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RADIUSINTERNATIONAL.ORG/WORLD
46
WELCOMING THE STRANGER
With an influx of Afghan refugees, one group models how to build friendships with newcomers
by Sophia Lee

40
PERSEVERING IN HOPE
As Haitians face brazen kidnappings and daily threats from gangs’ widespread control, churches cling to Advent hope
by Jamie Dean

52
BEYOND THE BILLY GRAHAM RULE
Accusations against Baptist leader Paul Pressler highlight the difficulties of addressing the abuse of men in the church
by Mary Jackson and Lynde Langdon

58
FACING DIVISION, PRAYING FOR UNITY
Part 3 of a series about divisions within American evangelicalism
by Sophia Lee
FEARFULLY AND WONDERFULLY MADE
COVID-19 stymies the Christmas market plans of a workshop for developmentally disabled adults
by Jenny Lind Schmitt
The Ashbrook Academies in American History and Government are a series of summer programs designed for rising high school juniors and seniors who share a deep interest in U.S. History, Politics, and Economics. Unlike other courses or programs that tend to erode confidence and pride in our country by emphasizing its historical failures, the Ashbrook Academies invite students to consider the American experiment in self-government as a triumph, a victory for Providence, reason, and the human spirit that warrants prayerful celebration but also demands serious study.

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Editor in Chief
Marvin Olasky

What surprise did you get while reporting on a church-sponsored soup kitchen?

“I hadn’t realized the pastor would be a Franciscan friar. I enjoy new social situations, but I didn’t know if there was a proper greeting for Father Reyes. Apparently, handshakes are fine because he warmly welcomed mine, and we had a delightful, hour-long interview.”

—World reporter Carolina Lumetta, whose story appears on p. 67

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This Christmas, she needs to hear about Jesus' love for her...

...yet, unreached people groups are growing faster than we are reaching them. What if the Church’s current missions strategy is actually limiting the global spread of the gospel, so children like Naya never hear? The Return Mandate is a call to return to the Scriptural method of missions found in the New Testament: "and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also." (II Timothy 2:2) It’s a call for genuine stewardship in missions giving by acknowledging the advantage trustworthy native missionaries have to fulfill the Great Commission.

Follow/learn more at ReturnMandate.org
THE EVANGELICAL DIVIDE
NOV. 6, P. 52: Thank you for Sophia Lee’s insightful article and series. We have a critical need to know our neighbors once again and not think that some sort of government program or solution will solve all our issues. I believe this is at the root of the divide.

Karl Stiegelz/Dubuque, Iowa

PAYMENT PENDING
NOV. 6, P. 46: James Madison famously stated, “Charity is no part of the legislative duty of government.” There would be less poverty and homelessness in this country if the church stepped up. Instead, we allow the government to make more and more Americans wards of the state.

Gary Porter/Yorktown, Va.

SEASON FINALE
NOV. 6, P. 38: Blessings to Mindy Belz in whatever the next season brings. Her travel and writing have revealed to us many lives—people we badly needed to hear about.

Mike Edwards/Charlotte, N.C.

My wife, Cathy, and I have been fans of Mindy Belz since the beginning when WORLD was on newsprint, and everyone was paying bills with affection and promises. To say that we will miss her voice does not do justice to the loss we feel.

Stephen D. Lawton/Greenville, S.C.

COLIN POWELL WAS 84
NOV. 6, P. 14: Colin Powell’s obituary noted he had underlying conditions of multiple myeloma and Parkinson’s disease. While PTSD is the most discussed sequela of service in Vietnam, these two conditions, which likely were due to exposure to Agent Orange, have shortened life spans and/or made life a great deal more difficult for a huge number of veterans and their families.

Karen Hester/Rescue, Calif.

THANKFULNESS
NOV. 6, P. 72: Marvin Olasky’s column should be required reading for college classes in logic. He is Scripturally spot on, but even for non-Christians his logic is practically irrefutable.

Barry Bertram/Campbellsville, Ky.

IDENTITY VS. PERSONHOOD
NOV. 6, P. 18: Our identity betrays us, one way or the other. Only identity in Christ, faithful and immutable, is solid—our true personhood.

Cheryl Irish/Bastrop, Texas

“LIGHT” MUSIC LIVES AGAIN
NOV. 6, P. 34: My thanks to Arsenio Orteza for his recommendation of the wonderful British Light Music: Richard Addinsell. The incredibly relaxing and uplifting piano and orchestral music brightened my day.

Kristofer Sandlund/Zanesville, Ohio

QUOTABLES
NOV. 6, P. 15: Thank you. Thank You. THANK YOU! For changing the background color of Quotables from black to white. I can now enjoy reading it again.

Bobbye Nelson/Alvord, Texas

BOOK IT!
One of my favorite parts of WORLD Magazine is the book review section, and I must not be the only one. Every time I try to put a “hold” on a book from your fiction list at the library, it’s already checked out!

Carol Cuttino/Carmel, Ind.

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It is no secret that our business model—reliance upon tens of thousands of donors and tens of thousands of subscribers—enables us to maintain editorial independence from outside interests. Different models fit other businesses well, but I can’t think of a better business model for an organization committed to journalism. We thank God that we don’t have to sacrifice our independence, or even the appearance of independence, by getting too cozy with huge advertisers, huge ministries, huge foundations, or huge governments. We don’t need to serve those interests—we need only serve the interests of our audience.

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Of course, not many of you avail yourselves of every one of our resources. Honestly, I don’t even have enough hours in the day to read, listen to, or view every single news piece we produce. I’d guess that if you’re reading this in print, you may not be spending a lot of time with our other platforms.

But this is the beauty of our audience: Even though you may prefer your news the old-fashioned way—ink on paper, delivered by mail—you have asked for, and supported, the distribution of vastly more news and analysis on several other platforms, for the benefit of hundreds of thousands of people.

Here’s another way to put it: Even if you don’t listen to podcasts, you have enabled many who may not have the time or the inclination to read a magazine to benefit from the Biblically objective journalism WORLD produces by supporting the products of WORLD Radio. Even if you don’t visit our website every day or subscribe to our email newsletters, you have made it possible for many to benefit from WORLD Digital. Even if you don’t need in-depth examinations of the most pressing current issues, you have provided for many others that sort of help through WORLD Opinions. And even if you don’t know children and students who need exposure to a Biblical perspective on current events, you have helped underwrite WORLD’s efforts for young families.

As we near the end of 2021, we are grateful for your support of all those initiatives and the new projects and products you ask us for in 2022.

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Taught by Matt Jacobson, husband, father, pastor, founder of FaithfulMan.com, biblical marriage coach, author of 100 Ways to Love Your Wife and 100 Words of Affirmation Your Wife Needs to Hear
More than membership
Will you help provide for WORLD’s unique brand of journalism?

F, IN ONE OF YOUR MORE entrepreneurial moments, you found yourself launching a new magazine, how would you decide exactly how much to charge for a subscription?

Well, you say, that depends. It depends on so many things. Like:

› What is the main editorial theme of each issue?
› What is the quality of workmanship from issue to issue? In reporting? In writing? In design?
› How many issues will I publish during the next year?
› How many pages will there typically be in each issue?
› How many of those pages will be devoted to ads? How many of the ads will interest the reader?
› What other benefits will there be for members of the reader’s family?
› Will there be any digital or electronic versions of this new “magazine”? Will that add to the cost?

But, of course, when I ask you to join me in thinking about an appropriate price for membership in WORLD, I’m quite deliberately setting you up. So here is an early warning! I will in fact be going even further than you may have thought.

Some time in the months just ahead, when you get this year’s renewal notice, you will indeed be challenged to use the preceding questions to help you decide whether a WORLD membership is a worthy use of your money. You probably won’t do it quite that formally—but those questions will be in the back of your mind, as they should be. We regularly hear from folks who consider WORLD a great bargain. Others have to pinch somewhere in their family budget. I’m hoping you’re in one of those two groups. But the only validation of that choice is an actual renewal.

I said, though, that I’m asking for more. It is gratifying beyond measure to have thousands of WORLD’s readers and listeners thoughtfully analyze the benefits and respond by saying, “Here’s my part.” But many, many of you have gone beyond “your part,” responding with gifts that serve to cover other costs of WORLD News Group. Those include the important work of the World Journalism Institute, and they provide support for our varied ministries to children. You will find more details at our website: wng.org.

Can you imagine how our gratification has been multiplied over the last year as more than 13,000 of you have joined in such giving, going so generously past the cost of your own personal membership? If you have already been part of this year’s giving, thank you! If you haven’t been part of that remarkable group, wouldn’t this be a great time? In the next issue of WORLD, you’ll find a reply envelope in which you can include a contribution. Or, go to wng.org to give.

For more than 25 years, I have added a footnote to this column with this request. I have asked each year whether there might be a handful of you who would commit to give $5,000 a year for the next three years. Call me. I’d love to chat before the next renewal notices come out.
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HALF HOUR INTO SUPREME COURT ORAL ARGUMENTS for the pivotal abortion case Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health, Justice Elena Kagan interrupted Mississippi Solicitor General Scott Stewart. For three minutes Kagan questioned Stewart’s arguments against the abortion precedents enshrined by Roe v. Wade and Planned Parenthood v. Casey. Kagan said not much had changed since the court released those 1973 and 1992 decisions: People today still disagree on whether those cases were right or wrong based on the same reasons that they believed they were right or wrong decades ago.

Kagan said only one thing has changed: “We are in the same exact place as we
were then, except that we’re not because there’s been 50 years of water under the bridge, 50 years of decisions saying that this is part of our law, that this is part of the fabric of women’s existence in this country.”

But the arguments attorneys made before the Supreme Court on Dec. 1 paint a different picture of how the cause of the unborn has benefited from medical advancements and a pro-life movement bolstered by scientific arguments since Planned Parenthood v. Casey in 1992. The Casey oral arguments tiptoed around the reality of unborn life. In the Dobbs case, those unborn human lives took center stage.

Even the pro-life attorneys in Casey treated the life of the unborn child as a secondary issue. They argued instead over legal standards, making only intermittent references to the state’s interest in protecting the life of unborn children. One of the attorneys regularly referred to that as “potential” life. In 1992, ultrasound technology was still relatively new: Only three pregnancy centers in the country used it to counsel pregnant women.

Today, more than 2,000 pregnancy centers provide ultrasounds. Mississippi Solicitor General Stewart noted such advancements in science and medicine have enabled parents and doctors to “know [what] the child is doing and looks like” and to know that the baby is “fully human.” No references to “potential” life.

Early in the oral arguments, Justice Sonia Sotomayor grilled Stewart about the science of fetal pain in an attempt to argue that it didn’t add anything new to the abortion debate. But he brought to mind a powerful image and responded that states crafting abortion legislation “should be able to be concerned about … an unborn life being poked and then recoiling in the way one of us would recoil.”

Sotomayor dismissed Stewart’s view of unborn life as purely religious. But during oral arguments, members of progressive pro-life groups stood outside of the court holding signs with phrases like “Agnostic, leftist, queer, biracial, nonbinary, pro-life.” They chanted, “Forceps—off their bodies.”

Even the language of the pro-abortion attorneys in the Dobbs case marked a shift from the Casey arguments. Both Julie Rikelman, director for the Center for Reproductive Rights, and U.S. Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar on Dec. 1 echoed many of the same arguments that ACLU attorney Kathryn Kolbert made in 1992: that abortion was central to women’s liberty, that the court couldn’t go against a former ruling that so many women had come to rely upon.

But the language Rikelman and Prelogar used showed the effect of three decades of advances in ultrasound technology. While Kolbert repeatedly referred to unborn babies in her argument as “potential life” and just once as “fetal life,” the word “potential” never appeared in Rikelman or Prelogar’s vocabulary. They both used the term “fetal life,” and, in one telling slip, Prelogar called unborn life a “baby.”

“The fact that so much time has passed ... that’s not a point in Roe and Casey’s favor,” said Stewart, responding to Kagan’s three-minute monologue. “They adopt a right that purposefully leads to the termination of now millions of human lives. If nothing had changed, they’d be just as bad as they were 30 years ago, 50 years ago. And now we just have decades of damage.”

—with reporting from Esther Eaton
THE NUMBER OF AMERICANS who quit their jobs in September, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The figure represents about 3 percent of the U.S. workforce and reflects a new record for resignations in a single month. Economists’ explanations for the pandemic-era labor shortages have varied widely. And while many of the millions who quit in August did so to take another job, fewer Americans are working. Some point to recent Delta variant coronavirus surges or a lack of childcare to explain why Americans may be leaving the workforce. Others suggest that workers, now flush with cash thanks to generous government stimulus programs, are reassessing their need to work.

34.5M
The number of Americans who have quit their jobs in the first three quarters of this year, outpacing 2019, the next-highest year on record, by several million.

61.6%
The civilian labor force participation rate in the United States as measured by the BLS. In January 2020, the number stood at 63.4 percent.

15
The number of consecutive months during the pandemic in which American households have saved 10 percent or more of disposable income, a figure not routinely seen since the 1980s.

10.4M
The total number of job openings in the United States at the beginning of November according to the BLS.

4.4M
THE NUMBER OF AMERICANS who quit their jobs in September, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The figure represents about 3 percent of the U.S. workforce and reflects a new record for resignations in a single month. Economists’ explanations for the pandemic-era labor shortages have varied widely. And while many of the millions who quit in August did so to take another job, fewer Americans are working. Some point to recent Delta variant coronavirus surges or a lack of childcare to explain why Americans may be leaving the workforce. Others suggest that workers, now flush with cash thanks to generous government stimulus programs, are reassessing their need to work.
Dole’s service remembered
Former senator dedicated later years to serving veterans

OB DOLE, WHO DIED DEC. 5 AT 98, earned respect as both a tough fighter on the battlefield and a shrewd negotiator in the U.S. Senate. Second Lt. Dole was wounded in battle in the waning days of World War II, losing the use of his right arm and earning two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star. After winning a seat in the Kansas House of Representatives in 1950, Dole spent the next 46 years in public service. A pragmatic negotiator well known for his sharp-edged humor, the Republican senator worked with Republicans and Democrats alike in developing tax policy, farm and nutrition programs, and protections for the disabled. He made three unsuccessful attempts at the presidency, losing the last time to Bill Clinton in 1996. Once out of office, Dole pushed for the construction of the World War II Memorial and regularly met with veterans there well into his 90s. He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth, and daughter Robin.

Fired
The meteoric rise of the Cuomo star in 2020 crashed just as quickly in 2021, as brothers Andrew and Chris both flamed out. CNN fired co-anchor Chris Cuomo in early December after reports that he assisted in the defense against the sexual harassment allegations that led his brother Andrew to resign as governor of New York in August. Like his older brother, Chris Cuomo also reportedly had problems with sexual harassment. At least two women accused him of sexual harassment prior to his firing, including his former boss at CNN. Gov. Cuomo faced accusations of sexual harassment by 11 women prior to his resignation.

Charged
Fifteen-year-old Ethan Crumbley, the Oxford, Mich., school shooter, and his parents, James and Jennifer Crumbley, are all incarcerated in the Oxford County Jail but in separate isolation cells. While the parents were quick to secure nationally known defense attorneys for themselves, they left the court to appoint a little-known, local attorney to defend their son. Four students died and seven others were injured when Ethan opened fire on Nov. 30 at Oxford High School, 40 miles north of Detroit, using a pistol his parents bought him as a Christmas present. He has been charged as an adult with two dozen crimes including murder, attempted murder, and terrorism, while his parents are each charged with four counts of involuntary manslaughter after prosecutors say they didn’t take seriously warnings about their son’s intentions.

Sentenced
A court in Myanmar’s capital city of Naypyitaw found Aung San Suu Kyi guilty of inciting dissent and violating coronavirus restrictions in early December and sentenced her to two years in prison. The 76-year-old Nobel laureate was ousted as the civilian leader of Myanmar in a coup by the military in February. She has remained under house arrest since then, but her supporters have discredited the allegations as the military’s effort to keep her out of office. Authorities have detained nearly 10,800 people and killed at least 1,318 others since February.
“Perhaps—and I’m just throwing this out there—the best way to prove your movement isn’t a threat to women, is to stop stalking, harassing, and threatening us.”

