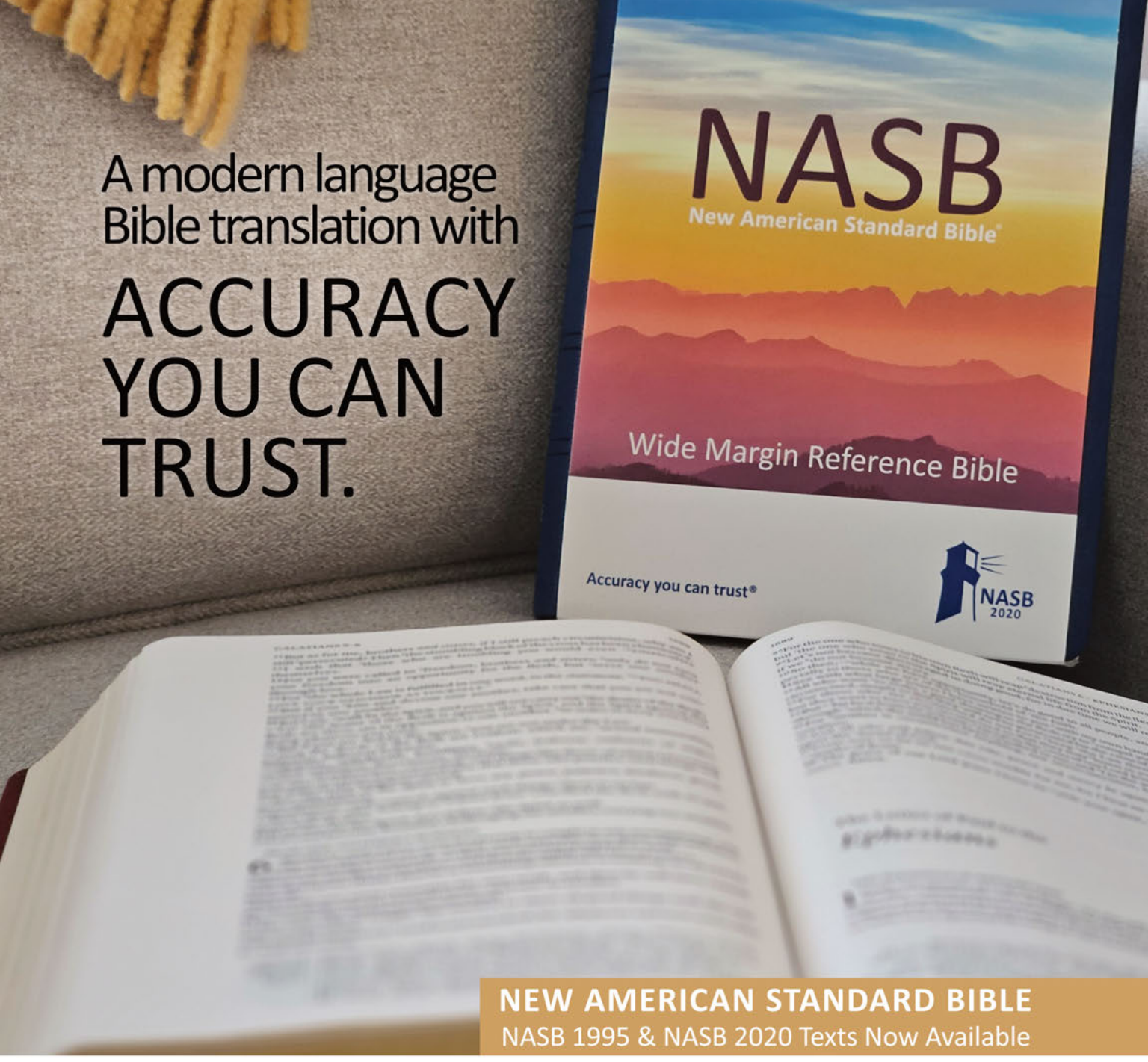
WORLD

EARNING YOUR TRUST, EVERY DAY / FEBRUARY 10, 2024

Sticking point

Patients injured by COVID-19 vaccines fight to be heard *p.44*

by EMMA FREIRE



NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE

NASB 1995 & NASB 2020 Texts Now Available

The New American Standard Bible (NASB) is a widely embraced and trusted English Bible translation that provides superior accuracy to the original languages. The NASB 1995 offers a traditional biblical language style, while the NASB 2020 offers a more modern English style that improves readability while still maintaining accuracy. The NASB 1995 and NASB 2020 both provide a clear and readable translation of the Bible that can be read with confidence because they strive for the most readable word-for-word translation that is accurate and clear.

NASB 2020 1995

Case Discounts at Shop.Lockman.org

Lockman.org

EMMAUS
BIBLE COLLEGE

Christ-Centered. Uncompromised. Valuable.

New Founders Grant!

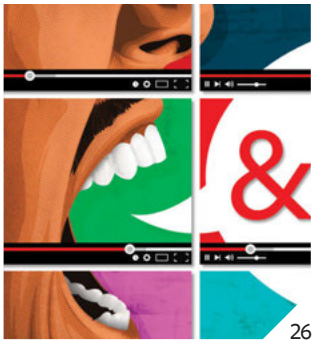
ALL INCOMING FRESHMEN ARE ELIGIBLE FOR OUR *$6,000* FOUNDERS GRANT. FIND OUT MORE AT:

EMMAUS.EDU/TUITION-AID

CONTENTS

FEBRUARY 10, 2024 / VOLUME 39, NUMBER 3

12



26


44


58

CEO Notes 6
Mailbag 8
Backstory 72

Voices

Joel Belz: Cover for coveting 10
Lynn Vincent: Music to my ears 24
Janie B. Cheaney: Costly kids 42
Andrée Seu Peterson: No trifling with sin 70

Dispatches

In the News: Evangelicals and Donald Trump 12
By the Numbers: Lenin's deadly legacy 15
Departures: Peter Schickele and Jack Burke Jr. 15
Global Briefs: Iranian aggression spreads 16
U.S. Briefs: Michigan GOP lands in court 18
Backgrounder: China's depopulation trend 20
Quotables: Dawkins on religion, Francis on hell 21
Quick Takes: Salt-lick drive-thru? 22

Culture

Trending: Does Hollywood need a swear jar? 26
Books: Two-tier Christianity? 30
Film & TV: *The Holdovers* 36
Music: Our post-war music story 40

Notebook

Science: Academic fraud dilutes real science 64
Education: Chronic truancy plagues schools 67
Religion: African bishops reject Vatican ruling 68
Sports: Newsom sacks youth tackle football ban 69

44

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

COVID-19 vaccines were supposed to help. Researchers—and government officials—are reluctant to admit that for some people, they actually hurt

52

SEEDS OF HOPE

Christians in Israel serve their neighbors as war brings suffering and few prospects for peace

58

SANCTUARY STRAIN

New York ministries help migrants navigate the U.S. asylum system—but most migrants have little chance of earning legal status

ON THE COVER: *Illustration by Krieg Barrie*

The FUTURE *of* HEALTH

Faith, Ethics, and our MedTech World

2024 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Hosted by Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, the Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity's annual conference is the leading venue for Christian bioethical engagement, providing opportunities for equipping and education, professional development and academic engagement, as well as networking for professionals, researchers, policymakers, educators, and students across a variety of disciplines and professional contexts.

JUNE 27–29

EARLY BIRD PRICING:

- CBHD Member: **$199**
- Non-Member: **$249**
- Student, Pastor, and Early Career Professional: **$99**

This conference will be available in person, online, or on-demand.

