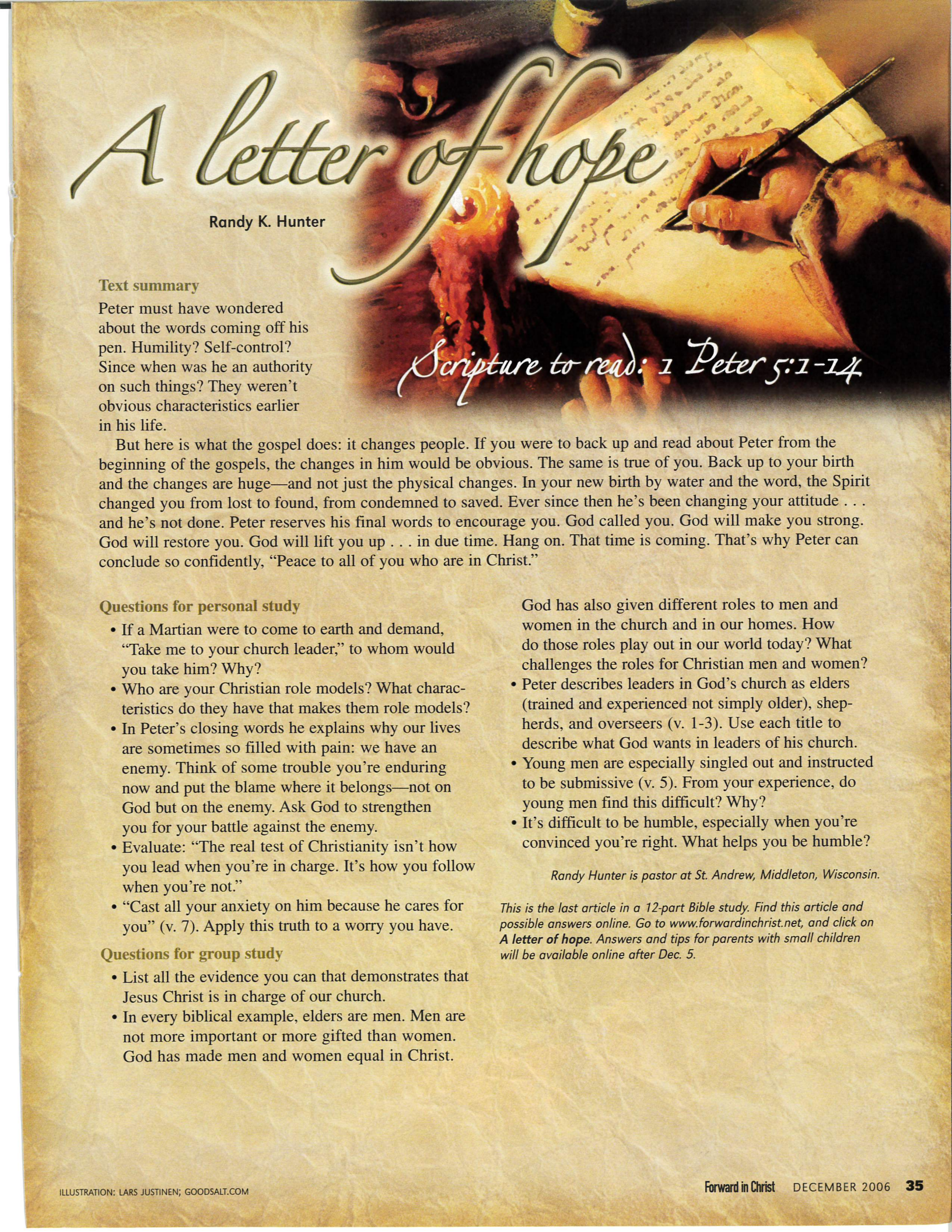
But God did not stand on the sidelines and watch humanity destroy itself in brutality, pleasure, bloodshed, and greed. He planned to rescue all humanity from itself and stepped into history to do it.

When the news carries story after story of heartache, corruption, cruelty, or perversion, haven't we said to ourselves, "What's happening? Why doesn't God do something?" Well, he did in Bethlehem. He came to rescue us from ourselves and the problems we live with day in and day out.

He became one of us because he loved us and wanted us to live with him without the problems that glare at us from the daily news. He came to make peace with God. Yes, God stepped into history and shed real blood—priceless blood because it is the blood of God made flesh. That's enough to cleanse all the world of sin and open heaven even for thieves hanging from a cross.

May your Christmas be filled with his peace.





# A letter of hope

Randy K. Hunter

## Text summary

Peter must have wondered about the words coming off his pen. Humility? Self-control? Since when was he an authority on such things? They weren't obvious characteristics earlier in his life.