Author J.K. ROWLING on transgender activists posting a now-deleted photo on social media with her home address visible in the background.

“I just held her and gave her a hug. A very big one, very tight.”

U.S. citizen DANIEL HSU after seeing his wife for the first time in a year and a half. The Chinese government had barred him from leaving the country for four years. He was released ahead of a virtual meeting between President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

“We’ll massacre all the scum that you have been financing.”

Belarus dictator ALEXANDER LUKASHENKO when a BBC interviewer asked him why 270 nonprofits had been shut down in the country since July.

“There are two pronouns: he and she. Our language is beautiful. And two pronouns are appropriate.”

French first lady BRIGITTE MACRON after a French dictionary added the gender-neutral pronoun iel to its online edition.

“Senator Dole was many things—a war hero, a father, a husband, a public servant; and to Kansans, a man who embodied everything good and decent about Kansas and about America.”

Gov. LAURA KELLY, D-Kan., commenting after former Sen. Bob Dole died at age 98 on Dec. 5.
In a league of their own
A children’s football team is kicked out of the playoffs for being “too good”

by John Dawson

A youth football team in Texas has been booted from its league for being too good. The Flower Mound Rebels, a team of 7- and 8-year-olds from a Dallas suburb, outscored their opponents 199-6 through the first seven games of the season, putting them in good position for the league’s postseason tournament. That’s when coaches for the other teams in the league in nearby Keller, Texas, decided to act. “They are too good. I fully admit it,” Keller Youth Association Vice President Rhett Taylor told KXAS. “They are a select-level team. They are too good for a rec-level team.” So Taylor, who coaches a team that lost badly to the Rebels, voted along with the league’s board to kick the Rebels out of the playoffs. Rebels coach Ragan Montero dismissed Taylor, telling KXAS, “He’s a sore loser.”

POSTMORTEM VOTE
In 2020, Las Vegas businessman Donald Kirk Hartle gave media interviews questioning the integrity of Nevada’s presidential election after claiming someone submitted a fraudulent mail-in ballot on behalf of his deceased wife. Maybe he shouldn’t have publicized the case. A year later on Nov. 15, Hartle agreed to a plea deal for voter fraud, admitting he had been the one to cast a ballot for his wife. According to the deal, Hartle will accept a $2,000 fine and probation. At the time, Hartle used his experience to cast doubt on Nevada’s election results. “That is pretty sickening to me to be honest with you,” Kirk told KLAS in 2020.

A SWEEPING PURSUIT
Police in Richmond, Ind., got into a low-speed chase after responding to a call about a stolen street sweeper. Police responded in the early morning hours of Nov. 7 and say they discovered Sammy H. Allen behind the wheel of the equipment. According to officers, Allen had been swerving into oncoming traffic and had driven into the yards of residents. Once confronted, Allen led officers on an hour-long chase reaching speeds of 10 to 15 mph. Police say Allen was able to elude spike strips. They apprehended him after he crashed the equipment into a river.
TRASHY SHORES
A Danish beachfront community has come under fire after Denmark’s state radio reported in November how the town deals with its beach trash. According to the report, the city of Slagelse spends $150,000 to clean up seaweed and litter from the town’s public beaches. But rather than dispose of the refuse responsibly, Danmarks Radio reported the town simply dumps all the garbage back into the ocean just a few yards from shore. “This is by no means a helping hand to nature,” an oceanography professor at the University of Copenhagen told Vice. “This is about one thing—convenience for beach goers.” City officials defended the practice, saying their beachgoers want pristine beaches like ones found in Southern Europe.

FREEWAY FREE CASH
Money fluttering out of an armored car on Interstate 5 north of San Diego caused pandemonium on the California freeway Nov. 19. “For whatever reason, money was falling out of an armored car,” California Highway Patrol Officer Jim Bettencourt said. “It was free-floating bills all over the freeway.” According to the CHP, the truck’s back door malfunctioned, and a bag full of mostly $1s and $20s fell out. Social media users uploaded videos of motorists pulling over to scoop up piles of cash. According to Bettencourt, motorists themselves shut down the motorway to clean up the cash. But CHP warned that keeping the money spilled from an armored truck could lead to criminal charges.

OVERLY FRIENDLY NEIGHBOR
A British court has issued a restraining order against a 67-year-old grandmother after complaints that she was harassing a local horse. Prosecutors near York said Margaret Porter had taken to feeding the horse carrots after deciding the chestnut gelding named Nelson looked sad. Nelson’s owner, Suzanne Cooke, asked Porter to stop overfeeding the animal, but the pensioner persisted. After a few calls to police, the dispute came to a head Nov. 18 when Porter was arrested and ordered by the court to leave the animal alone. This is the second time Porter faced the court: In 2005, she was convicted of assaulting her estranged brother with three sticks of rhubarb.

SENIOR SPRINTER
Sporting a red USA Track & Field top and a pink flower in her white hair, Julia “Hurricane” Hawkins set a new record for the 100-meter sprint. And while Hawkins’ time might not be impressive—1:02.95—completing the race at age 105 is. Hawkins set the record in the 105+ age category at the Louisiana Senior Games Nov. 6, claiming she had wanted to complete the 100 meters in less than a minute. Hawkins began competing at the senior games in her 80s as a cyclist but eventually retired from that when she could no longer find competitors her age. Having turned her attention to sprinting, Hawkins set the 100-meter record for women over 100 in 2017, clocking 39.62. “I love to run,” she said, breathing heavily after the race. “I want to keep running as long as I can.”
Eyes to the sky
Truly believing Christ’s Second Coming

I CAN’T SAY “I’LL BE BACK” to my husband without him repeating, in a spectral imitation of Arnold Schwarzenegger, “Ah’ll be bahck.” I hear it even when he’s not around. When, for instance, I think of Jesus promising to return, the pledge of the Terminator often comes to mind, and his promise seems about as real to me as Jesus’.

I’m ashamed to admit it. I know the Bible is true, that all came to pass as it’s recorded, that Jesus Christ walked this earth and changed history forever, and that the Holy Spirit continues to act in my life and others’. Prayers of gratitude come easily when times are good, and prayers of petition when they aren’t. But “Come, Lord Jesus” feels as remote a possibility as mountains melting and stars falling from the sky—because those events are on the schedule too.

He’s wrapped up the past, but does He really hold the future? Of course, and yet. It’s been so long, and so much has happened. With multiplying crises and confusion, the fall of hopes and the rise of chaos, it seems that now would be a good time to return.

The earth seems as restless as its inhabitants. Here’s a headline from early in November: “Unnerving Study Reveals There May Be No Warning for the Next Supervolcano Eruption.” Toba Peak in Indonesia is one of the dozen or so volcanoes capable of an eruption that could shroud the earth in 10 years of winter. Research into its prehistoric activity indicates that magma buildup can occur slowly beneath the surface and break out with no warning. Not that it will happen anytime soon, but researchers are keeping an eye on the steady growth of an island in Toba’s caldera.

And what about the asteroids continually bombarding us from space? In 1910, some scientists popularized the notion that the return of Halley’s Comet that year would fry us all. Apophis, nicknamed the Doomsday Asteroid, bypassed Earth with room to spare last March, but close enough for amateur astronomers to track. Scary predictions of the rock’s return (I’ll be back) have gone the rounds, but by the best estimates it won’t hit us. Not this century, anyway.

Still, blazing headlines about Yellowstone blowing up or the New Madrid Fault Line buckling the Mississippi cause a momentary twinge. And how’s a layman to know whether the climate-change alarmists are entirely wrong? “Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice,” mused Robert Frost, but almost everyone says it will end. While we don’t know how or when, the Word of God is clear about whether. Fervent heat will consume this planet, wrote Peter. “God has appointed a day,” preached Paul. It’s all pointing to one event: He’s coming back, and this time no one will miss it, or escape it.

Just as there was a precise moment in time when a human/divine zygote attached itself to the womb of a virgin, there will be a precise moment when the divine/human Lord declares history over and rolls up the universe. The first event is easier to imagine—if not explain—than the second, but if there was a beginning, there must be an end. Thousands of years into the future or day after tomorrow?

The earliest followers of Jesus favored the day-after-tomorrow scenario, for scoffers were already saying, “Where is the promise of his coming?” (2 Peter 3:4). Jesus himself claimed ignorance while He was on earth, so of course Peter couldn’t say. Nor could he have imagined us, 2000 years into the future. But God could.

That’s the only satisfactory answer. We’re impatient and fearful and doubtful that it will ever happen. It’s been so long, and times are so frightening—what is He waiting for?

He’s waiting for you. He’s waiting for me. Perhaps He’s cast His favorable eye on great-grandchildren yet unborn to complete His kingdom. If He’s willing to wait, so can we. But with hope and expectation.
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In January 1969, the Beatles were in the doldrums. They’d stopped playing live shows two years before, and advancements in mixing technology had allowed them to create their latest album without even being in the same room with one another.

In hopes of reviving their interest in making music together, they came up with an audacious plan: Write an entire album together, rehearse those new songs together, and play a live show for an audience. And accomplish all that in less than a month. Oh, and film a television special and a documentary while sorting everything out.

Of course, the plan doesn’t renew their dedication to each other, and they don’t...
manage to sort everything out. Less than a year later, the Fab Four stopped playing together.

*The Beatles: Get Back,* a three-part documentary streaming on Disney+, chronicles that manic month of January and gives viewers a glimpse of the band’s vain attempts to keep themselves from unraveling. Peter Jackson, who gave us the Lord of the Rings films, directed this mammoth trilogy that clocks in at almost eight hours. To create the documentary, Jackson combed through more than 60 hours of film and 150 hours of audio recordings captured by Michael Lindsay-Hogg who made the 1970 documentary *Let It Be,* released shortly after the band announced its dissolution.

Filming begins Jan. 2 on a Twickenham Film Studios soundstage. John, Paul, George, and Ringo need new material, and they need to plan their televised concert. The songs come in fits and starts, but agreeing on a concert venue proves impossible. Various location ideas around London get shot down. John gets hung up on the idea of a see-through plastic stage. There’s even talk of taking a cruise ship full of fans to Libya for a concert in a Roman amphitheater. In the end they give up on the television special. The documentary culminates with their famous unannounced rooftop concert, which the police break up for disturbing the peace. It was the last time they performed together in public.

Several times, we hear Lindsay-Hogg complain he doesn’t know what his documentary is about. But Jackson, with 50 years’ hindsight, knows what the story is. This is a documentary about both creation and destruction.

Beatles fans and people interested in the creative process will find *Get Back* fascinating. Over the course of days, we see Paul take a song from nonexistence to completion. He begins with rhythm, finds a chord progression, and works out a melody. Then he and John try out nonsense words until some sounds stick and become real words. There’s a magic in watching the birth of some of the world’s most iconic songs, like “Get Back,” “Let It Be,” and “The Long and Winding Road.”

When they’re actually playing together, the Beatles exhibit bursts of joy, but *Get Back* also reveals the band’s dysfunction. And it isn’t for kids. The four drink and smoke incessantly as they work, using adult language and making crude jokes.

A world-weary melancholy hangs over the group, even though they’re all still in their 20s. They long for the good old days—just 18 months earlier—before their manager Brian Epstein died, and Paul reminisces about how great it was when he and John lived and wrote together. Throughout the rehearsals, Paul acts as the professional, getting to work on time and trying to keep the others on task.

George finds Paul too demanding, quitting the band for a few days before returning. John swings between detachment and silliness, with Yoko Ono never more than a few inches from his side. And Ringo, perhaps more aware of the camera than the others, remains watchful and quiet.

*Get Back* shows us four young men who’ve reached the top of their industry, yet they find no satisfaction in it or each other. They don’t know who they are or where they’re going. We don’t see the Beatles break up in this documentary, but after eight hours we feel as if we’ve seen the beginning of the end.
SONG FOR A DAY

New musical *tick, tick ... BOOM!* remembers a groundbreaking Broadway composer

by Bob Brown

JONATHAN LARSON DIED IN 1996 at age 35 on the eve of the first public performance of his Broadway smash *Rent*. Before *Rent*, Larson won modest acclaim for *tick, tick ... BOOM!*, a genre-busting “rock monologue.” Lin-Manuel Miranda has adapted that musical into a new Netflix film by the same name, dramatizing a key week in Larson’s life. The film (rated PG-13 for language and a sex scene) is a smartly crafted story about an artist’s struggle to find meaning and acceptance. Miranda and Andrew Garfield, who plays Larson, seem destined for Oscar nods.

Larson is frustrated that at age twenty-nine, Broadway producers haven’t shown interest in his songwriting. Still, he persists. When he’s not waiting tables at a Manhattan diner, he’s revising *Superbia*, a musical he began composing years earlier. An imminent deadline looms: He must complete the musical within a week, when some producers will join a *Superbia* workshop. Larson’s obsession with success hurts his relationships with his girlfriend (Alexandra Shipp) and gay best friend.

The film alternates between a real-time narrative of that hectic week and a staged performance of *tick, tick ... BOOM!*, which itself chronicles that week’s events. It’s an ingenious musical-within-a-musical, elevated by Garfield’s moving performance. But the celebration is bittersweet. Larson seems not to have realized that his life, like each of ours, is a song in a divine musical. We won’t find fulfillment until we get in tune with its Composer.

NEW CHARM

by Collin Garbarino

*Encanto*, the latest animated musical from Walt Disney, features original songs by the ubiquitous Lin-Manuel Miranda. In theaters now, the film tells the story of a special family in Colombia with one member who struggles to find her place.

Each member of the Madrigal family has a supernatural gift given by the family’s magical home, Casita, which is alive with its own personality. They all use their gifts for the benefit of the neighboring village—everyone except Mirabel, who has no gift. But when something threatens Casita, Mirabel is the only one who can save the family.

Disney deserves some credit for abandoning its typical formula with *Encanto*. You won’t see a princess sing songs about personal actualization. The film celebrates community and doesn’t even have a villain. Instead, *Encanto* acknowledges the difficulties of family life when close relatives unintentionally hurt and disappoint us. The film also has much more singing than usual, and while this may not be Miranda’s best work, a couple of the songs are quite catchy.

*Encanto* draws a surprising amount of inspiration from Latin American Christianity. Themes of self-sacrifice and forgiveness undergird the narrative, and the characters never refer to “magic,” but instead always call their gift a “miracle.”

OTHER LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA MOVIES


ENCANTO: DISNEY VIA AP; TICK, TICK ... BOOM!: NETFLIX; VIVO: NETFLIX
“PEOPLE MUST KNOW”

Christmas With The Chosen: The Messengers
departs from the show’s usual recipe
but does it well

by Sharon Dierberger

CHRISTMAS WITH THE CHOSEN: THE MESSENGERS isn’t what I was expecting—not a bad thing—but don’t walk into the theater primed to see two hours of Biblical storytelling.

The episode itself is only about 35 minutes long, showing Jesus’ mother, Mary, as an old woman, with flashbacks to the first Christmas.

Most of the first 75 minutes and the last 10 showcase Christian artists singing powerful, modern arrangements of Christmas and worship songs. Between songs, performers make observations about Christmas. Others give monologues explaining the names of God, like Jehovah Shalom.

The singing and commentary initially surprised me, as I was eager to see the Biblical characters and reenactments. Authentic-feeling recreations are what have made The Chosen a smash hit, engaging audiences worldwide.

But as musicians like Phil Wickham, For King and Country, and Maverick City Music sang—and as other performers explained why God sent Jesus—I found my Christmas spirit rising. The Bonner Family’s powerful rendition of “How Great Thou Art” nails the film’s sentiments.

For several songs, enthusiastic children sing alongside artists, standing on stone steps and strolling cobbled streets. Most scenes—including these musical performances—were filmed on a football-field-sized set of Jerusalem located in Goshen, Utah.

The authentic landscape includes a stand of cedar trees designated the Garden of Gethsemane set where both cast and crew can get away for “prayer and alone time with God.” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints owns the set (The Chosen’s distributor, Angel Studios, was founded by Mormons).