KEITH PLUMMER, PhD
Second Annual Virtue Ethics Lecture, "Discipled by Our Devices: Spiritual Formation in Our Technological Age"

MATTHEW LEE ANDERSON, DPhil
Theological Anthropology

JASON THACKER, PhD (cand.)
"Defining Humanity Down: The Irony of Generative AI and Human Anthropology in Christian Bioethics"

KRISTIN COLLIER, MD
"AI and Medicine: Living in the New Atlantis"

FARR CURLIN, MD
"The Way of Medicine for Christians"

ANNA VOLLEMA, PhD (cand.) & MIHRETU GUTA, PhD
"Can Technology Be an Idol?"

MICHAEL SLEASMAN, PhD
"Reframing the Future of Health"

TEDS πιστευθῆναι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον 1 THESS. 2:4
TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL
TRINITY INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

THE CENTER FOR BIOETHICS & HUMAN DIGNITY
TRINITY INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

REGISTER AT:
cbhd.org/conference

WORLD

BIBLICALLY OBJECTIVE JOURNALISM THAT INFORMS, EDUCATES, AND INSPIRES

"The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." —Psalm 24:1

WORLD (ISSN 0888-157X) (USPS 763-010) is published biweekly (24 issues) for $69.99 per year by God's World Publications, (no mail) 12 All Souls Crescent, Asheville, NC 28803; 828.253.8063. Periodical postage paid at Asheville, NC, and additional mailing offices. Printed in the USA.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to WORLD News Group, PO Box 20002, Asheville, NC 28802-9998.

HOW TO REACH US

Phone 828.435.2981 or 800.951.6397 outside the U.S.
Website wng.org
Member Services memberservices@wng.org
Donor relations Debra Meissner: dmeissner@wng.org
Advertising inquiries John Almaguer: jalmaguer@wng.org, Kyle Crimi: kcrimi@wng.org
Letters to the editor editor@wng.org
Mail PO Box 20002, Asheville, NC 28802
Facebook facebook.com/WNGdotorg
X @WNGdotorg
Instagram instagram.com/WNGdotorg

PROVIDENCE
CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

EXPLORE • VISIT • APPLY

WWW.PROVIDENCECC.EDU/WITHERSPOON

GROUNDED
IN BIBLICAL TRUTH

EDUCATED
IN THE CLASSICAL LIBERAL ARTS

PREPARED
TO BE VIRTUOUS CITIZENS

Ask about our **Witherspoon Honors Program**! 75% scholarship and Europe excursion included!

APPLY FOR FALL 2024

FREE APPLICATION CODE WHEN YOU APPLY ONLINE:

PCCWORLD24

CEO NOTES

ACCORDING TO A 2022 U.S. Census Bureau estimate, 330 cities in the United States have a population greater than 100,000. Asheville, N.C., is not among them.

Depending on your perspective, Asheville is either a small city or a large town. When tourists are abundant, which is the case nine months of the year, Asheville feels more like a city. It lends credibility to the claim that Asheville has the highest number of short-term vacation rentals per capita of any American city. I've never met anyone here who seems very happy about that. (I've also seen claims that Asheville has the most breweries per capita of any American city, and I've met quite a few people who seem proud of *that*.)

I don't know if those claims are accurate, but I do know that Asheville has been a good home for WORLD News Group and its predecessor organization for more than 80 years.

A bit of WORLD history: In 1942, two Asheville men—Nelson Bell and Henry Dendy—began publishing *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* from an office nearby. That publication grew in numbers and influence, then declined in the same metrics—but survived for more than 40 years. Near the end of its useful life, a young Joel Belz joined the organization, hoping to breathe new life into its weekly publication. He couldn't, but he leveraged the publishing resources of the *Journal*, added a few more, and began the *God's World News* line of weekly newsmagazines for students that boomed alongside Christian schools in the 1980s. A few years later, he launched WORLD Magazine.

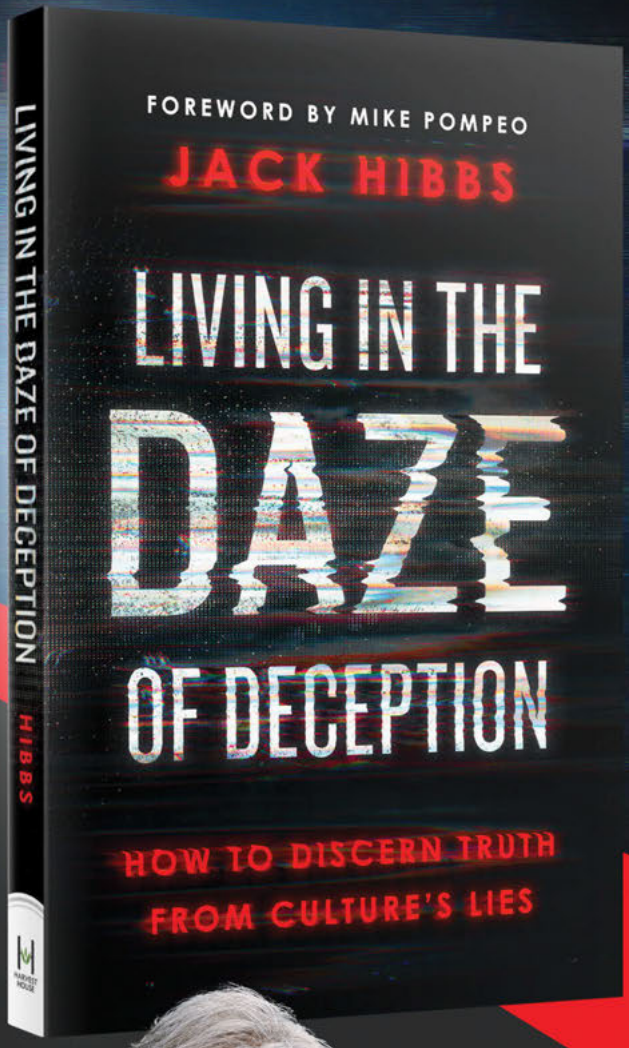
Today, roughly half of WORLD's full-time employees live in Asheville. Almost our entire business staff works from the Asheville headquarters, along with a significant portion of the editorial and production staff for God's WORLD News and *WORLD Watch*. Altogether, those departments represent the half of our employees who live here.

Conversely, almost the entire editorial and production staff for WORLD lives elsewhere, as do the employees of World Journalism Institute. That's important for the work they do, which involves as much on-the-ground reporting as we can afford. We can afford more when the reporters live closer to the action.

About 20 years ago, we looked at moving WORLD's headquarters to a different location. God didn't allow it then, and we haven't seriously considered it since. WORLD would have become a much different organization had it been based in a big city or a power center of some sort. Asheville is neither. I'm thankful for that.

KEVIN MARTIN
kevin@wng.org

A HIGH-STAKES BATTLE FOR EVERY CHRISTIAN



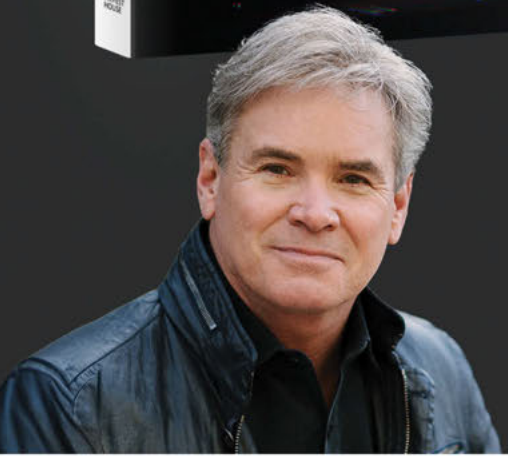
A worldwide outbreak of unstable thinking and counterfeit ideas—both inside the church and out—has permeated our culture. Containing just enough truth to appear trustworthy, these lies have grown more difficult to detect and avoid—but we are not without hope!