But here is what the gospel does: it changes people. If you were to back up and read about Peter from the beginning of the gospels, the changes in him would be obvious. The same is true of you. Back up to your birth and the changes are huge—and not just the physical changes. In your new birth by water and the word, the Spirit changed you from lost to found, from condemned to saved. Ever since then he's been changing your attitude . . . and he's not done. Peter reserves his final words to encourage you. God called you. God will make you strong. God will restore you. God will lift you up . . . in due time. Hang on. That time is coming. That's why Peter can conclude so confidently, "Peace to all of you who are in Christ."

*Scripture to read: 1 Peter 5:1-14*

## Questions for personal study

- If a Martian were to come to earth and demand, "Take me to your church leader," to whom would you take him? Why?
- Who are your Christian role models? What characteristics do they have that makes them role models?
- In Peter's closing words he explains why our lives are sometimes so filled with pain: we have an enemy. Think of some trouble you're enduring now and put the blame where it belongs—not on God but on the enemy. Ask God to strengthen you for your battle against the enemy.
- Evaluate: "The real test of Christianity isn't how you lead when you're in charge. It's how you follow when you're not."
- "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (v. 7). Apply this truth to a worry you have.

## Questions for group study

- List all the evidence you can that demonstrates that Jesus Christ is in charge of our church.
- In every biblical example, elders are men. Men are not more important or more gifted than women. God has made men and women equal in Christ.

- God has also given different roles to men and women in the church and in our homes. How do those roles play out in our world today? What challenges the roles for Christian men and women?
- Peter describes leaders in God's church as elders (trained and experienced not simply older), shepherds, and overseers (v. 1-3). Use each title to describe what God wants in leaders of his church.
  - Young men are especially singled out and instructed to be submissive (v. 5). From your experience, do young men find this difficult? Why?
  - It's difficult to be humble, especially when you're convinced you're right. What helps you be humble?

*Randy Hunter is pastor at St. Andrew, Middleton, Wisconsin.*

*This is the last article in a 12-part Bible study. Find this article and possible answers online. Go to [www.forwardinchrist.net](http://www.forwardinchrist.net), and click on *A letter of hope*. Answers and tips for parents with small children will be available online after Dec. 5.*



# It's a miracle

If God could create a living human being out of dust, surely it was no problem for him to perform a "lesser" miracle when he fertilized an egg in Mary's womb.

Joel C. Gerlach

"It's a miracle," people sometimes say when a baby is born. Abraham and Sarah could say that about baby Isaac, and Hannah and Elkanah about baby Samuel, and Zechariah and Elizabeth about their son John. And Mary too. But baby Jesus was a miracle for a totally different reason.

## The miracle of Jesus' conception

I was no "miracle" baby, and neither were you. The moment you were conceived, you received 23 chromosomes from your mother and 23 more from your father. If one was an xx chromosome, you were a girl. If one was an xy chromosome, you were a boy. The color of your hair, your eyes, your skin, also your height and whether your extended thumb is straight or curves back was all encoded in the DNA in your genes in those 46 chromosomes at the moment of your conception. Amazing, isn't it? But all really quite natural. Definitely not a miracle.

A bright and talented young attorney I met when I served in Kodiak e-mailed me an intriguing question. "If Jesus received 23 chromosomes from his mother," he wondered, "where did the other 23 chromosomes come from, specifically the xy chromosome?" I've been asked lots of tough questions, but that one was easy. Gabriel answered that question for Joseph's benefit. "Joseph son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20). Now, that was an authentic miracle.

That same Holy Spirit was in on the planning in the beginning when God said, "Let us make man in our image" (Genesis 1:26)—out of the dust of the ground, no less. So what's the problem with those other 23 chromosomes? If God could—and did—create a living human being out of dust, including our genetic code, surely it was no problem for him to perform a "lesser" miracle when he fertilized an egg in Mary's womb. And if you really want to know where Jesus got his xy chromosome, ask him when you meet him.

## What that miracle means for us

Meanwhile, focus on what the Savior's miraculous birth in Bethlehem means for you. Mary's Son is the God-man. Not half God and half man, but all God and all man. He brings God to us and us to God in himself. In Colossians 1:15, Paul says that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God" (God visibleized). Scriptures also say that he is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3).

What, practically, does that mean? It means that "just as we have borne the image of the earthly man (Adam), so shall we bear the image of the man from heaven (Jesus)" (1 Corinthians 15:49). That's an ongoing process for all who have come to know Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord. "We . . . are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18)—the same Spirit who made the miracle of Bethlehem a reality.

How's that for a special Christmas gift intended especially for you—personally?

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