When the account of Jesus’ birth begins, we hear realistic conversations between a calm, grateful Mary and a responsible, protective Joseph as they are about to enter Bethlehem. As Mary’s birth pangs increase, Joseph reassures Mary and reminds her of what the angel told each of them including, “Don’t be afraid.”

If possible, watch The Chosen’s pilot episode, “The Shepherd,” prior to this special. Both depict the first Christmas from different viewpoints and blend well together, heightening our wonder of those miraculous moments. But the new episode stands just fine on its own and is good for inviting someone who’s curious to learn what Christmas is really about.

The short dramatization begins by introducing a plausible storyline and adding a bit of tension.

We see a man guiding a horse-drawn wagon full of goods, as he smuggles someone into an undisclosed city protected by Roman guards. He’s brought a special, secret visitor to see Jesus’ aging mother, Mary. Before she dies, she wants a message carried to Luke, who’s in Rome recording Jesus’ story through eyewitness accounts.

As scenes flash between Mary as an old woman, then back to her giving birth, she recites the Magnificat, including: “My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.” She shares these treasures because “people must know.”

And that’s also the motivation behind Christmas With The Chosen.
TORTURED COWBOY

Despite a stellar cast and beautiful setting, The Power of the Dog is full of obscurities

by Juliana Chan Erikson

WITH A 96 PERCENT Rotten Tomatoes ranking, there’s no end of praise for this slow-burning Netflix Western starring Benedict Cumberbatch. The Chicago Sun-Times calls it “beautiful, brooding, dark and unforgiving,” and Polygon describes it as “an immense portrait of psychological torture and toxic masculinity.”

But if you’re like me—the one who struggles to understand modern art unless there are detailed captions—you’ll need Google to get you through The Power of the Dog, rated R for brief male nudity and implied sexual content. Everything from the film’s title to its bitter ending needed some internet research to understand, and by that point, it’s like a joke that needs an explanation. Once you get one, it won’t be funny anymore.

What the two-hour-plus movie does have is a good ensemble, haunting music, and spellbinding scenes of wide expanses that make everyone want to book a flight to New Zealand, where The Power of the Dog was filmed.

Brothers Phil (Cumberbatch) and George Burbank (Jesse Plemons) are wealthy ranchers in 1920s Montana when their crew stops for lunch at an inn run by widow Rose Gordon (Kirsten Dunst) and her teenage son Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee). Phil is a hardened man’s man who isn’t afraid to torment those he dislikes.

Peter is Phil’s first target, and he’s mocked mercilessly in front of everyone, which sets in motion a chain of neurotypical human events. Peter flees the room, Rose weeps after seeing her son bullied, and George consoles Rose. In the film’s only fast-moving event, George marries Rose, which hardens Phil even more.

He terrorizes fragile Rose next, calling her a cheap schemer. Both emotionally destroyed by Phil, Rose turns to the bottle and Peter flees to school.

He terrorizes fragile Rose next, calling her a cheap schemer. Both emotionally destroyed by Phil, Rose turns to the bottle and Peter flees to school.

What makes Phil so prickly is never clear. Critics blame everything from toxic masculinity to homophobia, and we eventually find out Phil’s a repressed homosexual pining after a dead mentor. But all these sound like modern-day cop-outs.

Also confusing is the movie’s title (inspired by the Thomas Savage book of the same name), which comes from Psalm 22:20, “Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog.” Phil is assumed to be the dog. But read carefully, and you’ll notice God is the implied deliverer. Sadly, He is not present in this film. Without spoiling the ending, it’s disappointing that such tormented characters (and director Jane Campion) misinterpret this verse and find solace in its twisted interpretation.

For everything else in the film—including how cowhides play a crucial role in the ending—there’s Google.
Jesus, the true Jewish martyr
Building bridges between Jews and Christians
by Marvin Olasky

Jennifer Rosner’s *Healing the Schism* (Lexham, 2021) is insightful concerning relations between Christians and Jews. She quotes Jacob Neusner’s observation that Nazism, Communism, and secularism attacked both Christian and Jewish ideals, so “we cannot find it surprising...that the first ‘post-Christian’ century also marked the last century of Judaism in most of Europe.” Those ideologies harmed both the physical and the spiritual descendants of Abraham. The wonderful Jewish painter Marc Chagall recognized this when he created dozens of crucifixion scenes, saying, “For me, Christ has always symbolized the true type of Jewish martyr.” As Rosner notes, “Through Christ, the door is opened for gentiles to enter into covenant relationship with Israel’s God—without becoming Jewish.”

It’s a tragedy that many Jews believe faithfulness to the God of Israel requires saying no to the most famous Jew ever, Jesus. Rosner writes, “To the extent that Jews seek to follow and honor God while remaining indifferent or hostile to their Messiah and his mission, their understanding of and ability to fulfill their own redemptive vocation will always be limited.”

Christians should push back against attempts to minimize the Jewishness of Jesus, and Jews should recognize that “God’s covenant with Israel was always intended to expand outward to include all nations.” Now, in God’s providence, some Jews such as myself profess faith in Christ and can be bridges between the two peoples.

The Holocaust at great cost increased Christian sympathy for Jews, but even before that many supported the concept of a Jewish homeland, as Donald Lewis reports in *A Short History of Christian Zionism* (IVP, 2021). In God’s mercy, the United States became a homeland for millions, as Deborah Tannen (author of *You Just Don’t Understand*) shows well in *Finding My Father* (Bantam, 2020).

Tannen’s memoir throws light on the life of her dad, Eli, a Jewish immigrant with vivid memories of his childhood in Poland. It also shows why some Jews in Poland and the Soviet Union were passive and even optimistic as Germans became their masters in 1939 and 1941. They relied on their memories of the Germans who invaded during World War I: “Unlike the Nazis of the Second World War, they were civilized, well behaved.”

But those Nazis were viciously racist. The title of John Rhodehamel’s *America’s Original Sin* (Johns Hopkins, 2021) is off because Germans, Americans, and people of every nation share the result of the original sin in Eden. The subtitle, though, connects one man with a murderous ideology: *White Supremacy, John Wilkes Booth, and the Lincoln Assassination*.

Ted Widmer’s *Lincoln on the Verge* (Simon & Schuster, 2020) turns the history many of us know into a suspenseful story. Widmer skillfully takes us on the train with Abraham Lincoln as he travels from Springfield, Ill., to Washington, D.C., early in 1861, as angry citizens hatch assassination plots.

When my mother was 90, the only sentence she could remember was a definition of economics she had learned in high school. To forestall that, my wife and I at bedtime take turns telling each other the first answer of the Heidelberg Catechism: “I am not my own, but belong...to my faithful Savior.” Alan Noble skillfully brings out what that means in *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World* (IVP, 2021).

David Bahnsen’s *There’s No Free Lunch* (Post Hill, 2021) serves up 250 economic truths in digestible bites. Robert Case’s *David Hume* (Wipf & Stock, 2021) shows how the power of custom can make better neighbors of those unmoved by the power of Christ.

Carlos Lozada’s *What Were We Thinking* (Simon and Schuster, 2020) is a useful survey of 150 books written about the Trump era.

Jonathan Franzen’s *Crossroads* (FSG, 2021) is true to its setting a half-century ago: It’s long and has some skippable scenes and language, but it takes seriously religious belief and has a moving conclusion. —M.O.
Godly counsel
Walking side by side through life
by Charissa Koh

TABLE FOR TWO: BIBLICAL COUNSEL FOR EATING DISORDERS
David and Krista Dunham
Most people receive counsel more easily when they know the counselor has experienced their pain. That’s what makes David and Krista Dunham’s book so powerful. For many years, Krista struggled with an eating disorder, and the person she turned to for help was her boyfriend (now husband), David. In Table for Two, they share their experience of walking through the trial together: Krista learning to identify and correct the lies behind her unhealthy habits and David learning how to help her. Years of ministry experience and Biblical training shape their perspectives now, as well as their personal story. This short, readable book is aimed at people with eating disorders and friends or family members who want to help but don’t know how.

SAINTS, SUFFERERS, AND SINNERS Michael R. Emlet
Suffering and sin prompt people to ask for help, but friends and counselors commonly fail to appropriately address each one. Emlet explains what the categories of saint, sufferer, and sinner mean for a person’s identity and what dangers come from overemphasizing one over the others when giving help. Emlet lists barriers to loving others as saints, sufferers, and sinners, and he gives examples of what it looks like in counseling and in the church. He is particularly helpful on how to help friends who are suffering—an area where Christians often hear what not to say but often don’t know what to do instead. Similarly, he tackles another difficult subject: how to address sin in a friend’s life.

MAKING SENSE OF FORGIVENESS: MOVING FROM HURT TOWARD HOPE
Brad Hambrick
Is forgiving yourself a Biblical concept? What about “forgive and forget”? Are there any situations when forgiveness is the wrong response? Brad Hambrick tackles these and many other questions in his thorough and well-written book. Though forgiveness is a familiar gospel concept, it is messy and complicated in real-life relationships. Hambrick deals with the many misconceptions and worldly ideas associated with human and divine forgiveness and clarifies them in light of Scripture. Then he offers counsel for how to wisely give forgiveness in relationships. He also addresses a host of related issues like promoting reconciliation, rebuilding trust, understanding boundaries in relationships, and discerning true repentance.

THE HEART OF ANGER: HOW THE BIBLE TRANSFORMS ANGER IN OUR UNDERSTANDING AND EXPERIENCE
Christopher Ash and Steve Midgley
With clear writing and an unflinchingly Biblical tone, this book explains the dynamics and motivations behind anger. The authors provide examples from Scripture that demonstrate common triggers to anger and the different ways anger can appear. At the heart of the issue is humans’ sinful desire to be God. They write, “When our attempt to be God is confronted with the one who really is God, we will either repent and bow down or determine to remove the one standing in our way.” This book steers clear of clichéd ways to manage anger and instead offers the surprising counsel that Christians remember the righteous and powerful anger of God. At the same time, they can rest in His loving care when things don’t go their way.

December 25, 2021
Survival stories
Four middle-grade reads
by Whitney Williams

THE HEDGEHOG OF OZ Cory Leonardo
Marcel, a pet hedgehog, runs away from his new doting owner, Dorothy, when she shows interest in a boy. He soon regrets straying and seeks to return to Dorothy’s loving care, but a series of events cause him to further lose his way. While holding out hope for reunification, Marcel also finds hope risky. New animal friends bolster his strength as he tries to find his way home, and a little faith and his owner’s pursuit light the way. Leonardo drew inspiration for the story from songs by Christian music artist Lauren Daigle. (Ages 8-12)

THE TRAIL Meika Hashimoto
“Screwup,” the voice inside Toby’s head accuses him, and for a long time the 12-year-old boy listens. The solitude of solo hiking the Appalachian Trail gives him a lot of time to think, so he mentally pummels himself for never having it together, for having to rely so much on others, and for playing a part in his best friend’s tragic death. But when a violent storm endangers the lives of two fellow hikers and a violent man threatens a helpless dog, Toby drops the negative self-talk and picks up courage and self-determination. (Ages 8-12)

HATCHET Gary Paulsen
When 13-year-old Brian Robeson finds himself the sole survivor of an airplane crash in the Canadian wilderness, he quickly learns through a failed suicide attempt (briefly mentioned and vague) that despair is not the answer. A rebirth of sorts occurs in Brian. With a revived will to live, the young teen begins to tap into innate survival senses long dulled by the conveniences of modern life. Gradually readers witness his disaster transform into delight. Note: Brian sometimes ponders his mother’s infidelity, which led to his parents’ divorce. (Ages 12-14)

THE POET’S DOG Patricia MacLachlan
Though this story begged for a bit more detail, the author of Sarah, Plain and Tall paints a poetic story of companionship, loss, grief, comfort, and sunshine after the storm. Narrator Teddy, a dog who can understand words and speak (only children and poets have ears to listen), is mourning the recent loss of his owner when he encounters a young boy and girl who are scared and alone in a raging snowstorm. He rescues them but soon finds himself rescued as well thanks to their tenderness and open ears. (Ages 6-10)

Believing that one has the ability to take on the world seems to be a common theme in childhood imaginations. James Ponti’s City Spies series fans that confident flame, showcasing five extremely intelligent and talented orphaned kids who work together as secret agents to unravel devious plots across the globe. The second book in the series, Golden Gate (Aladdin, 2021), opens with spies Brooklyn, 12, and Sydney, 14, derailing a kidnapping attempt and a hijacking at sea despite some bickering, jealousy, and pridefulness that they eventually work through. From there, various twists and rogue missions keep the story moving at a fast pace. Spoiler alert: The end celebrates adoption—a sweet reminder that God sets the lonely in families.

Note to parents: The kids affectionately call their male mentor “Mother,” a character uses God’s name in vain on one occasion, and there’s mention of a common British swear word. —WW.
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TIMOTHY KELLER NEEDS LITTLE INTRODUCTION. The founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, co-founder of The Gospel Coalition, and author of numerous books including New York Times bestseller *The Reason for God*, Keller has been busy—and famously media-shy. When I asked Marvin Olasky if he could connect me with Keller for an interview, he replied, “I can set it up as easily as I can set up one with Vladimir Putin.” I’ve not been able to score an interview with Putin (yet), but in the midst of chemotherapy (Keller has stage 4 pancreatic cancer) and other projects, Keller found the
time to send me a 16-page written response to my interview questions. Here’s the first part of our edited Q&A with additional content available at wng.org. Part 2 will appear in the next issue of WORLD Magazine.

You were raised a nominal Christian. What was your idea of Christianity like as a child? I was baptized and raised in a liberal Lutheran church (at the time, the denomination was the Lutheran Church in America, now part of the very liberal Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). The basic idea I got from this mainline church about being a Christian was: “Be a good person and go to church.”

From the age of 13 to 14, I went through two years of confirmation class before joining the church. One year, the class was taught by a young minister who was a recent graduate of a liberal seminary. He just talked about how great the civil rights movement was. He never spoke about doctrine.

What about the second year? I got a retired minister to teach me. That was the first time I’d ever really heard the idea that salvation was not something we earned, but a free gift of grace received by faith. He was explaining the gospel to me, but it didn’t square with anything else I’d gotten from that Lutheran church growing up, nor did I hear anything like it again there. So I basically forgot about it. I continued to hear and believe that being a Christian meant simply trying hard to be a good and helpful person. It didn’t really matter what you believed or even if you went to church.

Did any of that stick? Neither of these ministers made much of an impression on me at all. No one turned me into either a liberal or a conservative or persuaded me in any political direction. I was neither confused by them nor particularly convinced by them. I wasn’t a social-action kind of kid nor was I particularly religious. My Christianity was very superficial—it was a veneer of “niceness.”

When did you first consider going into ministry? Just a couple of years before I went to college, my parents left our Lutheran church and began going to a conservative evangelical congregation. This church, unlike the Lutheran, was very conservative and spoke about being “born again.” That was the first time I’d heard anything about that. But looking back, I still didn’t understand the gospel. Rather, I thought being a Christian happened when you “surrendered” and “came forward” and “gave your life to Christ.” That meant, to me, trying even harder to live like Jesus than the Lutherans did. So I “gave my life to Christ” (several times in youth meetings).

But this only led me to feel spiritually superior to others in a way I had not felt as a Lutheran. I was both closer to the truth (now understanding that Christians had to live a holy life and surrender completely to Christ) but also farther from the truth of the gospel because I was more self-righteous. Not surprisingly, I started thinking I wanted to go into the ministry. In hindsight, I can see that came from my pride. And I’m grateful that God did not allow me to become one more unconverted ordained minister.

You had a genuine conversion as a college student in Bucknell University. How did you come to faith? During my first year at Bucknell University, away from home and any church, I began to have serious doubts about the faith along with an identity crisis—a perplexity about who I was and whether that fit in with being a Christian. But a Christian student who lived on my dormitory floor gently began nagging me to go to InterVarsity Christian Fellowship with him.

To make a long story very short, reading C.S. Lewis on pride helped me finally understand the depth of my sin as something that was not simply a matter of wrong behavior, but something profoundly wrong with my heart, identity, and outlook—and most of all, it was alienation from God. Underneath all the religiosity, I saw I was actually hostile to God. For the first time, I recognized the need for salvation by sheer grace. Somewhere during my sophomore year I transferred my trust from myself to Christ and found real faith.