Living in the Daze of Deception explores how God's love overcomes every cultural lie. This biblical resource shows you how to discern truth from falsehood, equipping you to stand strong in faith as the spiritual battle around us intensifies.

FOREWORD BY MIKE POMPEO

"Christ can truly change hearts, and it is for this reason that I know you will find this book as encouraging as I did."

AVAILABLE WHEREVER YOU BUY BOOKS



JACK HIBBS is the senior and founding pastor of Calvary Chapel Chino Hills in Southern California. He is also the host of the nationally syndicated TV and radio program *Real Life*, and his daily media programs reach millions worldwide. Jack and his wife, Lisa, have two adult daughters and three grandchildren.

HARVEST HOUSE

DazeOfDeceptionBook.com

MAILBAG

Handel's triumph *p44*

Yet another inspiring cover for the Christmas edition of the magazine. Last year, it was Linus looking heavenward with joy as he recited the Christmas story, and this year, a whole chorus of faces doing the same.

DON BARBER
Newfields, N.H.

I greatly appreciated your cover story as I reminisced about my part in perpetuating Handel's *Messiah* as a Christmas tradition, from helping my church's organist carry his harpsichord into the building to my participation in a chapel group that sang "And the Glory of the Lord" and the "Hallelujah" chorus at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan.

MATTHEW TUBBS
Watertown, Wis.

Sometimes, when I pick up WORLD from the mailbox, I have to drop everything to read the cover story. Such was the case with the Dec. 23 issue. Great article by Caleb Bailey and an excellent follow-up by Leigh Jones. Noteworthy was the citing of Charles Jennens' words, which were inspired by Scripture.

NEIL SLATTERY
Fort Worth, Texas

Thank you for Caleb's informative article. Might there be a third reason why King George II rose to his feet during the "Hallelujah" chorus? Unlike King Herod, he readily acknowledged that "a greater than George" was there and stood in deferential respect and honor.

MIRIAM MORAN
Stone Mountain, Ga.

DECEMBER 23, 2023

Cultural combatants *p50*

The article on Ukrainian expats was informative and encouraging against all the horror and discouragement of Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine.

ROBERT DUNN
Fort Collins, Colo.

There is ample reason for Ukraine fatigue. First, the United States is $34 trillion in debt with no plans to balance a budget. Second, we have an open border and invasion of our own. Third, Ukraine's average military "recruit" is now in his 40s. The best service to humanity is to sit at the table and negotiate a peace settlement.

KATHY CONNORS
Medina, Wash.

What's inside the Gaza Strip tunnels? *p20*

I was offended that you referred to the tunnels built by the terrorist group Hamas as "defensive." Thankfully, later paragraphs clarified that these spaces are used to launch attacks, smuggle weapons, and hold hostages.

ANDI MICHELSON
East Sparta, Ohio

Bullets in the bush *p64*

You reported that "The [Australian] government bought back and destroyed 650,000 privately owned guns." Few if any of the guns were purchased from the government, so they were not going "back." And it was an involuntary and nonnegotiable transaction. The action would have been more accurately described as a "compensated confiscation."

DAVID K. MARTIN
Harrisburg, Pa.

The problem with Buddha *p70*

Andrée Seu Peterson's thoughts on life's sufferings were more than an essay. It was pure art! It marked me. I hope WORLD collects her insightful writings into a book for us to read soon.

TOM CASHEN
Fort Wayne, Ind.

Mailbag

It is a common occurrence for WORLD to print letters to the editor that show critique of articles. Good job for allowing your readers to give honest and Spirit-led criticism, praise, and feedback.

PAUL GREEAR
Montrose, Colo.

Correction

Artifice is based on the stories of Johan van Hulst, who saved 600 Jewish children in Amsterdam, and Han Van Meegeren, who sold forged art to Nazis ("Stroke of deception," Jan. 13, p. 32).

Send your letters and comments to:

- editor@wng.org
- WORLD Mailbag, PO Box 20002, Asheville, NC 28802

Please include full name and address. Letters may be edited to yield brevity and clarity.

Let's get started on a journey of discovery—***because you were created for a purpose***. Together, we're seeking God's design in all things. ***Integrating faith and life.*** From our beautiful campus in the Pittsburgh area, we're exploring, growing, and discerning all that we are created to be and do. **You were made for this.**

learn more at:

Geneva.edu/MadeForThis

VOICES **JOEL BELZ**

When politics is cover for coveting

The Tenth Commandment and debates over tax policy

This is the latest in a series of classic columns (edited for space) by Joel Belz. Joel wrote this column for the Oct. 9, 2010, issue of WORLD.

IN ALL THE DISCUSSION about tax breaks for the rich, two fairly simple facts are really all you need to know.

Fact No. 1 is that only 3 percent of all the taxpayers in the United States pay more in income taxes than the other 97 percent combined. Fact No. 2 is that even if you taxed that 3 percent of our population at a rate of 100 percent of their income, you wouldn't produce enough additional revenue to cover the deficits our federal government is now incurring each year.

There's a lot more, of course, you might learn and know about taxes. But keep these first two facts in mind as you try to process the big debate between those, on the one hand, who want to extend tax breaks enacted by the Bush administration in 2003 and those, on the other hand, who say it's time to end those tax breaks and make rich people pay more of their "fair share."

Wealthy as our nation is—and even in its current economic funk it is incredibly rich—it isn't wealthy enough to do everything we have committed to. We've run up to their limit a suitcase full of national credit cards, and now find there's no way to make the monthly payments. So we do what comes most naturally in such a desperate situation. We covet.

We glance to the right and to the left and we see a few folks who, from the looks of things, have more of this world's goods than we do. At first, we simply muse how much easier life would be if we just had a little more of what they already have. Then we start thinking: Maybe it's my right to have what they have. And the Tenth Commandment looks increasingly frayed with every new government wealth-transfer program.

I've heard from a number of WORLD readers who refer to this as theft, which involves the Eighth Commandment. That, I think, goes too far. A thief has no right to take what belongs to someone else. If a government, though, has an inherent right to tax its citizens, who can say at what point such taxation constitutes taking something to which it is not entitled? Jesus told us to give to Caesar what is Caesar's. At which marginal tax rate does Caesar's right end? A 32 percent tax rate might strike me as destructively high for the national good—but I'm not sure I can call it theft. A Christian in a thoroughly socialist nation is still Biblically obligated to pay his taxes fully and honestly.