Before Redeemer, you pastored a small-town church in Virginia for nine years. What was that like? My first years were challenging, just as ministry always is to any new pastor. I had to learn through making mistakes, same as everyone else. My sermons were too long, my pastoral approaches to some people didn’t work—I was sometimes too direct and sometimes not directive enough. I started new programs no one really wanted. But because the congregation was so supportive →

December 25, 2021  WORLD

33
and loving, I was able to make those mistakes without anyone attacking me for them.

Most importantly, being in a blue-collar church taught me to be both clear and practical in preaching. One of the biggest compliments I ever got was when someone in the congregation thanked me that I “wasn’t intellectual” and therefore could be understood. I also learned not to build a ministry on leadership charisma (which I didn’t have anyway!) or preaching skill (which wasn’t so much there early on) but on loving people pastorally and repenting when I was in the wrong. In a small town, people will follow you if they trust you—your character—personally, and that trust has to be built in personal relationships, not through showing off your credentials and your talents.

How did that experience affect your later years of pastoring an urban church? In Hopewell, people were willing to listen to my sermons because they had experienced my love and concern for them. In Manhattan, people only came to me with their questions and opened up about their lives once they were convinced by the sermons that I was not a snake oil salesman or a crank, and had a few IQ points!

How did you gain the trust of secular Manhattanites? We knew we were never going to win their trust without their peers. Meaning, we didn’t hand out flyers or advertise in any way at all. In the early years (before my books made me more public), the only way you found out about Redeemer was because a friend brought you. The early years were wild; conversions were happening so often we couldn’t keep track of them.

Also Redeemer gets labeled as being a church for young professionals, but that was never my intention. We were trying to reach the most unreached people group in New York, those who had the least access to a Bible-believing church. That meant center-city Manhattan, and the demographics of the church were just the demographics of that area.

Before you and your family moved to Manhattan to plant Redeemer, what was running through your thoughts and emotions? My wife was originally opposed to coming to NYC mainly because of our children. We were not sure how they would fare in new schools, new neighborhoods. As it turned out, this was the very best place we could have raised our sons. (They will tell you so.) They watched their dad do something scary (I didn’t hide that), and they also saw successful young people whom they admired come to faith. We also worried about the expense of living there, and we were right—we did not have a sufficient salary the first year—as well as the difficulty of just adapting to such highly urban life.

It’s interesting that Kathy was not as worried as I was about plain ministry failure. She had more confidence in God (and in me) than I did, and she always thought that we would be able to plant the church. She was more worried about the effects of life in NYC on our family.

What surprised you while pastoring in Manhattan? I found I had a gift for evangelism. I doubt I would have discovered it if I hadn’t come to a place where there were lots of non-Christians present in every church service. My second surprise, and biggest of all, was that people in center-city New York really did respond to the gospel, and many got converted.

What attracted these successful Manhattanites to the gospel? They had lived their whole lives with parents, music teachers, coaches, professors, and bosses telling them to do better, be better, try harder. In their view, God was the ultimate taskmaster, with unfulfillable demands. To hear that He Himself had met those demands for righteousness through the life and death of Jesus, and now there was no condemnation left for anyone who trusted in that righteousness—that was an amazingly freeing message.

I came to see how the theology of grace freed them (and Christians too) from the modern-day idolatries that Manhattanites struggled with.

How does New York City set the culture for the rest of the country and the world?
In the ’90s I heard New Yorkers discussing and expressing their views on gender and sexuality in ways that are now, many years later, mainstream on a national level. The city is a pacesetter for the culture, whether we like it or not. Some might think therefore that Christians should stay away from cities, but when you look at Scripture, you can’t deny that Jesus went from city to city in his ministry, or that Paul was willing to argue with the cultural intelligentsia in city centers such as Athens and Ephesus. In fact, I went back to Acts 17 over and over while I was in NYC to learn how to interact faithfully with center-city people.

How can Christians influence New York City for good? I started wondering, “What if there could be a movement of the gospel in one of the most religiously hostile and influential cities in America?” That was a goal. And it has been partially realized. A great number of people who became Christians here are now serving as salt and light in all sorts of places you’d never expect to find Christians.

At the time were there other contemporary pastors who preached about loving and investing in the city? Well, we have to start by pointing out that this question is something of a white-centric question. Or at least it’s the kind of question an upper-middle-class professional would ask. Because black, brown, and Asian churches never left the city. When white evangelicalism grew so much from 1965-1995, it was shaped by this “white flight” mentality and so had a very anti-urban bias to it.

However, during my five years teaching practical theology at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia alongside Harvie Conn and Manny Ortiz, I was exposed to a host of thoughtful, dynamic, and theologically informed African American, Hispanic, and Asian pastors and their ministries. They had thriving ministries at a time when U.S. inner cities were in terrible shape. But there they were. When Kathy and I announced we were moving to New York City, a number of people told us we were sinning against our children by taking them to the city, that they would lose their faith—and maybe their lives. (The opposite was true.) But the white evangelical view of the big cities as complete “spiritual wastelands” was wrong. So yes, in the 1980s, there were not many white and middle-class pastors talking about loving and investing in the city.

Has anyone else influenced your views and approach to city ministry? The rare mainstream white evangelical voice that was an encouragement to me was James M. Boice, senior pastor at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He was an outspoken advocate of Christians intentionally investing in and living in the city to serve there. Jim argued from the Bible that living in the city was not something that every Christian had to do, but it was something to be encouraged.

I was inspired by this and adopted this reasoning and teaching when I moved to NYC. It’s interesting to note that Jim never took criticism from evangelicals for his stance, but today there’s a good deal of criticism against those of us who encourage living in and investing in the city. Times change!

Redeemer’s stated vision is “To spread the gospel, first through ourselves and then through the city by word, deed, and community. To bring about personal changes, social healing, and cultural renewal through a movement of churches and ministries that change New York City and through it, the world.” In what ways has it fulfilled this vision, and in what ways has it fallen short? I’d say Redeemer has been partially effective in this. First let’s look at the second part of the vision—the movement. In 1989 (the year Redeemer began), less than 1 percent of center-city Manhattan residents attended an evangelical church. In 2019, it was 8 percent. In 1989, there were about 100 evangelical churches in center-city Manhattan. In 2019 there were 308. Neither Redeemer nor Redeemer City to City (which works specifically with church planters) directly planted all those churches, but it was the largest contributor to the movement in Manhattan.

It is harder to measure the first part of the vision. How much has the gospel “spread through ourselves,” that is, made us Christians into Christ-like persons? How much social and cultural renewal has the city seen because of us? I could give you pages and pages of good examples of both that have flowed out of Redeemer. But has Redeemer fallen short of this vision as it is stated? Of course—how could it not?

Looking back, is there anything you wish you had done differently in ministry? Absolutely. I should have prayed more. No question.
Celebrating the Yuletide anew

New Christmas albums beat the odds to find new ways to honor the season

by Arsenio Orteza

ACH YEAR, IT SEEMS LESS AND LESS likely that new Christmas recordings could be anything other than redundant. Yet somehow—either by excavating unjustly neglected works or by making it possible to hear the overfamiliar as if for the first time—ensembles and solo performers alike manage to defy the odds.

On Ralph Vaughan Williams: An Oxford Christmas (Albion), the Chapel Choir of the Royal Hospital Chelsea presents Vaughan Williams’ arrangements of 20 selections from the 93-year-old Oxford Book of Carols and two from other sources. Seldom if ever heard nowadays outside the United Kingdom, the carols come to vivid life on the strength of expressively supple singing and Joshua Ryan’s accompanying organ.

Austerer yet in some ways richer is Signum Classics’ An Elizabethan Christmas by the viol quintet Fretwork and the mezzo soprano Helen Charlston. Featuring the compositions of William Byrd, Orlando Gibbons, Antony Holborne, Martin Peerson, Thomas Weelkes, and “Anonymous,” it re-creates the kind of Christmas music that the initial audiences of Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night would’ve known. (Not for nothing is that comedy’s main character named Viola.)

Singing plays no role in Xavier de Maistre’s Christmas Harp (Sony). And, with the exception of Carlos Salzedas’s four “short fantasies,” neither does the unfamiliar. “Carol of the Bells,” Schubert’s “Ave Maria,” and “Jingle Bells” to “Waltz of the Flowers” and “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy” from Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker—the strains could hardly be user-friendlier.

Yet, as performed by a talented, unaccompanied harpist, the music takes on crystalline qualities that, if not always new (John Thomas’ Schubert arrangement goes back over a hundred years), at least make it glint like the moon on the breast of new-fallen snow.

But if you’re buying only one new holiday disc this year, the one to get is Atma Classique’s The Road to Christmas by Bernard Labadie’s La Chapelle de Québec. Based on the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, the album begins with an organ prelude (Pachelbel’s Vom Himmel hoch) then proceeds to blend well-known and lesser-known choral numbers (sung in French) with narrations by the Canadian actor Colin Fox (in English). Together, the texts—sacred and secular, fanciful and divine—and the music create a multifaceted, emotionally rich aural tableau.

CHRISTMAS TRADITION Every Christmas Eve since 1918, Cambridge has held the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols.
Bringing Christmas cheer

Noteworthy new or recent releases
by Arsenio Orteza

A BELFAST CHRISTMAS
Belfast Cathedral Choir, Matthew Owens
“Still, Still, Still,” “In the Bleak Midwinter,” and “Good King Wenceslas” are the only instantly recognizable “seasonal favorites” on this lustrous recording, leaving 16 relatively unfamiliar pieces of old (and sometimes ancient) provenance for listeners seeking a fresh and reverent Advent soundtrack. How fresh? Seven selections appear in world-premiere settings by still-living composers. How reverent? Nothing deviates from the Christocentric course charted by the a cappella “Jesus Christ the Apple Tree” that opens the proceedings. Freshest of all: the choir’s articulation, which makes recourse to the printed lyrics in the accompanying booklet all but unnecessary.

CHARLIE BROWN LIVE
Eric Byrd Trio
The studio recording of Vince Guaraldi’s A Charlie Brown Christmas that this threesome made 12 years ago is still available (at least digitally), but then so is Guaraldi’s. So why not seek out this new live version instead, especially since by now Byrd (piano), Bhagwan Khalsa (bass), and Alphonso Young Jr. (drums) inhabit this music like a favorite Christmas pullover and the appreciative responses of the audience enhance the immediacy of their playing? The improvisations stay within Guaraldi’s melodic and rhythmic parameters, but they also open Advent-calendar-sized doors through which one can glimpse a future in which this music will continue to warm hearts and stimulate minds.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS Billy Idol
If music fans in the 1980s had been asked to name the contemporary hitmaker least likely to throw his hat into the Christmas-music ring, they almost certainly would’ve said, “Billy Idol.” And they would’ve been justified—until 2006, that is, when Idol released the first version of this album. This newly remixed edition tacks a new original rocker (“On Christmas Day”) onto the end and deletes “Blue Christmas,” “Merry Christmas Baby,” and “Christmas Love,” presumably to help the program fit onto 12 inches of vinyl. Whatever the reason, less has always been more where Idol is concerned. And his “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen” and “Silent Night” retain their blokey, Dickensian charm.

THE KNIGHTS BEFORE CHRISTMAS
The Knights
“We seek to engage with contemporary culture through vibrant performances that honor the classical tradition and our passion for musical discovery,” says this ensemble on its homepage. And, as jargony as that statement sounds, it’s actually pretty accurate. The orchestral treatment given Bartók’s “Romanian Christmas Carols” brings out a festivity merely latent in solo-piano versions. And to hear the melody of “Do You Hear What I Hear?” played on the pipa by the Chinese musician Wu Man while the Knights explore new rhythmic and harmonic possibilities is to encounter an East-meets-West excursion into dissolving boundaries.

Ensemble in the Christmas cheer

Jasmine Records’ new White Christmas: 28 Wildly Eclectic Versions of the Most Famous Christmas Song of All lives up to its subtitle, with gimmicky renditions such as those by the Waikikis, Bill Robbins & the Blue Jays, Simms and Robinson, and Elvis Presley serving as semi-comic relief for sensitive renditions that serve as reminders of how heartbreaking the song can be: The song’s heartwarming melody notwithstanding, its lyrics are haunted by ghosts of happier Christmases past. So imbedded in the memory is the bittersweet tenor of the words that even Kenneth Spencer’s German-language version and the versions in which no one sings at all (Mantovani, Billy Vaughan) push melancholy buttons. Still, it’s solo vocalists that really have the power to move. Bing Crosby’s, Frank Sinatra’s, Johnny Mathis’, and Rosemary Clooney’s are probably staples of your playlist already. Prepare to add Bobby Vee’s, Ella Fitzgerald’s, and Walter Brennan’s to your mix.—A.O.
Lessons learned abroad

Leaving WORLD more convinced of God’s goodness

WELVE YEARS AGO as a college senior, I nervously interviewed for a WORLD Magazine reporter job. Nick Eicher asked me where I saw myself in five years. “I want to be a foreign correspondent,” I said, aware of publications downsizing and bureaus closing. I’ll never forget Nick’s answer: “There’s an opportunity for that here at WORLD.”

Almost exactly five years later, I found myself on a plane headed to Taiwan as WORLD’s first foreign correspondent, marveling at God’s faithfulness. Yet I also feared failure and felt overwhelmed by the task ahead.

This month marks my seventh anniversary living in Taipei, Taiwan. I now see God’s faithfulness in every step: I met trusted sources who became friends. I studied Chinese. On reporting trips across Asia, I witnessed God’s work firsthand. My faith grew as God answered desperate pleas in dangerous situations, led me to the people He wanted me to meet, and revealed that true hope in this weary world can only be found in Him.

Most unexpectedly at my Taipei church, I met a cute, God-loving man from central Illinois who would become my husband, then the father to our rambunctious 1-year-old son, Miles. I knew I loved my then-boyfriend Kevin when I left for a reporting trip and found in my suitcase notes he had written for each day I’d be gone and how he was praying for me. I owe all these blessings to God, of course, but in part I also owe them to WORLD.

That’s also why it’s so difficult and sad to note that the past seven years have taught me anything, it’s that God will be faithful even when I am fearful.

Readers can discern my reasons for leaving from columns published in previous issues by Sophia Lee, Mindy Belz, and Marvin Olasky. But I want to leave you with three lessons I’ve learned reporting abroad.

1. We know so little.

When I first moved to Taiwan, a relative asked me how I, a foreigner, could expect to understand the local context well enough to report on it. His comment pricked my pride and made me defensive. But today I see wisdom in his words. My early articles could only scrape the surface of any given topic. Seven years of reporting later, I can better discern what’s newsworthy and provide deeper analysis. But even more, I see how little I know.

At a time when everyone claims expertise in a myriad of topics, it’s important—and freeing—to remember that we don’t know much, we usually can’t see the full picture, and we’re more limited than we want to admit. So let’s stop, listen, and learn.

2. Let go of control.

When planning reporting trips, I feel the most secure when my schedule is filled with interviews and events. I like to know who I’ll meet with and where I need to go. Yet some of my best material has come from spontaneous, unguarded moments: conversations with a source’s family over a home-cooked meal, last-minute invites to a prayer meeting, ambling interviews that run over time.

Making space for this in my reporting—and my life—means loosening my grip. Yet it allows me to trust God and give Him glory for how it comes together.

3. The Church is global.

Reporting in Asia always brings a transcendent moment when I sit in a worship service—sometimes in a hallowed historic church or a crowded apartment living room. I look around and see brothers and sisters filled with the Spirit worshipping the same God and reading the same Word. I imagine how as the globe spins, Christians around the world wake up for their turn to worship.

It’s an image of the great multitude we will worship with one day as we stand before the King of kings. When tempted to get caught up in divisions of American evangelicalism, remember to zoom out and see how God continues to call people from every tongue and tribe to Him. One day we will cry together, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” Amen.
Merry Christmas from THE MASTER'S UNIVERSITY

Thank you to World Magazine and all your readers.
AS HAITIANS FACE BRAZEN KIDNAPPINGS AND DAILY THREATS FROM GANGS’ WIDESPREAD CONTROL, CHURCHES CLING TO ADVENT HOPE

by Jamie Dean

On Christmas Eves Past, David Vanderpool and his wife often sat on the roof of their home in rural Haiti, listening to the sounds of Haitians singing Christmas songs in nearby churches late into the night.

The medical missionary from Texas established a surgical hospital north of Port-au-Prince and has spent 11 years performing surgeries, delivering babies, and training Haitian doctors and nurses to take over the work one day.

That day arrived a few weeks before Christmas when Vanderpool left Haiti for the foreseeable future, not long after the U.S. State Department urged Americans living or working in the country to “depart Haiti now.”

The November alert cited deteriorating security and infrastructure conditions in the Caribbean nation and warned “the U.S. Embassy is unlikely to be able to assist U.S. citizens with departure if commercial flights become unavailable.”

The security warning followed a presidential assassination in July, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake in August, and the kidnapping of 17 missionaries near Port-au-Prince in October. Leaders of the 400 Mawozo gang demanded $1 million for each of the 16 Americans and one Canadian affiliated with Ohio-based Christian Aid Ministries.

In November, gang members released two missionary hostages. On Dec. 5, they released three more captives, raising hopes more releases would follow. But kidnappings remain a part of daily life for many Haitians: From the powerful to the poor,
A girl waits with other earthquake victims for the start of a food distribution in Les Cayes, Haiti.
few are off-limits to gangs willing to extort big bucks or a few dollars from families desperate to ransom loved ones.

Even in a nation accustomed to criminality, the last two years have been particularly difficult. With powerful gangs filling a vacuum created by a nearly non-functioning government, Vanderpool calls the security situation in Haiti “beyond the tipping point.” Meanwhile, kidnappings have tipped over into a handful of attacks on churches, making historically safe spots suddenly fair game even as Christians continue to gather.

This Christmas, Vanderpool will celebrate in the United States instead of on a rooftop, like many other missionaries who have trickled out of Haiti over the last 18 months. But he’s thankful for the well-trained Haitians who remain to operate the hospital and ministry, and for Haitian Christians persevering in other parts of the country.

Octavius Delfils, a Presbyterian pastor in Port-au-Prince, says Christmas will also look different for Haitians this year since fuel shortages and fears keep many people close to home. “Some people in Haiti will say there is no Christmas,” Delfils says. “But that’s why we preach the gospel. Because we have hope. We know Christ has come.”

FOR VANDERPOOL, hopes for a mission hospital in Haiti were always intertwined with concerns about security.

When the surgeon established a hospital in Haiti through the Christian ministry LiveBeyond, builders surrounded the 63-acre compound with 12-foot walls topped by razor wire and manned by security guards: “We knew early on that security depended on us.”

Still, a breach in security allowed armed men to enter the compound in 2015 and nearly kidnap Vanderpool’s wife. Vanderpool says he grabbed the wrench he was using to fix a generator and managed to fend off the attackers. “The Lord saved her,” he says about the close call. Gang members later kidnapped two Haitian staff members, releasing them after a week in captivity.

Abductions aren’t new to Haiti, but they’ve surged in recent months: Criminal gangs kidnapped at least 119 people in the first half of October alone, according to the Center for Analysis and Research in Human Rights, a nongovernmental organization based in Port-au-Prince.

The kidnappings grabbed international attention on Oct. 16, when gang members abducted the 17 missionaries with Christian Aid Ministries, which has operated in the country for more than a decade. The hostages included five children. The youngest was 8 months old.

The brazen abductions underscored the growing lawlessness gripping the nation and brought condemnations from the U.S. government. Members of the FBI and the U.S. State Department began working with Haitian officials to free the hostages, even as gang members continued their daily assaults on Haitian citizens.

Two weeks before the missionary kidnappings, criminals abducted 20 people on a single Saturday in Port-au-Prince. A few weeks later, armed men hijacked a bus with 52 passengers near the capital, killing a police officer and holding some passengers until the next day.

It wasn’t clear whether kidnappers extorted money for hostages, but ransom demands have grown common, even for

“Criminal gangs are using children as bargaining chips and making money off parents’ love.”
smaller amounts from families with few resources. Locals say families sometimes sell possessions and property and enter financial ruin to secure the release of a loved one.

Those loved ones increasingly include children, according to a United Nations report in September: “Criminal gangs are using children as bargaining chips and making money off parents’ love.” The report said the kidnapping of children has become a “lucrative business” in Haiti.

Another unexpected target: churches. While most Haitian congregations have enjoyed a measure of security while meeting for worship and other activities, gangs have begun crossing a line that’s appeared off-limits for years.

In April, members of the 400 Mawozo gang were suspected of abducting five priests and two nuns. They released the hostages after nearly two weeks in captivity. During the same month, a startling livestream of a Seventh-day Adventist worship service showed gunmen kidnap four members as they led worship.

In September, gunmen attacked First Baptist Church in downtown Port-au-Prince on a Sunday morning, kidnapping a deacon’s wife and killing the deacon as he tried to prevent the abduction. Then in October came the abduction of the I7 Christian Aid Ministries missionaries during a visit to an orphanage. The missions group set up a 24-hour prayer vigil and asked Christians to pray for the missionaries and their captors. During the same month, a group of men dressed like police officers reportedly abducted an elderly pastor and later released him.

Gangs held 12 of the missionaries into December. The prolonged captivity underscored the complicated negotiations for high-profile targets: Kidnappers want to extract a high ransom, but U.S. negotiators don’t want to prop up a cottage industry that puts Haitians and others at even greater risk of more kidnappings.

And though religious abductions are probably less about opposition to the gospel than opportunism, the crimes send a message to ministries in Haiti: No one is off-limits.

HOW DID THINGS GET SO BAD? It’s a simple question without an easy answer. Haiti has known cycles of tumult and disaster since its people mounted the first successful slave revolt in modern history and declared independence from France in 1804.

The years ahead were difficult, as Haiti endured a series of political oppressions, dictatorships, corruption, and natural disasters. A 7.0 magnitude earthquake in 2010 destroyed large parts of Port-au-Prince and killed as many as 200,000 people.

Some Haitians point to a recent development as a turning point in the current instability: The departure of UN peacekeeping forces in 2017. While the United Nations introduced its own series of problems to Haiti, including sex abuse scandals and links to a cholera outbreak, it also provided at least some backstop to local police combating widespread criminality.

In 2017, the UN Security Council voted unanimously to begin drawing down its peacekeeping mission in Haiti, saying the nation had begun stabilizing. But any stability was short-lived, as security conditions began deteriorating again in 2018. In November of that year, gang members unleashed a gruesome attack on a Port-au-Prince slum, burning hundreds of homes and killing dozens of people.

Late last year, the U.S. Treasury Department released a report on the 2018 attack: “Gangs removed victims, including children, from their homes to be executed and then dragged them into the streets where their bodies were burned, dismembered, and fed to animals.”

The U.S. agency announced sanctions, citing Jimmy “Barbecue” Chérizier for helping to plan and execute the attack on the La Saline community. Chérizier was a member of the Haitian police at the time of the attack. He’s now the head of a powerful alliance of nine Haitian gangs known as the G9 Family and Allies. The report also cited two Haitian government officials for planning and financing the massacre, including supplying weapons and state vehicles to gang members.

The attacks came as punishment against Haitians protesting government officials.
When the prime minister tried to lead an annual ceremony honoring the anniversary of the death of a Haitian revolutionary in November, gunfire erupted and chased him from the scene. Soon after, Chérizier arrived in a white suit and black tie and calmly laid a wreath of flowers at the site.

THESE DAYS, MANY HAITIANS focus less on raw displays of political intrigue than on the real effects on daily life.

Boby Sander, national director for the Christian aid group Food for the Hungry, says security conditions often dictate the ministry’s daily movements. The day usually begins with a security assessment, sketching out which parts of town are “red zones”—areas the group shouldn’t enter.

In October, Daniel Foote, the former U.S. special envoy to Haiti, testified bluntly before a U.S. House committee: “The gangs run Port-au-Prince. It is in their control. It is in their hands. They are better equipped and better armed than the police.”

A few weeks later, the G9 coalition’s control of Port-au-Prince became even more obvious. Gang members took control of the country’s largest fuel terminal, sparking a severe fuel shortage across the capital city and surrounding areas.

The lack of available fuel left millions of Haitians without transportation, electricity, and other basic services dependent on fuel for generators. A main hospital in the capital announced it would close until it could regain reliable power and water service.

Holding the fuel hostage: Chérizier. He announced the gangs would release the fuel when the government handed over $50 million and Prime Minister Ariel Henry resigned.

The prime minister didn’t resign, but his office is controversial: Henry rose to power in the wake of the assassination of Haitian president Jovenel Moïse on July 7. Moïse tapped Henry for the post two days before armed men stormed the president’s home in the middle of the night and killed him.

The still-unsolved assassination allegedly involving a web of Haitians, Colombians, and Haitian Americans has thrown the country into an even bigger power vacuum that gangs have been quick to fill.

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and black tie and calmly laid a wreath of
visit that day because of potentially dan-
gerous activity.
A network of local contacts helps
Sander, other missionaries, and aid
groups assess what parts of town to avoid
on any given day. Other parts of town are
perpetual “no-go zones,” says Sander,
where gang control is so tight it’s too
dangerous to visit at all.
In some cases of urgent need, Sander
says, the group might travel in an aid
convoy or helicopter. For example, after
a 7.2 magnitude earthquake hit southwest
of Port-au-Prince in August, killing more
than 2,000 people, gang control of sur-
rounding routes made transporting aid
into the area particularly dangerous.
Sander describes other spots as “dead
zones”—places dangerous enough for
residents to flee for their safety. (Some
20,000 people have fled their homes in
Port-au-Prince since June, according to
UN figures.)
Many of the ministry’s staffers live in
the communities they serve, says Sander,
and they’re able to continue teacher train-
ings and church development without
traveling far from home. It’s an intentional
design aimed at serving communities with
local leadership. (Other programs like
seed and tool distribution require more
travel to reach communities in need.)
Sander says the organization has had
to relocate some staffers to safer spots
and that a small number of workers have
left the country. But he’s encouraged by
the determination of the populations the
ministry still serves. “These guys are resil-
ient,” he says. “They want to live.”
In more rural areas, the biggest chal-
genies are often shortages of fuel or sup-
plies. Vanderpool, the missionary surgeon,
says the region his ministry serves has
remained largely unscathed by the worst
of the recent violence. But he worries about
the group running out of food and hospi-
tal supplies if fuel shortages continue.
What he is confident about: the Hai-
tian staffers, doctors, and nurses trained
to run the hospital on their own. “You
always have to be prepared for this day,”
he says. “Because it always comes.”
For Haitians staying in their homeland,
life and ministry mean patiently living
each day and each week. Octavius Delfils,
the Presbyterian pastor in Port-au-Prince,
says he’s thankful his congregation has
mostly escaped violence, particularly
while walking or driving to church.
The recent fuel shortage has left Delfils
focused on keeping enough gas on hand
to drive to church on Sundays. Friends
sometimes bring a few gallons they’ve
managed to find for the pastor to use.
Delfils says some friends have won-
dered if it would be safer to close the
church during dangerous seasons. The
pastor acknowledges he and many other
people go out only for what they need. But
when it comes to Sundays, Delfils is firm.
“We will continue to go to church,” he says.
“We will continue to worship because we
know that the Lord is in control.”
He says he’s thankful for the maturity
he’s seen in his congregation: “I can see
people growing—more growth than I’ve
seen before.” It’s a simple but notable
dynamic in a country often associated
with spiritual darkness and deep need.
Delfils says Haitians are tired, and many
have little hope left. He’s noticed that
even local radio stations aren’t playing
Christmas music anymore.
“But that’s why we preach the gospel,”
he says. “Because we do have hope.” It’s
a hope he sees in his own small congre-
gation’s simple determination to continue
coming to worship each week. “We can
see joy in their hearts. We can see hope
in their eyes,” he says. “We believe the
Lord will do something for Haiti.”
WELCOMING THE STRANGER

With an influx of Afghan refugees, one group models how to build friendships with newcomers

BY SOPHIA LEE
in Fredericksburg, Va.
T'S SUNDAY AFTERNOON, and two families gathered at a hotel parking lot in Fredericksburg, Va., for a special visitation. Zion Twum, a tall 17-year-old, prayed: “Lord, please help us share the love of Christ and make them feel welcome here.”

The large group—the Twums, with five boys ages 6 to 17, and the Joneses, with two teenage boys and two teenage girls—were part of Welcome Families, a new interchurch effort in which local Christian families or individuals commit to one year of friendship with an Afghan family resettling in the area. Welcome Families visits an “adopted” Afghan family once a week for six months, and at least once a month for the next six months.

With welcome gifts in hand—the Twums baked loaves of apple-and-spice bread, and the Joneses bought nuts, dates, and loose tea leaves—the two families ambled into the narrow hotel hallway.

The Afghan woman who answered her door didn’t seem fazed by the large group. She insisted they all sit for chaî or tea. The American families filed into the tiny hotel room, looming over the Afghan family in height and numbers, while the Afghan woman, Mary, repeated in Dari, “You’re still standing! Please, please sit!”

The American families squeezed onto the floor cross-legged while Mary apologized for not having enough seats. Her family of six had lived in that hotel room for a month, and before that, in a smaller motel room. They have been unable to find affordable housing. Mary’s husband had just started his second day working at Walmart.

Mary (WORLD is using a pseudonym because she has family in danger in Afghanistan) wore an auburn tunic and a green hijab. They have three teenage boys and a cherub-cheeked 12-year-old girl, who brewed loose green tea and filled plastic platters with nuts, green raisins, and candies. They poured the hot beverage into glasses from white thermoses.

Those thermoses are some of the few items they brought with them from Afghanistan. Now in a strange country, they face an uncertain future with few friends and the mix of survivor’s guilt, sadness, shock, and relief. That’s why Welcome Families’ founder, Debra Smith, founded the group and helped introduce the Twums and Joneses to Mary’s family.

The Twums’ 6-year-old stood frozen with saucer eyes, refusing to move when his father invited him to sit on his lap. Mary knelt on the floor across from the boy and fed him a piece of caramel and smiled: “Thank you for coming. Your family is very beautiful. From the moment we were introduced, you are like family to me.”

MARY’S FAMILY IS ONE of the few thousand special immigrant visa (SIV) holders who left Afghanistan this summer just before the government fell to the Taliban. During the following frenzied two weeks of evacuation, the United States airlifted 124,000 Afghans out of Kabul. Before being allowed to enter the United States, every individual goes through multiple layers of security screening and vetting, including reviews of biographic and biometric data.

According to the Department of Homeland Security, about 34,000 Afghan evacuees have been vetted and are currently staying in seven military installations across the country, with thousands more stationed in sites in Europe and the Middle East. An additional 30,000 may arrive in the United States through the next year. So far, about 25,000 Afghans have resettled in communities throughout the nation.

Some have SIVs, some are in various stages of applying for SIVs, and some are family members of American citizens or lawful permanent residents. But the majority come under humanitarian parole, an emergency permit that allows Afghan nationals to stay in the United States on a case-by-case basis for two years. Humanitarian parole is the quickest option for high-risk individuals such as human rights activists, journalists, and humanitarian workers to enter the country.

Parolees don’t usually qualify for government benefits and services, but Afghans granted parole between July 31, 2021, and Sept. 30, 2022, can apply for the same federal benefits available to refugees, such as cash, medical assistance, food stamps, and English language training. Most parolees will likely file for asylum, but that system already has a backlog of 1.4 million cases.

Most Afghans stay in military bases awaiting security screenings and capacity at resettlement agencies to open. Many will live indefinitely in barracks and tent structures in military bases for months even as winter sweeps in.

It’s also unclear how long the American public’s interest in welcoming these Afghans will last. Though polls show bipartisan support for receiving Afghans, Republicans are still more wary than Democrats. Several Republican politicians and conservative commentators have expressed concerns that the rushed evacuation could have allowed potential terrorists to slip through the vetting process. And despite tight security at military bases, crime still happens: Two Afghan evacuees are in federal custody—one charged with engaging in a sexual act with a minor, another for spousal abuse. The FBI is also investigating a Fort Bliss female service member’s report that a group of Afghan males assaulted her.