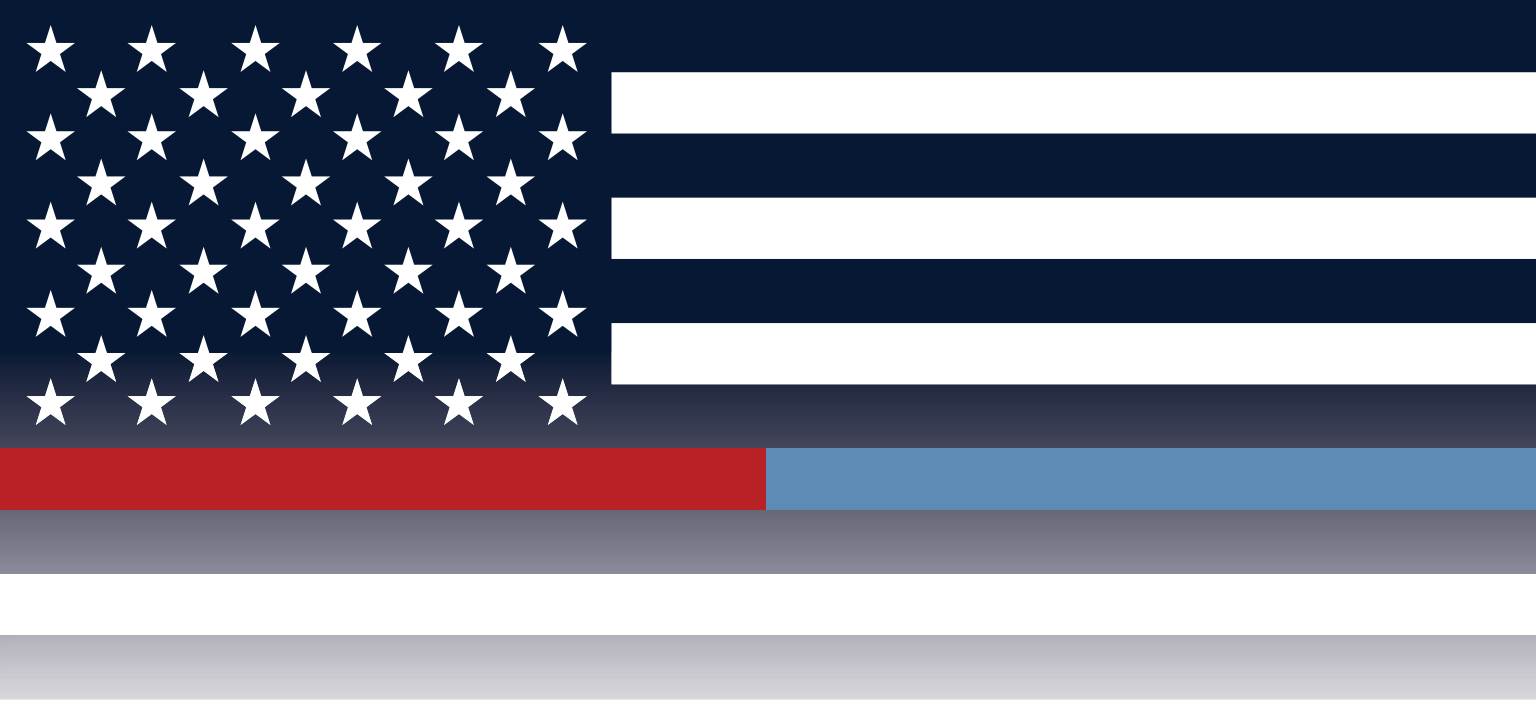
But there's no such ambiguity about coveting. And especially so when the politicians who call for higher taxes on the rich explicitly structure their argument on a blatant encouragement of envy and class covetousness. I wish President Barack Obama and his whole staff had had to memorize as children what my parents taught me from the Westminster Shorter Catechism, whose 81st question earned this answer: "The Tenth Commandment forbids all discontentment with our own estate, envying or grieving at the good of our neighbor, and all inordinate motions and affections to anything that is his." Try hanging that on the wall of every room where government tax policy is discussed and established.

See, God has structured and ordered things so that coveting is an unusually unproductive exercise. We sit and stew all day and wish we were as rich as our neighbor—and at the end of the day, even if the tax law gets changed so that rich people have to pay 40 percent of their income instead of just 30 percent, the coveters end up with virtually none of that difference.

That's why I started with the two simple facts of our current tax structure. We've gotten to the point that it doesn't matter much anymore how we change things. All the taxpayers together haven't got enough money now to change the fact that we've spent ourselves into oblivion. There's not a whole lot left to covet.

Not even if we change the rates to 100 percent. ■

Email *jbelz@wng.org*



RED & BLUE SCHOLARSHIP

at **THE MASTER'S UNIVERSITY**

This community scholarship is for students dependent on a parent currently working full-time in law enforcement or a fire department. Recipients are awarded $14,000 across 4 years.

SEE ALL DETAILS AT MASTERS.EDU/RED-AND-BLUE

150+ PROGRAMS | WORLD-CLASS FACULTY | SANTA CLARITA, CA

FOR CHRIST & SCRIPTURE SINCE 1927

DISPATCHES

AL DRAGO/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

IN THE NEWS
BY THE NUMBERS
DEPARTURES
GLOBAL BRIEFS
U.S. BRIEFS
BACKGROUNDER
QUOTABLES
QUICK TAKES

Donald Trump arrives at a campaign event in Manchester, N.H.

IN THE NEWS

Why Trump?

Concerns over America's future are driving evangelical support for the former president

by MARY JACKSON & CAROLINA LUMETTA

AT A TRUMP CAMPAIGN STOP in Hollis, N.H., on Jan. 23, Gabriela Cernolev stood in the snow outside a vineyard to watch Donald Trump Jr. speak on his father's behalf. As evidence of her support, she wore a MAGA baseball cap displaying signatures from both Trumps. Her T-shirt sported Trump's infamous mug shot and the text "Wanted—for president."

A Romanian immigrant, Cernolev has voted for Donald Trump in every election since she earned American citizenship in 2015. Now she says she enjoys living in New Hampshire where she can be on the front lines of support for the former president.

"He does have Christian values, and everything that he does, I think he is appointed by God to be where he is," Cernolev said. "Through the Bible, through history, God uses people in different ways. And I think Trump is being used for the greater good."

Many American evangelicals share similar sentiments. And following Trump's victories in New Hampshire and Iowa, he appears poised to clinch the Republican presidential nomination for a third time.

Of course, no other presidential candidate has rolled into primary season freighted with federal indictments, so Trump's legal baggage may yet derail his third White House bid. And yet, despite that baggage—and past moral indiscretions—Trump enjoys broad support from religious conservatives.

Why didn't such voters coalesce around an alternative Republican candidate, such as former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley or Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis? Evangelical Trump supporters in Iowa and New Hampshire will tell you: In interviews, many expressed confidence in Trump's track record, willingness to overlook his faults, and fear over where the country is headed.

Stephen Scheffler is the president of the Iowa Faith and Freedom Coalition and the state GOP's Republican national committeeman. He's also an elder at Woodland Hills Church of Christ in Pleasant Hill, Iowa. On Jan. 18, Scheffler endorsed Trump, a decision he says was based on his belief that Trump is the only candidate who can beat Biden. He admitted he doesn't always like the way Trump talks, but emphasized that every candidate has flaws. "We're not looking →

to elect a priest or a pastor," he said. "We're looking to elect somebody that's got the guts and the tenacity to push back against radical woke socialism."

Gary Leffler, 62, of West Des Moines, Iowa, praised Trump's first-term record on religious liberty and pro-life issues: "Never in our lives did my wife and I believe we would see *Roe v. Wade* overturned." Leffler attends a nondenominational church and, in local and state parades, drives a 1957 Ford 860 tractor with "John 3:16" painted on the front. In 2016, Leffler's tractor morphed into the "Trump tractor," decorated with Trump magnets and signs. Leffler admits Trump is rough around the edges. But he argues God uses sinful people—why not Trump?

There's a whole other wing of evangelicals who stand ready to answer that question, too.

Some well-known Christians still publicly oppose Trump, most notably *New York Times* columnist David French and former Southern Baptist leader Russell Moore, who now heads *Christianity Today*. They, along with Peter Wehner and the late Michael Gerson, have pointed out that Trump behaves in ways that are antithetical to Christian teaching, and they've argued he has duped evangelicals into supporting him by offering a combination of key policy concessions and access to power.

While many nonpublic evangelicals share these views, they were hard to come by in Iowa and New Hampshire. Every evangelical we interviewed was, if not a full-throated Trump supporter, ready to vote for him over Biden.