Meanwhile, resettlement agencies are unprepared for the sudden speed and volume of Afghans needing
ABOUT 34,000 AFGHAN EVACUEES HAVE BEEN VETTED AND ARE CURRENTLY STAYING IN EIGHT MILITARY INSTALLMENTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

help. The hollowed-out refugee resettlement infrastructure is recovering from the historic-low refugee admissions during the Trump administration. More than 100 resettlement agencies closed their offices, losing long-term relationships with local churches, landlords, and businesses. On Sept. 30, Congress passed a spending bill that includes $6.3 billion in supplemental funding for Afghan resettlement, a boost to resettlement agencies scrambling to hire new staff.

The Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Arlington, one of the primary resettlement agencies in Northern Virginia, helped resettle 200 Afghan SIVs between August and September after resettling fewer than 400 people the entire year before. “It was a significant stress and challenge for our agency,” said President and CEO Stephen Carattini. This year, Carattini anticipates resettling 800 individuals in the area.

Many local employers are eager to hire them, but the biggest challenge is finding affordable housing. Staff at resettlement agencies must help refugees find housing, employment, and schools. They work with their clients for 90 days, then services trickle away, even though Afghans’ needs will stretch for far longer.

Mary’s family was still in a hotel after more than 75 days in Fredericksburg, and her children had not yet
brothers still waiting for their SIVs. Each day they beg him for help through WhatsApp. But he’s an immigrant working a minimum-wage job. It breaks his heart to tell his brothers, “There’s nothing I can do for you.”

It’s unclear how many SIV applicants and recipients remain stuck in Afghanistan, though a State Department official told the media that the United States was unable to evacuate “the majority” of SIVs, “just based on anecdotal information about the populations we were able to support.” That infuriates people like the man trying to help his brothers. He says it’s unfair that tens of thousands of non-SIV Afghans were evacuated while their family members, who were promised safety for helping the United States, remain. “My brothers did everything that was recommended,” he said. “America is big enough to take them all.”

Smith often can’t do much more than pray. She’s open about her Christian faith: “I follow Jesus the Messiah,” she tells them. They never say no when she offers kabuli pulao (basmati pilaf with lamb), skewers of kabobs, or her favorite dish, burani (braised eggplants with tomatoes and yogurt).

Smith met most of her Afghan friends through random encounters. She spots Afghan women at Walmart. When she greets them in Dari, they ask for her phone number and invite her over for chai. She met another new Afghan family in September while driving on a busy street. A woman and her three young boys were walking under the darkening sky. Smith pulled over and yelled out in Dari, “Do you need a ride?” That family had been living in a kitchenless motel for a month, subsisting mostly on snacks. The woman insisted Smith come in for juice, apologizing for the lack of chai.

Every Afghan Smith meets has family in Afghanistan, some in grave danger. They weep and beg Smith for help. In September, she had a spreadsheet with the information of 250 individuals whom she’s trying to help evacuate. In October, when I visited Smith, her spreadsheet had expanded to 350 names. Every family we visited wanted to talk about their loved ones. If their names weren’t on the spreadsheet, they pulled out their family members’ passport numbers, and Smith typed their information into her MacBook—but without much hope. She said she had had zero success in evacuating anyone.

Some of these family members were in the process of an SIV application when the Taliban took control. One Afghan man, who had waited four years for his SIV and resettled in Fredericksburg in 2018, said he has two WELCOME FAMILIES began with Debra Smith, who spent three years as an ESL teacher in Kabul and more than a decade building relationships with Afghan families in Fredericksburg.

Smith is a Norwegian-blooded American with elbow-length golden curls and blue eyes, but her heart lies with Afghans. In 2013, she seriously considered returning to Afghanistan, then noticed a burgeoning Afghan community in her city after Congress created an SIV path for Afghans in 2006 and 2009. Between 2001 and 2013, 2,300 Afghans received green cards. That number exploded to 12,300 between 2014 and 2019, the majority through SIVs. Today, the Northern Virginia–DC metro area has the largest Afghan population in the country (Sacramento and San Francisco are a close second).

The fact that Smith is a blond-haired American who speaks conversational Dari turned her into a mini-celebrity among the Afghan community. She’ll be lunching on wilted salad at a park, and more often than not, an Afghan family on a picnic will recognize her and insist she toss aside her salad for kabuli pulao (basmati pilaf with lamb), skewers of kabobs, or her favorite dish, burani (braised eggplants with tomatoes and yogurt).

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to pray for them. Sometimes, they ask her to pray. Often she helps in additional ways.

One man called Smith asking if the letter he received is “free money.” It turned out to be a $150 traffic ticket. She spends time with women who are lonely while their husbands work. They love telling Smith about meeting their husbands and showing her pictures of family in Afghanistan. They also love feeding Smith: At any given day, empty Tupperware containers roll around her car, ready to go back to Afghan women who stuffed them with food.

But Smith is just one woman. Hence the creation of Welcome Families.

**THE TWUMS AND THE JONESES** were the first Welcome Families volunteers that Smith matched with an Afghan family.

Both families had undergone Smith’s three-hour orientation, in which she teaches participants what to expect, what the needs are, and why Christians should welcome sojourners.

Smith emphasizes that the needs are as unique as what you’d expect from any friendship: “You will drink a lot of chai, read a lot of mail, and maybe talk about Jesus quite a bit—and repeat.” Don’t be afraid to make mistakes, she says: “Remember, just as you’re trying to learn their culture, they’re also trying to acculturate to America.”

That day at Mary’s hotel room, Smith was present to interpret, but it’s up to the Welcome Families to continue the relationship after that. Mary, after feeling trapped in a hotel room for months, was eager to chat, even as her fingers cracked open pistachios for her guests. Whenever a guest finished her tea, the sharp-eyed Mary nodded, and one of her children swiftly filled the cup again.

There isn’t much to do here, Mary said. “What can we do? We’re sojourners. We’ve been wandering from place to place. We don’t know the language here, the customs, nothing. It’s been very hard.” Tears dripped on her hijab. She wiped her eyes and continued shelling pistachios.

She didn’t want to leave Afghanistan, she said, even though her family waited four years for SIVs. They had a good life there. But then the Taliban began encroaching, dragging men from their houses and killing them. Her husband urged her, “We have to go now, before it’s too late.” At the time, Mary refused to leave her ill mother. But she too insisted, “Go.”

They left on Aug. 14, a day before Kabul fell. Had they waited one more day, they would have been like her brother, uncles, and brothers-in-law who had worked for the U.S. embassy but now live in fear in Afghanistan. They burned all the documents that prove their ties to the United States. Mary worries about them constantly. Two months after they arrived in the United States, Mary’s mother died. “Life is like this,” Mary sighed. “There’s sweetness, there’s bitterness. May God give us mercy.”

Nora Twum, 47, told me that as a daughter of Ghanaian immigrants, she was familiar with the disorienting immigrant experience. Her husband, Willis, immigrated to the United States from Ghana when he was 19. “We just want to be the hands and feet of Christ, and show the love of Christ to those who don’t know Him,” Twum said.

By the end of that visit, the Twums and Joneses had exchanged phone numbers with Mary. They decided to get Mary’s husband an Uber gift card for transportation to work. Willis Twum challenged Mary’s older sons to a soccer match—“I feel bad for you, because we’re really good. Bring it on!”—and the women planned to take Mary on a walk to the park.

As the Americans shuffled out of the hotel room, Mary kissed the women on both cheeks: “Thank you for your compassion. You shared my pain. I feel like we’re one family. God be kind to you for being our new friends.”
Accusations against Baptist leader Paul Pressler highlight the difficulties of addressing the abuse of men in the church

by MARY JACKSON and LYNDE LANGDON
In 1948, evangelist Billy Graham recognized the temptation for ministerial leaders to succumb to sexual sin while traveling without their wives and families. His practice of not traveling, meeting, or eating alone with a woman other than his wife became the standard for ministers and leaders to protect themselves and others from sexual temptation and accusations of sexual impropriety.

But the “Billy Graham rule” was insufficient to protect five men who claim Paul Pressler, a former Texas appeals court judge, sexually harassed or assaulted them during his long career as a Southern Baptist lay leader. WORLD detailed the accusations against Pressler in the online report “What is a young man worth?” on Nov. 12. The allegations against the judge span nearly a 40-year period. Two young men allege Pressler sexually assaulted them, and two others claim he made unwanted sexual advances. One case involving Gareld Duane Rollins Jr., who claims Pressler raped and molested him for 24 years, now sits with the Texas Supreme Court. WORLD reported that some Baptist leaders were aware of accusations against Pressler at the time but took no measures to protect young men from his alleged behavior.

Since our report, another man, Chris Davis, has come forward alleging Pressler pressured him into being naked with him in a hotel room in 2002. The judge declined to comment through his attorney.

Pressler, by all accounts, followed the Billy Graham rule by not traveling, meeting, or eating alone with women who were not his wife or family. (He has been married to his wife, Nancy, for 62 years and has three adult children.) So did apologist Ravi Zacharias—except when he received massages he claimed to need for medical reasons. The women who performed those massages later accused him of harassment and rape. Sexual abuse survivors and advocates now say the Billy Graham rule is just one step among many that churches must take to build a culture of safety that protects as many people as possible from abuse.

In February 2002, Davis, an aspiring pastor, introduced himself to Paul Pressler at a gathering to celebrate Davis’ former pastor, Dennis Watson of Harp’s Crossing Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Ga., reaching his 20th year of pastoral ministry. By then, Pressler had served in the Texas judiciary and held numerous leadership positions in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and its churches. He published a 1999 memoir about his role as a driver of the Conservative Resurgence, a historic shift back to Biblical orthodoxy in SBC institutions in the late
20th century. Watson described Pressler’s influence on him as a liberal seminary student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville in 1985 as “a Damascus road experience.”

At 24, Davis had heard Watson’s story and read Pressler’s memoir. He considered it an honor when Pressler invited him to accompany him on a three-day trip to Alabama to assist in selling books, lugging suitcases, and chauffeuring him to various church venues and meals with prominent Alabama Baptist leaders. “I anticipate thought-provoking discussion and spirit-invigorating fellowship as we travel Birmingham and Montgomery,” Davis wrote the judge in a March 1, 2002, letter (which we read).

Davis said the two men shared a hotel room on the trip. The first night, Davis said, Pressler gave him an extended hug and told him he loved him before turning out the lights. It struck Davis as odd since they had just met. Davis recounted what happened the next morning: Pressler told Davis that when he traveled with men, he considered the bathroom like a locker room shower. To save time and water, Pressler suggested Davis shower quickly and he would wait nearby to get in when Davis got out.

When Davis finished, he said, Pressler was waiting naked. He began peppering Davis with questions. The two of them stood talking with the shower water running. Davis said as he held a towel over his genitals, Pressler commented on his apparent discomfort with being naked in front of him. Davis said a similar routine occurred the next two mornings. During one car ride, he said the judge described visiting European bath houses where male nudity is commonplace and told Davis his wife approved of the visits. (Brooks Schott, an attorney who accused Pressler

“What happened to me has made me want to be a voice inside the convention for survivors.”
of unwanted sexual advances in 2016, said in court documents related to the Rollins case that the judge referenced swimming naked with other young men in Denmark.)

Bob Underwood, an SBC church planter and strategist, verified that Davis requested time off to travel in Alabama with Pressler. Davis was an intern and youth pastor at Underwood’s church, New Covenant Fellowship in Logan, W.Va., at the time. Underwood said he believed it was an “amazing opportunity” at the time but when Davis returned, he said little about the trip.

Months after Davis’ 2002 trip, he mentioned Pressler’s alleged proclivity for nudity in a conversation with a seminary friend, Jason Kovacs. He said he did not disclose specifics to Kovacs about what occurred in the hotel room. Kovacs confirmed the conversation with WORLD. Davis said he initially brushed the behavior off: “I thought, I’m only 24. Who am I to question this guy?” In May 2002, at Pressler’s invitation, Davis attended a gathering in Tysons Corner, Va., for the Council for National Policy, a networking group for conservatives and Republicans in which Pressler served as a president from 1988 to 1990. Davis’ brother and a friend joined him, but he said he never spent one-on-one time with Pressler. Davis’ brother, Danny, confirmed that the men attended the event and stayed in a room at the Ritz Carlton paid for by Pressler. Davis also said he declined several written and verbal invitations from Pressler to his Austin ranch.

“It is not far-fetched to say that abuse could have happened to me,” Davis said.

In 2017, Davis listened to podcast interviews of abuse survivors of entertainment mogul Harvey Weinstein. One victim detailed Weinstein’s grooming tactics, including persuading her into situations where he was completely naked. It reminded Davis of his encounter with Pressler. He emailed Kovacs on Dec. 17, 2017: “The more I think about it, the more I think, ‘That was messed up.’ At the time all I knew [was] that I was with a powerful man and I couldn’t believe my good fortune to be traveling with this luminary of SBC life.” In 2018, Davis referenced his alleged encounter with

Paul Pressler has served as a judge and in several Baptist leadership positions.

Pressler but did not name him in an article for the Gospel Coalition.

ABUSE SCANDALS in recent decades have shown how sexual predators use mentoring and teaching relationships as a cover for abuse. In response to pervasive allegations of abuse against Scout leaders in the Boy Scouts of America (BSA), Trail Life USA, a Christian outdoor adventure program for boys that started in 2013, prohibits men from being one-on-one with children. BSA also now has a similar rule.

In a 2019 report, an SBC sexual abuse advisory group advised churches adopt “two-deep leadership” for adults interacting with children in church settings. The 52-page Caring Well report, commissioned by then-SBC President J.D. Greear, defined grooming as a process by which abusers use power in a relationship to gain potential victims’ trust and break down boundaries. It recommended other prevention measures such as an open door policy, prohibiting one-on-one travel, vetting church volunteers, establishing a safety team, and ensuring children’s privacy when going to the bathroom or changing.
The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC), the public policy arm of the SBC, started the Caring Well Initiative, which included a 2019 conference and multimedia training modules for churches. Baptist pastors who have used Caring Well resources told us they felt better equipped to address abuse. Oak Creek Community Church in Mishawaka, Ind., now offers to take other local churches through the Caring Well Challenge, a yearlong, eight-step process created by the ERLC. Oak Creek Pastor Todd Benkert said he worries that too few Baptist churches are taking abuse seriously: “When you look at the response, a very small percentage of our churches have actually gone through [the Caring Well materials].”

The denomination’s doctrine of church autonomy limits the ways in which SBC leaders can respond to sexual abuse within its 47,000 churches. So far, more than 1,000 SBC churches have participated in the Caring Well Challenge. About 4,100 churches have assigned a 12-lesson Caring Well resource called “Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused” to staff and volunteers, according to an ERLC spokeswoman.

“Part of the culture change that needs to happen is acknowledging there is a danger we need to account for,” said Brent Hobbs, pastor of New Song Fellowship in Virginia Beach, Va. “In a lot of situations, as long as it wasn’t crossing gender lines, it was assumed it was no problem, no big deal.” (Hobbs told WORLD that at a Virginia pastors luncheon at the 2016 SBC annual conference Pressler invited him to visit his Austin ranch to get into the hot tub.)

The SBC is now reckoning publicly with how it has handled cases of sexual abuse. Church delegates at the June annual conference in Nashville approved an investigation into how the denomination’s key governing body, the Executive Committee, addressed allegations of abuse over a 21-year time period.

Davis, now a pastor at Groveton Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va., traveled to Nashville specifically to cast his vote in favor of the investigation. “If anything, what happened to me has made me want to be a voice inside the convention for survivors.”

Preventing abuse in churches

On Nov. 28, sexual abuse survivors lost one of their earliest and bravest champions, Phil Saviano, who died at age 69 of gallbladder cancer. His advocacy helped expose widespread predatory assaults by Roman Catholic priests in the United States. The 2015 Oscar-winning movie Spotlight tells how he served as a key source for the Boston Globe investigation that uncovered how scores of priests got away with molesting children.