Shari Reynolds, 77, of Earlham, Iowa, said she sees Trump as the only candidate who could "make right what Biden has messed up." Reynolds believes the U.S. has lost respect internationally and sees Trump as the candidate who could restore that.

Pepperdine University political science professor Chris Soper believes many white evangelicals support Trump because he represents political attitudes they value—such as distrust of government and isolationist leanings. He noted that some evangelicals who supported Trump on a transactional basis in 2016 now judge his first-term track record—on issues ranging from the economy to immigration—a success.

It's true that some Americans who self-identify as "evangelical" to pollsters do not actually attend church regularly. Increasingly, the term is used more in a "political, cultural sense than a theological church sense," said political scientist Ryan Burge. He predicts these "cultural evangelicals" will make up about 12 percent of Trump's self-identified evangelical voters in 2024.

In a Jan. 22 Substack post, Burge compiled data from the 2008-2020 Cooperative Election Study on church-attending Trump supporters. His conclusion: Partisanship, not high or low church attendance, has propelled Trump's popularity to a "fever pitch." Burge says that's because "religiously active people tend to be more Republican and Republicans tend to vote for Trump."

As for Trump's pending legal indictments—charges surrounding his alleged efforts to overturn the 2020 election results, mishandling of classified documents, and hush money paid to an adult film star—Patti Arnburg, 72, of Earlham, believes they're "part of an effort to keep him out of office."

Certainly, not every evangelical names Trump as their first pick. Grant Brown, the 35-year-old pastor of Crossroad Church in Earlham, said he voted for DeSantis at the Iowa caucuses. But in the general election, Brown said, he'll support Trump "because I'm looking at my kids." ■

—with additional reporting by Christina Grube

Gary and Jannell Leffler

COURTESY OF GARY LEFFLER

BY THE NUMBERS

Legacy of terror

The footprint of Lenin's bloody revolution

by JOHN DAWSON

100

The number of years since Vladimir Lenin's death on Jan. 21, 1924. Though the power of Marxism-Leninism has faded, Lenin's 1917 revolution stained the 20th century with widespread privation and bloodshed.

9 million

The number of deaths attributable to the Russian Revolution of 1917, according to historian Richard Pipes. The horrors continued with the 1921-1922 Soviet famine, which resulted in the deaths of another estimated 5 million people.

54,174

The number of Orthodox churches in the Russian empire on the eve of the revolution—a number that fell to less than 500 in 1939 after Lenin began a campaign of religious persecution that Stalin intensified.

5

The number of communist countries remaining in the world: China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam.

DEPARTURES

Peter Schickele

Schickele, a Juilliard-trained musician and humorist whose parody albums earned him four consecutive Grammy awards in the 1990s, died Jan. 16 at age 88. In his early career, Schickele composed film scores, orchestrated Joan Baez albums, and played the bassoon with a symphony. Along the way, he wrote classical music parodies under the pen name P.D.Q. Bach, the supposedly forgotten youngest son of the classical composer. While Schickele continued his more serious work, it was his P.D.Q. Bach persona that sold out concert halls and won Grammys. As his parody gained popularity, Schickele ran with it, writing a fictional 1976 biography of the character and even inventing fanciful instruments such as the dill piccolo (for sour notes).

Jack Burke Jr.

A golfer whose hot streak in 1956 led to two major championships, Burke died Jan. 19. He was 100. The son of a professional golfer, Burke qualified for the U.S. Open at age 16. After serving in the Marine Corps, Burke returned to professional golf. In 1952, he won four professional tournaments in a row and at year's end won the PGA's Vardon Trophy for lowest scoring average. Four years later, he got hot again. Down by eight strokes going into the final round, Burke came from behind to win the 1956 Masters. Three months later, he'd win the PGA Championship. Burke co-founded Champions Golf Club in Houston in 1957, finally selling the club to his son in 2021.

ILLUSTRATION BY KRIEG BARRIE; SCHICKELE: HANDOUT; BURKE: PRESTON STROUP/AP

Iran fans flames in regional conflicts

Iran The Islamic Republic has grown increasingly aggressive amid already-high military tensions in the Middle East. In mid-January, Tehran launched airstrikes against targets in Syria and Iraq in retaliation for a suicide bombing by Islamic State militants that killed more than 90 Iranians. Hours later, Iran similarly targeted insurgents in Pakistan. Meanwhile, the Pentagon said several U.S. troops were injured in a Jan. 20 attack by Iranian-backed rebels on an Iraqi air base. U.S. officials say Iran is also "directly involved" in more than a dozen attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels on international shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. *—Leigh Jones*

North Korea Kim Jong Un, the country's dictatorial leader, said unification with South Korea is no longer possible, state media reported on Jan. 16. During his speech to the Supreme People's Assembly, North Korea's rubber-stamp parliament, Kim called for a rewrite of the constitution to designate the South as the North's "primary foe and invariable principal enemy." The North also shuttered three government agencies that managed inter-Korean affairs, including joint economic and tourism projects. North Korea launched a spy satellite into space in November and plans to launch three more this year, in addition to strengthening nuclear and missile forces and building drones. As tensions on the Korean Peninsula escalate, the South has ramped up defense cooperation with Washington. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol said the South would retaliate if provoked. *—Joyce Wu*

POPULATION
26 million

LANGUAGE
Korean

RELIGION
Traditionally Buddhist and Confucian, some Christian and syncretic Chondogyo

GOVERNANCE
Dictatorship

GDP
$40 billion

MAJOR EXPORTS
Refined petroleum, iron alloys, electricity, cars, vaccines and cultures

FACT BOX SOURCE: THE WORLD FACTBOOK-CIA; IRAN: KARZAN MOHAMMAD OTHMAN/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

Kyrgyzstan Authorities searched the homes and offices of 11 independent media–affiliated journalists on Jan. 16. They are charged with fomenting unrest. The same day, multiple international human rights groups urged Kyrgyz authorities to stop repression of journalists that began after outlets published investigations into political corruption two years ago. Kyrgyzstan's legislature is considering a new law similar to Russia's that would increase government control of news outlets. The country was once renowned for its journalistic freedom, but under President Sadyr Japarov, that freedom has eroded. Japarov claims his government supports freedom of speech and "good quality" media investigations. The journalists will remain jailed for at least two months. *—Amy Lewis*

POPULATION
6.1 million

LANGUAGE
Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian

RELIGION
90% Muslim, 7% Christian, 3% other

GOVERNANCE
Parliamentary republic

GDP
$32.22 billion

MAJOR EXPORTS
Gold, float glass, precious metals

Finland The state prosecutor on Jan. 12 asked the country's high court to consider a case against an evangelical Christian lawmaker and her pastor. The prosecutor charges **Päivi Räsänen** and Pastor Juhana Pohjola with discriminatory "hate speech" for publicly voicing Biblical views on human sexuality. The Helsinki District Court and the Court of Appeal already acquitted them twice. As part of the appeal, the prosecutor dropped a previous charge over statements Räsänen made on a radio program in 2019. Her lawyer, Matti Sankamo, said Räsänen has essentially won that part of the case. The remaining dispute centers on "whether quoting Bible texts can be criminal," Sankamo said. *—Jenny Lind Schmitt*

Nicaragua Bishop **Rolando Álvarez**, a leading critic of Nicaragua's increasingly authoritarian government, is free after more than a year behind bars. On Jan. 14, a flight carrying Álvarez and 17 other Catholic clergy landed in Rome after the Vatican brokered a deal for their release. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega jailed them following sweeping anti-government protests in 2018. Ortega views the Catholic Church as a threat and has accused religious leaders of plotting to overthrow him. Last February, Washington helped secure the release of 222 political prisoners, but Álvarez refused to leave without conferring with other bishops. *—Grace Snell*

Solomon Islands China is trying to control the press in this tiny island country. According to independent media group In-depth Solomons, a Chinese Embassy delegate contacted the owners of two major island newspapers after Taiwan's Jan. 13 elections. The delegate expressed concern about "incorrect perspectives" in articles about Taiwan's new president, and emailed two pro-China articles for the newspapers to print. The *Solomon Star* ran them on its front page the next day. *The Island Sun* ran them two days later. Both papers have accepted thousands of dollars in cash and equipment from China. Georgina Kekea, head of the Media Association of Solomon Islands, issued a warning: "If we are not careful, we might lose our freedom." *—Amy Lewis*

POPULATION
714,766

LANGUAGE
Melanesian pidgin, English

RELIGION
73% Protestant, 20% Roman Catholic

GOVERNANCE
Parliamentary democracy

GDP
$1.7 billion

MAJOR EXPORTS
Lumber, tuna, palm oil, coconut oil

RÄSÄNEN: EMMI KORHONEN/LEHTIKUVA/SIPA USA/AP; ÁLVAREZ: STR/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

U.S. BRIEFS

Leadership spat divides Michigan's GOP

Michigan A power struggle in the state's Republican Party has landed in court. Members of Michigan's Republican State Committee voted Jan. 6 to remove Kristina Karamo as their chair. In a subsequent meeting on Jan. 20, they elected **Pete Hoekstra**, a former congressman and U.S. ambassador to the Netherlands, to replace her. Karamo's opponents accuse her of various failures, including an autocratic leadership style and mismanaging party finances. But Karamo has refused to step down: On Jan. 13, she held her own meeting, and other party members voted to affirm her as chair. In response to Hoekstra's election, Karamo posted on X, "As chair of the Michigan Republican Party, we will not allow for the party to be stolen." On Jan. 19, Republicans opposed to Karamo filed a lawsuit in Kent County Circuit Court in Grand Rapids to force her out. Karamo was elected to her position in February 2023. She is a vocal supporter of former President Donald Trump and maintains the 2020 election was stolen. *—Emma Freire*

POPULATION
10 million

GOVERNOR
Gretchen Whitmer*

U.S. SENATORS
Debbie Stabenow*; Gary Peters*

INDUSTRY
Agriculture, automotive manufacturing

West Virginia The state Senate's Committee on Education unanimously recommended approval Jan. 16 of a bill that would let public school teachers discuss theories besides evolution in the classroom. If passed, public school officials could not prohibit a teacher from discussing or answering questions about "scientific theories of how the universe and/or life came to exist." Proponents said teachers avoid discussing intelligent design because they fear reprisal. Opponents called intelligent design an unscientific form of creationism that violates the separation of church and state. The full state Senate approved a similar bill last year and still needs to vote on the new bill. Last year's bill died in the House Education Committee. *—Todd Vician*

Montana The state Board of Public Education unanimously approved 19 applications on Jan. 19 for Montana's first public charter schools. The board received 26 applications and prioritized proposals that provided diverse options for students and parents. Those approved include a multilingual school for students learning English, a school focused on career-based agricultural education, and one offering internships and college credit to high school students interested in teaching. The board denied applications that didn't show innovative instruction or a likelihood of success. The state Legislature authorized public charter schools in 2023 and will provide funding, at a level set by the governor, through the same process used for traditional public schools. *—Todd Vician*

*DEMOCRAT / *REPUBLICAN / *INDEPENDENT; SOURCES: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU AND WORLD ATLAS

Washington Nearly four years after the death of Manuel Ellis, lawmakers in Olympia want to end the police practice that may have starved his body of oxygen. The restraining technique known as "hog-tying," sometimes called the prone maximal restraint position or the hobble position, involves cuffing a person's feet and hands, with the hands behind the back. It's a practice the U.S. Department of Defense has opposed since 1995. The attorney general's office in Washington state opposes it, too, according to a model use-of-force policy released in 2022. But some local agencies continue to use it. Democratic state Sen. Yasmin Trudeau sponsored SB 6009, legislation that could end hog-tying entirely. She says she doesn't want anyone else to experience the "dehumanization" Ellis faced before his death. After a medical examiner ruled Ellis' 2020 death a homicide, three Tacoma police officers faced murder and manslaughter charges. Defense attorneys argued methamphetamine intoxication and a heart condition caused Ellis' death. A jury acquitted the officers in December. *—Kim Henderson*

Pennsylvania The 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia has ruled state laws banning 18- to 20-year-olds from openly carrying firearms during a state of emergency are unconstitutional. In a 2-1 decision issued Jan. 18, the majority cited the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark 2022 ruling in *New York v. Bruen*. That decision affirmed for the first time that the Second Amendment protects the right to carry a handgun in public for self-defense. And it established a new test for gun laws: Restrictions must "be consistent with the nation's historical tradition of firearm regulation." Regarding Pennsylvania's attempt to impose restrictions on 18- to 20-year-olds, U.S. Circuit Judge Kent Jordan wrote, "We are aware of no founding-era law that supports disarming people in that age group." Pennsylvania's attorney general may appeal. *—Sharon Dierberger*

POPULATION
12.8 million

GOVERNOR
Josh Shapiro*

U.S. SENATORS
Bob Casey Jr.*; John Fetterman*

INDUSTRY
Mining, tourism

Texas Inactive drilling sites, known as orphan wells, leak a toxic mixture of oil and salt water. Oil companies are supposed to fill them with cement within 12 months of closing a drilling site, but they abandon some of them, leaving the Texas Railroad Commission to clean up the mess. The Lone Star State now has a backlog of thousands of patch jobs, and officials are having trouble keeping up, according to commission data. Federal lawmakers delegated $4.6 billion to plug orphan wells in 2021 and filled 730 wells in Texas, more than any other state. As the federal money flowed, the watchdog group Commission Shift found that while the state is able to plug more wells, the Texas government is using less of its own money. State funds are paying for 600 fewer wells each year. The Railroad Commission hopes to secure more federal funding to keep up with the plugging, but federal officials say they will base future grants on states increasing their funding instead of their catalog of abandoned wells. *—Addie Offereins*

MICHIGAN: DANIEL SHULAR/THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS/AP; WASHINGTON: MADDY GRASSY/AP; PENNSYLVANIA: ELAINE THOMPSON/AP

BACKGROUNDER

Does China have a depopulation problem?

by ELIZABETH RUSSELL

CHINA'S POPULATION has fallen—for a second year in a row. The number of people in China was 1.409 billion in 2023, a decrease of 2.1 million from the year before, according to figures released by the National Bureau of Statistics on Jan. 17. Communist officials are worried about the downward trend and have offered incentives for young couples to have more children. But it will likely prove challenging to boost the birthrate slump, an ongoing problem in many countries around the globe.

Why is China's population falling? Last year, 11.1 million people died while only 9 million were born. The death rate in 2023 was the highest since 1974, during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. That was partly due to a nationwide surge of COVID-19 that occurred early last year after authorities finally lifted their stringent quarantine measures. Meanwhile, the national birthrate dropped to 6.39 births per 1,000 people, down from 6.77 in 2022, officials reported.

Isn't China's former one-child policy to blame? That policy, in place from 1980 through 2015, caused Chinese birthrates to plummet. Combined with the country's traditional cultural preference for boys, the policy also led to a massive gender imbalance, with men now outnumbering women by about 32 million. Rapid urbanization has lowered the birthrate (and marriage rate) even further due to the higher costs of living and raising children in cities.