Despite surviving abuse from a priest, Saviano remained a devout Catholic. At his funeral, his friend the Rev. Ron Coyne explained that Saviano felt Christians should take charge of holding the Church accountable.

But church leaders accused of perpetrating abuse often claim to have prophetic gifts.

In his 1999 memoir, Paul Pressler claimed to have received a prophetic vision from God in the form of a recurring dream. In late 1978 and early 1979, he dreamed of a line of people singing the hymn “Marching to Zion” while processing down Main Street in Houston. The following summer, Southern Baptist Convention delegates elected as president the candidate Pressler had supported at their annual meeting in Houston.

“Immediately I remembered my recurring dream,” Pressler wrote. “Now I knew what it meant.”

WORLD has compiled accusations of sexual abuse and harassment against Pressler from five young men, the first of whom claims the judge abused him in 1978, the same year Pressler’s “Marching to Zion” dream began.

In an article for the nonprofit group GRACE, which works with churches to prevent and respond to abuse, counselors Laura Thien and Carrie Nettles wrote that a leader who claims to speak for God can make sexual abuse survivors feel unprotected and unable to come forward.

“If a person in a congregational leadership role is perceived as being a spokesperson for God … a survivor may perceive an implicit message that a clergy person’s guidance is synonymous with God’s guidance or that a clergy person’s approval/disapproval is synonymous with God’s approval/disapproval,” they wrote.

In the nearly 20 years since the Catholic sex abuse scandal broke in Boston, churches and nonprofits have developed practical ways to mitigate the danger predators in their midst pose to children. Best practices include performing background checks on volunteers, not allowing adults and children to be alone behind closed doors, and educating adults on spotting signs of abuse. In about half of U.S. states, according to churchleaders.com, clergy members can face legal penalties for not reporting child abuse to authorities.

Thien and Nettles also recommend other spiritual and relational practices. Congregants must be free to question their leaders’ decisions—something abuse survivors often say they did not feel safe doing. One massage therapist who said the late apologist Ravi Zacharias molested her later told independent investigators she never came forward “because she thought ‘who would believe me’ against a famous Christian leader?” according to a report by the law firm Miller & Martin.

Mason Tabor, a man who claims Pressler made unwanted sexual advances against him, said the judge told him “Christians should not be afraid to be naked together,” and asked if Tabor would have a problem with that.

Saviano said in 2002 that one of the hardest parts about doing advocacy work was the deafening silence from the pews—the trust and reverence bestowed on church leaders and the unwillingness to ask questions. Once the Catholic abuse scandal broke, Saviano was unsure whether to credit The Boston Globe or the power of God. “But boy oh boy, look at us now.” Saviano said. “Times sure have changed, and I’m thrilled to have lived long enough to see it.”—L.L.
FACING DIVISION, PRAYING FOR UNITY
WHEN I CHOSE TO FOLLOW Beth Daranciang, a 55-year-old white woman in Seattle, and Michael Byrd, a 37-year-old black pastor in St. Louis, for this story, I had one goal: to find people who didn’t fit Twitter-branded tropes. Many prevailing narratives flatten individuals, with all their nuances and idiosyncrasies, into confusing labels such as “woke” or “social justice warrior” or “Christian nationalist” or “bigot.”

Both Daranciang and Byrd talk about truth, but in different contexts. Daranciang focuses on freedom of speech, and criticizes how the government, media, and big corporations silence dissenting voices. She worries that one-sided liberal news is indoctrinating fellow evangelicals. Byrd focuses on discipleship and missions, and wonders why evangelicals who hold orthodox beliefs but different political views are treated as though they’ve trespassed gospel boundaries. He worries about the church’s witness: Why would people believe in Jesus, when they see professed Jesus-lovers slandering one another?

That’s a key difference: While Byrd frames truth as power that can redeem humans who can then redeem society, preaching often about how orthodoxy naturally begets orthopraxy, Daranciang frames truth as power to resist and restrain evil. While they both believe in spiritual warfare, the enemy looks different in everyday life: Daranciang is an activist in a blue state; Byrd is a pastor in a red state. Daranciang sees herself in a spiritual war against anti-Christian cultural tides. Byrd sees himself in a spiritual war to save and shepherd souls.

Daranciang and Byrd’s responses are nuanced, but over time, over a multitude of daily decisions and choices, their paths diverge wider and wider—reflected in their churches.
ON JULY 4, Daranciang’s senior pastor Alec Rowlands at Westgate Chapel paused multiple times during his sermon to hold back tears: “I don’t think I have to tell you the mess this nation is in.” That’s why he began Apologia, a monthly forum on culture, at his church. Some people had gotten offended that speakers from the political right were invited, but “I’m not going to apologize for Apologia,” he declared, to enthused cheers and applause, “because Christians have sat by and sat on their hands while the enemy has systematically eroded this nation and stolen the very things that we hold precious.”

After 32 years of striving to be apolitical in the pulpit, Rowlands changed course after the pandemic shut down his church from March through June 2020. With no end to the pandemic in sight, and sensing Washington Gov. Jay Inslee was “gunning for churches from the very beginning,” church leaders decided to open against the governor’s orders. They took precautions: They blocked off every other pew and asked congregants to voluntarily wear masks. Several church members left over the decision to open, but the church also gained hundreds more newcomers, such as Daranciang.

Responses to racial unrest also stirred disagreements among members, including elders on his church board. What most shocked Rowlands was that people were leaving because he spoke out against abortion, homosexuality, Black Lives Matter, and critical race theory—stances that he considered “are not open for debate, but clearly Biblical.” That’s when he realized, “I’ve done something wrong here. … We’ve left the interpretation of biblical issues to the congregation.” He publicly apologized several times for “doing a disservice” to the church.

In February 2021, Westgate Chapel launched its first Apologia event to talk about cultural issues “where the Bible is being attacked.” An outpouring of financial support from church members and outsiders helped woo big-name figures such as Charlie Kirk—a right-wing activist and media personality who founded Turning Point USA, a nonprofit that advocates for conservatism on school campuses—and Eric Metaxas, a prominent evangelical author who’s a staunch Trump supporter. (Speaker fees vary from $2,500 to $10,000.)

Rowlands said he only invites speakers whose positions he believes “line up with the Bible.” “If my positions Scripturally happen to line up with the platform of the Republican Party, I can’t help that.”

Kirk drew the largest crowd so far. The audience cheered and clapped as Kirk urged Christians to step up on political platforms. The left’s agenda is clear, Kirk declared: “It’s one of control and permanent political power, and you’re already seeing it manifest.” He linked pandemic resistance to Daniel’s courage in Babylon.

Kirk is known for provocative statements, and Rowlands didn’t agree with everything he said, but he defended Kirk’s invitation: “If you put yourself in the place of the average Westgate Chapel attender that’s being bombarded by the left daily ... it’s refreshing to see someone on a national level espouse and speak to the values that are your core values, because you’re not getting it any place else.”

Meanwhile at Byrd’s Faith Community Baptist Church, the cultural war rhetoric wasn’t present. Before a men’s Bible study early on a Saturday morning, Byrd and three other church members had a casual conversation about movies and TV shows. One man mentioned his surprise at how “real” Hollywood was becoming in addressing controversial racial topics such as police brutality. Another man chimed in: “Now they’re actually going there!”

During lunch at a chicken and waffle house, I heard church members talk about how a recent power outage destroyed the food in their community’s fridges and freezers. They talked about managing childcare while both parents work. They worried about high-school kids who still can’t read, a public school district with a high teacher turnover rate that’s rapidly losing students and funds to suburban schools, private schools, and city charter schools. They talked about the effects of trauma on their kids.
“It’s different when we live and serve among the poor,” one church leader told me. Another deacon told me, “My wife owns and runs a business while taking care of the kids. Politics is the last thing we think about.”

One church member said he left his previous church after nine years there to avoid culture war rhetoric. A 52-year-old carpenter, Mike used to attend a majority-white church with close ties to Pastor John MacArthur’s church. CRT was a frequent topic there, he said. He didn’t understand what CRT had to do with the gospel.

Mike and his family left that church in May 2020. George Floyd was “the straw that broke the camel’s back,” Mike told me. He didn’t think he could stay in a church that denied the existence of systemic racism, something he sees affecting his own community: “I wanted to have more impact in the community I’m part of, and I knew I couldn’t do that there.”

“OH GOSH, they’re still going at it,” Daranciang sighed.

She had just glanced at her iPhone, and neighbors in her Nextdoor group were bickering online. It started several days ago, when a neighbor posted a message urging everyone to stand with their Asian neighbors during a slew of publicized attacks against Asians. One person blamed “the orange demon” for the spike in anti-Asian attacks. Daranciang objected and said the mostly white antifa has committed more violence in their area. Someone wrote that by denying the existence of white supremacy, Daranciang is “one of them.” Daranciang pointed out that she’s married to a Filipino man and has biracial kids. An Asian American woman responded, “You just pulled a ‘I have a black friend’ card.”

Such responses irritate Daranciang. These people don’t know her, she says. They don’t know that growing up, her parents sponsored several Vietnamese refugee families. She cooks Filipino dishes such as menudo and panceit at home and shops for ube-filled buns in Filipino supermarkets. She enjoys learning about new cultures and gets teary-eyed when her church celebrates ethnic diversity in their congregation.

Daranciang, her husband Ditos, and I had just left church service and were heading to a nearby GOP event. During the drive, Daranciang commented that the Seattle
school district was intentionally keeping Latino students in ESL classes for money. Ditos made a frustrated noise: “I don’t think it’s the district’s fault, Beth. Some people just don’t integrate well.”

He turned to me: “This is where I disagree with Beth. I think many people give canned Republican answers when there are many points of view. The Republicans are not always right. The Democrats are not always right. But Republicans and Democrats live in echo chambers. I think that’s why we’re seeing polarization in our country.”

Daranciag pointed out that she lives in Seattle, an uber-blue city: How is that living in an echo chamber? I asked her if she has any liberal or progressive friends. No, she said, but pointed out that she’s part of a watchdog group on transgender policies that includes lesbians and radical feminists bullied by their fellow liberals.

Daranciag dived into local activism after her kids got older. While tuning into the Washington state legislative hearings in 2018, she was stunned at how some Democratic legislators seemed to dismiss opposing views. One of the bills they discussed was the Uniform Parentage Act, a surrogacy bill backed by LGBTQ groups. Daranciag saw it as legalizing “baby-selling” and “child abuse” in broad daylight: “This is evil. They’re calling evil good and good evil. Our leaders are pushing this, and we voted for them.”

After her daughter graduated from high school, she ran for the state senate in 2018. She was mindful that a white Republican candidate’s chances of winning in Washington were slimmer than Twiggy. She lost but ran for state representative in 2020. She lost again.

Ditos worries politics is sucking his wife in. “Beth talks enough about politics for the whole family,” he half-joked when I met him. But I saw Daranciag come alive in politics. Normally measured and soft-spoken, her voice rises with passion when talking about the mainstream media’s bias against former President Donald Trump.

So even before Election Day, when Trump made comment after comment about election fraud, Daranciag paid attention. After Trump’s defeat last November, a Vietnamese American immigrant in Daranciag’s Republican group recruited other Trump supporters in the state to attend the Jan. 6 rally. Daranciag wanted to witness Trump’s last rally as president, and she suspected “there was significant fraud in the election,” so she joined them.

She didn’t anticipate that the day would devolve into an insurrection. When chaos broke out at the Capitol,
Daranciang had no cell phone service, so she had no idea what was going on inside the Capitol. She heard the police had shot tear gas and pushed people down the steps and was upset that the police “acted brutally” against rally attenders. Despite plenty of video evidence from rioters themselves and police body-camera footage from the Capitol, Daranciang said she isn’t sure what to believe about Jan. 6.

At the Sunday GOP event, she hugged everyone she knew. It was like a big family reunion. People wore red, blue, and white attire, along with MAGA T-shirts and Trump 2024 hats. As candidates gave their campaign speeches, Daranciang whooped and clapped. From the other corner, her husband turned around to look at her. She was half-dancing, grinning from ear to ear. He smiled: It was nice to see her in her element.

YOU WON’T FIND Byrd in any political event. He’s voted for both Republican and Democratic presidents. He voted for Barack Obama in 2008, but not in 2012. He wrote in a candidate for both the 2016 and 2020 elections. When then-Vice President Mike Pence spoke at the 2018 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting, he walked out. “They turned a gospel stage into a political stage,” he fumed. “They were rallying the troops for Trump.”

He remembers the first time he saw someone tweet the word “woke” as a pejorative: “I was very shocked.” Being “woke” to him meant being socially conscious—something everyone should aim for. To see it used as a slingshot against fellow Christians was jarring.

It was a tweet by Owen Strachan, a provost and research professor of theology at Grace Bible Theological Seminary in Conway, Ark. Strachan had posted a six-part lecture on “Christianity and Wokeness,” describing wokeness as “an ungodly system.” Byrd watched all six videos, aghast. He had met Strachan: “This is a brother in the Lord, right? I’m grateful for his ministry. He loves the truth, right?” But the way Strachan explained wokeness sounded distorted to Byrd: “He built a straw man. And everybody is following it.”

In my conversations with Byrd and Daranciang, I noticed that whenever they criticized the “other side,” they were envisioning the loudest, most provocative voices on social media. The way those voices described people “like them” sounded not just untrue but uncharitable, tunnel-visioned, and intellectually dishonest. It felt like a personal attack.

Yet offline, face to face, people act very differently than they do online. That’s what happened with Daranciang’s Nextdoor group. After days of pinging and quibbling online, one neighbor invited everyone to his house. About six neighbors gathered at the man’s driveway and munched on Krusteaz-mix pancakes. Someone asked Daranciang for her thoughts on anti-Asian attacks. Daranciang said she thinks it’s complicated. Sure there’s some racism, but the United States is the most free and least racist country among any other heterogeneous countries in the world: “People of all races come to America with nothing and make successful lives for themselves”—people like her husband and his siblings. One young Asian American woman objected. She said Daranciang, a white woman, can’t possibly understand what it’s like to be a minority. “There’s a lot of hate,” the woman said.

Because it was an intimate face-to-face group, they all measured their tone and choice of words. The conversation was short, and none changed their minds, but Daranciang was glad to offer a real-life face to liberals: She wanted them to see her, a lone conservative, as a fellow human being with well-reasoned thoughts.

Toward the end of my time with Byrd, I told him about Daranciang, and how she feels treated like a deplorable because of her beliefs. Byrd went quiet. Then he said softly, “I’m heartbroken that my brothers and sisters in Seattle feel like they’re under attack.”

He paused: “I don’t know them. I don’t know their church. But what I can tell you is that I love them. They are part of my family. We may worship differently, talk differently, think differently. But we’re still family. My prayer is that, even with all these things that could potentially divide us, we will allow what unifies us to pull us closer together.”
Today, mainstream evangelical scholars claim that

- The Gospel books are full of errors and contradictions and fictitious details
- Jesus never said the “I am” statements in the Gospel According to John
- The original text of the New Testament can never be fully recovered
- Genesis 1 can only be understood in the light of pagan ancient Near Eastern writings

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Columns post each weekday on wng.org/opinions.
FEARFULLY AND WONDERFULLY MADE

COVID-19 stymies the Christmas market plans of a workshop for developmentally disabled adults

by Jenny Lind Schmitt in Boncourt, Switzerland

ON A GRAY NOVEMBER DAY, Sandra Ramirez is bringing another snowman to life. Wearing a plastic apron to protect her pinstripe dress, Ramirez dips her hand in a small bucket of glue on the tabletop and coats the surface of a round paper mass. “First a white layer, then a newspaper layer, then another white layer,” she explains, as she then carefully covers the ball with 2-inch pieces of torn paper.

Ramirez displays her work at Atelier Ouest.
Once the ball has its third layer, she places it on a table next to the radiator to dry.

Ramirez’s shy smile and calm demeanor contrast with the general buzz of activity at Atelier Ouest, a workshop at Foyer Les Fontenattes, a residential center for developmentally disabled adults in Boncourt, Switzerland. With only two weeks until the local Christmas market opens—for the first time since pre-pandemic—everyone is working to make sure there are enough handmade decorations to sell. Little did they know the virus would again stymie their plans this year.

Against bright yellow walls, colorful papier-mâché creatures crowd shelves and line windowsills: spotted cows with curved horns, basset hounds with mournful eyes, oversized cats, brightly colored chickens. Dragonflies and bees with demure smiles hang from the ceiling. And for the Christmas season, small groups of snowmen and Christmas elves huddle together on every flat surface. Everywhere you look in Atelier Ouest, there’s evidence of the workshop’s guiding principle: Intellectual deficiency does not mean artistic deficiency.

At the oval table where Ramirez, 52, is working on another snowman’s head sit four other members of the workshop. Fabien puts glue and paper on a small balloon to create snowman bodies. Once the dried heads and bodies are attached, Sylvie and Laurette paint them white. Nathalie, whose left arm is paralyzed, uses her right hand to make balls out of chopped papier-mâché. They will become the base for small purple elephants. Micha doesn’t feel social today, so he sits apart on a nearby sofa, tearing paper and putting small pieces into a bucket. “The key is finding the part of the process that best matches the abilities of the person,” says workshop director Delphine Brabant. “Our aim is to show how a person with a developmental disability can flourish in the artistic world.”

Atelier Ouest began in 2007 as a place of occupation and expression for residents and has grown into an important bridge between the world of disability and the surrounding community.

When they first started selling at the Christmas market in 2010, organizers were hesitant to have disabled persons participate, afraid it would detract from the ambiance. Several years later, when Atelier Ouest couldn’t attend the market, the organizers responded that their absence would be sorely missed. “They realized our people add to the wonderful ambiance instead of detracting from it,” said Brabant.

In 2018, Atelier Ouest’s booth won the prize for “most beautiful stand” at a Christmas market in the nearby medieval city of St. Ursanne. That gained them free entry in 2019, but last year COVID-19 regulations canceled all markets and kept workshops, including Atelier Ouest, closed most of 2020 and 2021.

During my November visit, Ramirez, who has Down syndrome, says she is excited about the return to the Christmas market. She enjoys seeing people and selling her crafts, and wants to win another prize.

Yet four days before this year’s St. Ursanne market, COVID-19 hit Foyer Les Fontenattes with a vengeance, infecting one-third of staff who attended an employee gathering. To protect the vulnerable residents, leadership requisitioned all uninfected staff as caregivers and canceled all outside outings, abruptly ending this year’s Christmas market plans.

“It’s a profound disappointment,” said Brabant, “but it reminds me how much the residents lead the way. They are fountains of positivity.” Ramirez, who herself spent four weeks hospitalized last year with a severe case of COVID-19, shed a couple of tears when she heard about the cancellation. “It’s hard,” she said. “I’ve had enough of this disease!” But then she turned her attention to consoling the others. “Oh well,” she told Brabant. “It’s going to be OK.”
Y HIS OWN ADMISSION, 72-year-old Kirk Hallett should have retired years ago, but he says he can’t quit serving his Harrisburg, Pa., neighborhood just yet. Every weekday around lunchtime, he walks across Market Street from Joshua Group, an at-risk youth ministry he founded and directs, to the St. Francis of Assisi Parish soup kitchen. Usually a cook and two helpers have been in the kitchen since 7:30 a.m. making more than 100 meals packed in Styrofoam boxes. Hallett corrals volunteers to set up folding tables and prep paper bags with utensils and snacks. For the next hour, they hand out up to 165 meals to the residents of Allison Hill, one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in Harrisburg.

Father Orlando Reyes, who has served as the parish’s friar for the past 11 years, said his community is plagued by gang violence, poverty, and prostitution. One of the few certainties in Allison Hill for the past 30 years is a warm meal at St. Francis. Yet now the pandemic and supply chain issues test its endurance.

By 2019, food insecurity and hunger were at their lowest rates since the 1990s. The onslaught of COVID-19 erased these improvements and threw millions of families into poverty. By the end of 2020, food banks across the country were serving 55 percent more people than before the pandemic. Many of these recipients had never stood in a line for a meal before.

Donations from church groups, grocery chain deals, and individual donors make up 80 percent of Central Penn-
N A CLOUDY FALL MORNING, Aziz Sulayman showed up outside the White House wearing a suit with a bright blue tie and matching baseball cap, the color of the East Turkestan flag. He stood in a line of about 20 Uyghurs waving flags and holding signs, shouted along with the call-and-response chants (“Grant refuge to Uyghurs!”), and stepped forward to translate for a woman speaking about her time in a reeducation camp in China, pausing while she choked back tears.

Despite concerns they’ll cause trouble for family members still in China, some Uyghurs in the United States are exhausting all avenues to draw attention to the Chinese government’s oppression of ethnic Uyghurs living in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in western China, which some Uyghurs call East Turkestan. Since 2017, the Chinese government has placed more than 1 million Uyghurs in reeducation camps, where they endured brainwashing classes, torture, and forced sterilization. Some have now been transferred to

Pennsylvania Food Bank’s stores. But rising inflation has had a toll on grocery store shelves, which in turn affects food banks. According to October’s consumer index, the price of meat skyrocketed 10.5 percent in the past year. Additionally, the end of increased unemployment benefits and pandemic stimulus checks have sent more people to food lines.

Supply chain delays have created not a food shortage, but a material shortage. Central Pennsylvania Food Bank and St. Francis’ pantry usually stock up with canned goods, but canneries have not produced at their typical rate due to aluminum shortages. The food bank has no canned yams, a typical holiday favorite, for this year’s boxes. In lieu of nonperishable items, it is looking for fresh sweet potatoes which must be frozen or distributed more quickly.

Before the pandemic, St. Francis’ soup kitchen served whoever showed up. As COVID-19 safety measures prevented volunteers from allowing people indoors, the church started to look outward, Reyes said. Hallett packed extra meals in a dilapidated pickup truck to deliver to shut-ins, a low-income veterans’ home, and people living under a bridge. When the truck finally broke down beyond repair, Hallet packed his own car with trays of food, extra blankets, and paper bags.

This Thanksgiving, St. Francis held its first in-person gathering in more than a year. Between food drop-offs and monetary donations, the church stocked 22 frozen turkeys for the dinner. The dormitory gymnasium filled with decorated tables for the roughly 230 guests who came on Thanksgiving Day. The leftovers piled into 100 extra packaged meals that Reyes and the volunteers delivered to the homeless. The space the turkeys used to fill in the kitchen freezers now stands ready for Christmas hams. Reyes planned to feed at least 200 at a Christmas dinner on Dec. 23.

Regardless of how high the price of meat rises, Reyes said, he will not shut the soup kitchen. “If all we have is rice and beans, then that’s what we’ll serve,” he said. “How can I shut down this place when our brothers and sisters are hungry? ... God has blessed us with so many good things in this nation, so many opportunities, and so much food.”

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N A CLOUDY FALL MORNING, Aziz Sulayman showed up outside the White House wearing a suit with a bright blue tie and matching baseball cap, the color of the East Turkestan flag. He stood in a line of about 20 Uyghurs waving flags and holding signs, shouted along with the call-and-response chants (“Grant refuge to Uyghurs!”), and stepped forward to translate for a woman speaking about her time in a reeducation camp in China, pausing while she choked back tears.

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long-term detention, and others have been released or forced into work placements.

Sulayman lives with his wife, a poet who writes under the pseudonym Gulruy Asqar, in a newly developed neighborhood in Fredericksburg, Va. A dentist in the Xinjiang capital of Ürümqi, Sulayman came to the United States in 2009 and now works in data analytics. Each weekend they pick up their daughters from the University of Virginia. Stacks of their paintings of flowers and ocean scenes fill an upstairs bedroom.

Asqar doesn’t like long drives, but Sulayman regularly travels to attend protests. He sometimes brings small laminated posters. One is a photo of his brother, Alim Sulayman, who has been in custody in Xinjiang since 2016, when he was detained after visiting Turkey to study the Turkish language. On a video call, a woman Asqar knows in Xinjiang showed her toothpicks in the shape of 17 to tell them he’d been sentenced to 17 years. Another poster features Asqar’s brother-in-law, Azmat Bahti, who was also detained.

Sulayman and Asqar try to call attention to their detained family members, hoping public pressure will drive China to release them. Asqar writes poems and essays, and Sulayman shares tweets calling on the United States to prioritize Uyghurs’ asylum applications. When they saw the State Department featuring detainees in social media posts, they emailed until the department added Alim to the series. They were encouraged when former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared China’s repression of Uighurs genocide in January, but said they’ve been disappointed by the lack of follow-up action. They want the United States to boycott the 2022 Olympics in Beijing and declare Xinjiang an occupied country, not a mistreated part of China.

Other Uyghurs in the United States are also telling their stories, including 39-year-old Zumret Dawut, who wore a dress embroidered with reindeer to the White House protest. Through a translator, she talked about the 62 days she spent detained in Ürümqi in 2018. Dawut said police called her to a local station, led her down to the basement, and tied her to a chair for interrogation. They asked about her bank transactions and phone calls, she wrote in a statement for the London-based Uyghur Tribunal. Authorities then took her to a detention camp and held her in a cell so crowded that the women inside had to sleep in shifts. Dawut recalled guards drew her blood every two weeks and forced her to take unknown medication.

Authorities released her because her husband is Pakistani. She said she later submitted to being sterilized, worried they would detain her again if she refused. Dawut told The Washington Post her family got permission to visit a sick relative in Pakistan, then came to the United States on a tourist visa and applied for asylum.

After Pompeo mentioned Dawut’s case in 2019, China’s state-run Global Times published a video of Dawut’s brother, who still lives in Xinjiang, contradicting her story. She told the Post she believes he spoke under duress. Sulayman and Asqar have lost touch with relatives who have deleted their contacts on WeChat, likely out of fear of retaliation from the Chinese government. Sulayman’s uncle picked up a call once, but immediately hung up.

Despite the risks, Asqar continues to tell her relatives’ stories to whoever will listen: “It might go to two ends. It might help them, or it might cause retaliation [against] other family members. We don’t know, but still, we speak.”
Opening the doors
What do you see in your Advent calendar?

Always liked advent calendars. What kid wouldn’t—prying open the doors, counting down the days, and building up excitement till you get to Christmas morning. The Advent calendars now in the stores celebrate snowmen, Harry Potter, The Nightmare Before Christmas, Barbie, and specialty coffees.

You expected that by 2021, but not so fast. It does not necessarily go without saying that a culture that has moved beyond their forefathers’ religion would do away with its very names and narratives. We name planets for the retired gods Jupiter and Venus. We don’t get rid of Patrick on St. Patrick’s Day and call it Harry Potter Day. We hold a shopworn Santa Claus back from the abyss of cultural forgetfulness. So why is not the baby Jesus kept alive at least in myth form?

So thorough is the deliberate extinguishment of the historical Christmas story that it suggests more afoot than mere preference for frivolity and fashionable fables. Jesus was murdered once (Acts 3:15) and, to my thinking, is being murdered again each year. Why the desperate need to keep on killing one they claim is dead and of no relevance?

I wondered what the youngsters of this generation know of Christmas. This empty-nester had to seek out other people’s children for an answer. I found three on a park bench at the high school and made bold to introduce myself: “Please tell me what you know about the origin of Christmas,” I asked, standing in their space. Stunned by the question and the unlikely questioner, the middle boy first took a stab: “I think it’s about a king giving slaves away as gifts.” I marveled at the whisper-down-the-lane feel of his understanding and asked him who told him that. “My grandmother,” he said.

While this reply was proffered, the boy to his right had quietly said, “Jesus.” I turned my focus next to him and sought elaboration. “Jesus’ birthday,” he added. “Who is Jesus?” I probed. “God’s Son,” he said, with less certainty. The till-now silent third student jumped in: “He made a sacrifice.” “What sacrifice? And why?” I asked. But one now was on his cell phone, and waning interest was palpable.

In a last try I asked if they had ever seen in baseball bleachers bobbing homemade signs with “John 3:16” on them. They had not. I said, “For God so loved the world he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Just then a car pulled up, and it looked like their ride. The moment disappeared into thin air.

I puzzled at the timing, not imagining that God would run that kind of interference. But of course there’s some-one else involved in the affairs of men, who cuts short promising discussions, who likes it well that Barbie lurks behind the doors of Advent cards. He must remain until a second Advent—not of the bunting baby Jesus but the King in regal splendor. Of that crafty “prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2) the Apostle also voiced frustration: “We wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us” (1 Thessalonians 2:18).

There are two kingdoms, one of light and one of darkness. Both have secret doors, and people walking through them all the time. Mine happened to be in the Swiss Alps, and glad I was to open it and find, as the Pevensie children did, a country different from the one the carnal eye can see. The other kingdom has its trap doors too, which outwardly look beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones.

Jesus is the threat to that dark kingdom. Jesus, and not Jupiter or Venus or however many pretenders adorn the racks of what passes for Advent cards. And for this cause the world would try to kill him every Christmas if they could.
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It’s a wonderful career
One life touches so many others

IS THE SEASON for It’s a Wonderful Life, the great 1946 movie in which the character played by Jimmy Stewart spends years putting people into homes through his work at Bailey Bros. Building and Loan. Then, as Christmas approaches, the film takes a terrible turn, but bad news becomes blessing as it provokes a community response that reminds him of what a wonderful career he’s had.

I had in November a mini-version of that. I’m grateful to have been editor since 1994, and had thought the painful disputes of September and October a departure from all that joy. But after The New York Times and the Religion News Service published articles about the advent of WORLD Opinions and the consequent resignations, the reaction made me thankful for bad news as well.

Suddenly, my email and Twitter feeds were full of sweet notes from former students and interns, readers of my columns and books, and others. I saw the moral of It’s a Wonderful Life: One life touches so many others. And I’ve learned this: Please write notes to those who have touched your life. They can make a huge difference in times of stress.

I’ll quote just one tweet here, from a student I taught long ago at the University of Texas: “Olasky was one of my profs when I was in J school. He was an [expletive]. Anyone who disagreed with him had to come correct with deeply reported work that made clear, concise arguments. My work was better because he was a man of unshakeable principles.”

That’s a great Christmas gift to a teacher, and I’ve had so many. Every WORLD writer during my editing years has been a gift. Here’s a partial list, in rough order of appearance: Joel Belz, Mindy Belz, Roy Maynard, Frederica Mathewes-Green, Joe Maxwell, Nick Eicher, Cal Thomas, Carl F.H. Henry, Forrest Mims, Susan Olasky, Helen Durham, Amy Sherman, Arsenio Orteza, Gene Edward Veith, Pamela Johnson, George Grant, David Chilton, Bob Jones IV, William H. Smith, R.C. Sproul Jr., Gary Thomas, Pete Wehner, Margie Haack, Joseph Slife.


And: James Marroquin, Evan Wilt, LaShawn Barber, Gaye Clark, Laura Finch, Samantha Gobba, Anna Poole, Bonnie Pritchett, Julia Seymour, Paul Butler, Kent Covington, Mary Reichard, Jim Henry, Sarah Schweinsberg, Juliana Chan Erikson, Katie Gaultney, Kim Henderson, Charles Horton, Henry Olsen, Jenny Lind Schmitt, Charissa Koh, Jim Long, Harvest Prude, Sharla Megilligan, Russell St. John, Marty VanDriel,

And: Michael Reneau, Rachel Aldrich, Ann Walters Custer, Rob Holmes, Mary Coleman, Sharon Dierberger, Jenny Rough, Andrew Shaughnessy, Laura Singleton, Jeff Koch, Laura Edghill, Steve West, Maria Baer, Myrna Brown, Trillia Newbell, Esther Eaton, Leah Savas, Hannah Harris, Maryrose Delahunty, Kyle Ziemnick, Collin Garbarino, Anna Johansen Brown, Ryan Bomberger, Jim Hill, Joyce Wu, Carolina Lumetta.

Finally, thanks to some helpers: David Freeland, Rob Patete, Krieg Barrie, Katrina Gettman, Joanna Veith, Rachel Beatty, Mary Ruth Murdoch, Kristin Chapman, Amanda Beddington.

And June McGraw.
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