What economic effects can we expect? A downswing in the number of future workers and consumers will hurt businesses. Also, as the proportion of elderly Chinese grows, their retirement pensions and healthcare needs will strain national resources. The government-run Chinese Academy of Sciences projects the pension system will run out of money by 2035.

Aren't other countries experiencing this problem? Nearly every European country has a death rate exceeding its birthrate. However, many still experienced population growth in the last two years due to immigration. Worldwide fertility is expected to fall to 2.1 births per woman—the replacement level—by 2050. In the United States, population growth is largely being driven by immigration from South and Central America.

Can China reverse its trend? President Xi Jinping last year urged women to "cultivate a new culture of marriage and childbearing," and local governments have announced various baby-friendly incentives, from longer maternity leave to housing subsidies and tax deductions. The Wuhan Donghu High-tech Zone is offering 60,000 yuan ($8,400) per child, the highest known subsidy so far. But according to a recent report from the Beijing-based YuWa Population Research Institute, many of these plans haven't actually been implemented due to insufficient funding or motivation. ■

WANG ZHAO/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

QUOTABLES

"Maybe there is still something for me to learn when it comes to religion."

British atheist and author RICHARD DAWKINS, in a Jan. 12 tweet promoting an upcoming Dissident Dialogues conference in New York featuring a discussion (or perhaps a debate) between him and his friend Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Muslim-turned-atheist who recently converted to Christianity.

"Nothing. No juice. Still on zero percent."

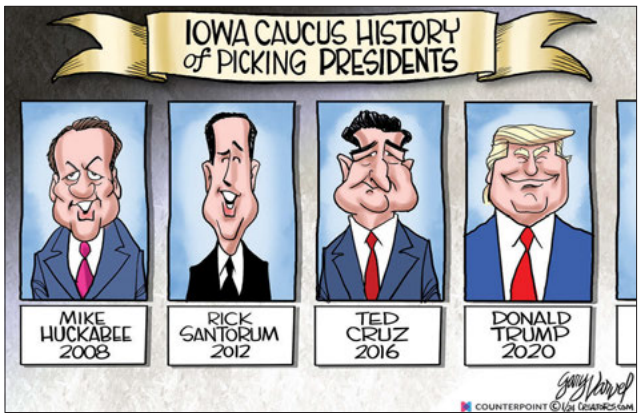
TYLER BEARD, a Chicago-area Tesla owner whose electric car, like many others, was dead and stuck in a charging lot in mid-January, unable to recharge due to sub-zero temperatures, according to Fox Chicago.

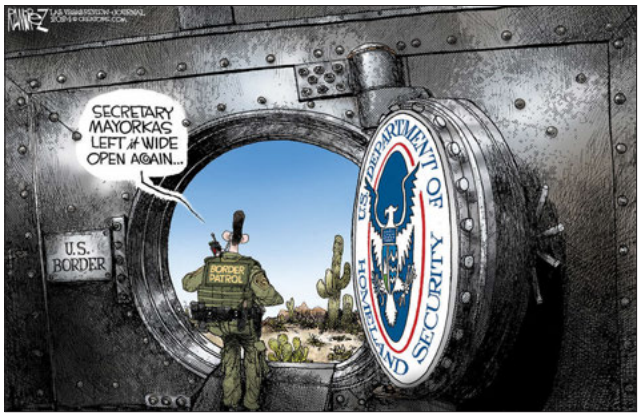
"What I am going to say is not a dogma of faith but my own personal view: I like to think of hell as empty; I hope it is."

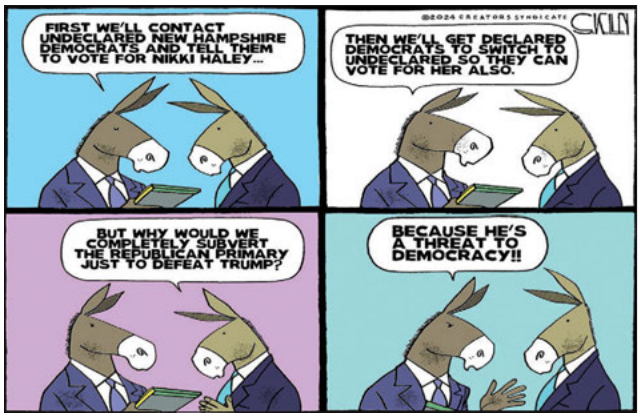
POPE FRANCIS, speaking on a prime-time Italian TV talk show on Jan. 14 after being asked by interviewer Fabio Fazio how he imagines hell.

"I saw seven of them smashing into a car the other day. They tear up roofs and break windows. Once they even chased a group of kids."

Houston resident KELLIE DONOGHUE, whose neighborhood on the city's west side has been terrorized by feral peacocks.







QUICK TAKES

Curb the licks

Canada cautions motorists against letting moose slurp salt from vehicles

by JOHN DAWSON

DON'T LET MOOSE LICK YOUR CAR. That's the warning from a Parks Canada spokesperson who in January cautioned motorists against endangering wildlife in Canada's national parks. According to Tracy McKay, moose are drawn to roadways every winter in search of the salt used to de-ice roads. McKay said motorists who stop and let the massive animals lick salty residue from their cars are putting the moose—and motorists—at risk of a collision because it encourages the animals to linger on those roadways. "Parks Canada understands that seeing those wildlife is a real highlight for a lot of people," McKay told the CBC, "but we ask people not to stop ... so that the moose can't get used to licking salt off of the cars."

Dousing his flame

As Quebec battled a record-breaking wildfire season last year, Brian Paré posted updates frequently on Facebook, claiming the Canadian infernos were all a government conspiracy to promote climate change initiatives. But in reality, he was lighting the matches. Paré's social media tirades had raised suspicion among investigators, who tracked his vehicle to the scene of other suspicious fires. Paré subsequently confessed and pleaded guilty to 13 counts of arson Jan. 15 in connection with fires sparked in rural Quebec that forced the evacuation of 500 homes.

No-sled zone

Toronto health and safety officials know how to take the fun out of snow days. The Canadian city is now limiting sledding to 29 hills at 27 parks, placing an outright ban on sledding at 45 other hills due to safety concerns. Toronto Councilor Brad Bradford decried the order, saying city residents had a long history of sledding down the now-forbidden hills. "It's the no fun city when you start seeing them cracking down on tobogganing," Bradford told the CBC. "This is why folks get cynical."

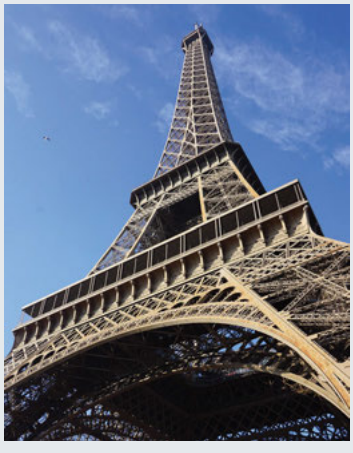
ILLUSTRATION BY YUKI MURAYAMA; SLED: TATYANA TOMSICKOVA/GETTY IMAGES

Fixing a bad turn

Drivers in Edinburgh, Scotland, may want to update their Google Maps app. In January, Google officials said they fixed a problem that had directed two motorists to drive down a flight of city steps. Previously drivers were able to turn from a major street onto Greenside Lane using a ramp. But last year, the city replaced the ramp with a pedestrian-friendly staircase. Apparently, city officials didn't tell Google, whose mapping software continued to direct drivers down the path.

Language barrier

Belgium native Vincent Lenoir runs a French company. His wife, Martine, wrote a book in French. They have lived in southeastern France for 24 and nine years, respectively. But none of that convinced the French bureaucracy that the couple speaks enough French to qualify for citizenship. "You can see that I'm talking to you [in French] in a correct way," Lenoir told BFMTV. "But unfortunately a priori that's not enough for our administration." According to French officials, the Lenoirs must pass an official language exam—a test offered so infrequently, according to Vincent, their current immigration appeal will expire before they can get results.

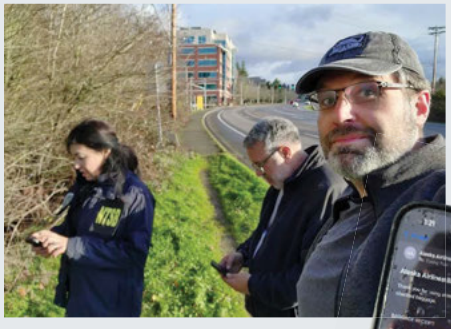


"God bless you, but the wrath of God will be upon you for taking from the house of God."

Nothing's sacred ...

The Way Fellowship Church of Dallas put up a security fence to try to quell a string of burglaries. But by Jan. 8, burglars had stolen the fence, too. Pastor **Tavares Gardner** said thieves used a saw to cut through the wrought-iron fence and then made off with eight panels and a gate, destroying a security measure that cost the church's congregation thousands of dollars. Gardner told KDFW-TV that burglars previously had stolen media equipment. Filled with righteous indignation, the pastor had a message for the thieves: "God bless you, but the wrath of God will be upon you for taking from the house of God."

Skydiving iPhone



Apple may have a new marketing scheme after Washington resident **Sean Bates** found an abandoned iPhone on the side of a road Jan. 7. He was surprised the device was half charged with no screen lock. But he was even more surprised to find on the phone an Alaska Airlines baggage e-receipt from the Boeing 737 flight that made an emergency landing when the plane's door plug blew off after departing Portland, Ore. Several items—including the phone Bates found—had been swept out of the plane. "It was still pretty clean, no scratches on it, sitting under a bush," he said on social media. Not bad for an estimated 16,000-foot fall out of a jet.

CAR: METRO; FRANCE: DAYLIGHTLOREN/GETTY IMAGES; GARDNER: HANDOUT; PHONE: SEAN BATES

VOICES **LYNN VINCENT**

Music to my ears

WORLD 2024 playlist entries are in

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE MUSIC to evoke an era, and scores of you wrote to share five songs that take you back to your youth. The idea, you'll recall, was to create a WORLD 2024 playlist that would unite us across generations. Each email was like opening a little gift, and it was so much fun to see the enormous range of eras and genres.

In all, you submitted more than 600 (and counting) songs. Once duplicates were merged, the final tally was more than 450. Sadly, I had to omit a few songs for thematic reasons. I was saddest to leave behind Cab Calloway's million-selling, jazz-scat, call-and-response number, "Minnie the Moocher." Despite her big heart, Calloway tells us, Minnie's red-hot profession was not, shall we say ... Biblically compatible.

The oldest song on our playlist is George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." Several sources say Gershwin's instrumental classic embodies the "zeitgeist of the Jazz Age." Also among the oldest selections: "All the Things You Are" (Artie Shaw Orchestra), "Sing, Sing, Sing" (Benny Goodman), and multiple Glenn Miller songs, including "Fools Rush In," "String of Pearls," and "Pennsylvania 6-5000."

The song with the most votes (6) was "Bridge Over Troubled Water" by Simon & Garfunkel. (Not what I would've thought!) After "Bridge," the songs with the most votes were "I Want To Hold Your Hand" (the Beatles), "25 or 6 to 4" (Chicago), "Good Vibrations" (the Beach Boys), and "Close to You" (the Carpenters), all with five nods each. I love all those songs, especially the Beach Boys, whose music I recommend any time you need to do some mindless and unpleasant task, such as cleaning out a storage shed, and need to feel better about it. (Who can stay grumpy while listening to "Fun, Fun, Fun"?)

Of course, it wouldn't be a true WORLD playlist without songs from WORLD staff. Some top staff selections: Myrna Brown, co-host of *The World and Everything in It*: "Boogie Wonderland" (Earth, Wind, & Fire and the Emotions). Rebecca Cochrane, editorial director, God's WORLD News: "Faithfully" (Journey). Daniel Devine, editor, WORLD Magazine: "God's Own Fool" (Michael Card).

I laughed when one young staffer told another he was happy to see somebody posting songs that weren't "geezer" music. By the way, it was our young staffers who contributed the most music from Christian artists. Songs like "4:12" (Switchfoot), "Nothing Is Beyond You" (Rich Mullins), and "Sweet Victory" (Twila Paris).

A big thank-you to our intrepid executive assistant, Jennifer Kuyper (no direct relation to Abraham) for entering 600-plus songs in a spreadsheet. Her next step is to build the playlists for Spotify and Apple, so she could probably use prayer! To get you started, I've scoured Jenn's spreadsheet for a representative sample:

"Heartbreak Hotel" (Elvis Presley). "Runaway" (Del Shannon). "Fly Me to the Moon" (Frank Sinatra). "Satisfaction" (the Rolling Stones). "Blackbird" (the Beatles). "My Generation" (the Who). "Like a Rolling Stone" (Bob Dylan). "For What It's Worth" (Buffalo Springfield). "A Day in the Life" (the Beatles). "Monday, Monday" (the Mamas and the Papas). "Bad Moon Rising" (Creedence). "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" (Crosby, Stills, & Nash). "Into the Mystic" (Van Morrison).

"Roundabout" (Yes). "Ain't No Sunshine" (Bill Withers). "Stairway to Heaven" (Led Zeppelin). "Take It Easy" (Eagles). "Shambala" (Three Dog Night). "Fantasy" (Earth, Wind, & Fire). "Blue Bayou" (Linda Ronstadt). "Ain't That a Shame" (Cheap Trick). "Bohemian Rhapsody" (Queen). "Stayin' Alive" (the BeeGees). "There Is a Redeemer" (Keith Green). "Walk Like an Egyptian" (the Bangles). "Old Enough To Know" (Michael W. Smith). "Free Fallin'" (Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers).

"Because He Lives" (the Gaithers). "Daisy" (Switchfoot). "One" (U2). "Ironic" (Alanis Morrissette). "Jolene" (Dolly Parton). "Ring of Fire" (Johnny Cash). "Chariots of Fire" (Vangelis). "What a Wonderful World" (Louis Armstrong). "Rock With You" (Michael Jackson). "The Thin Ice" (Pink Floyd).

Check back on this page in our next issue for a QR code and web link to take you to our full playlist. ■

Email *lvincent@wng.org*

WJI WORLD JOURNALISM INSTITUTE

Scan here to learn more

YOUR CALLING IS CALLING.

College students and recent graduates: Join a multimedia journalism course that grows your portfolio, your connections, and your faith. Receive hands-on instruction from experienced journalists while reporting for magazine, television, internet, and podcast platforms.

COLLEGE COURSE 2024 | MAY 16 - JUNE 1 | SIOUX CENTER, IOWA

Accepted students will receive a full scholarship including tuition, housing, and most meals. **Apply online at wji.world. Application deadline: March 29, 2024.**

CULTURE

ILLUSTRATION BY TAYLOR CALLERY

TRENDING

Lights, camera, profanity

Does Hollywood need a swear jar?

by BEKAH MCCALLUM

IT'S TOUGH TO CUE UP a movie with the family these days without instinctively keeping a finger on the mute button. If you feel like language and objectionable content in entertainment are getting worse, you're right.

Analyzing 60,000 movies for *The Wall Street Journal*, a filtering service called Enjoy Movies Your Way compiled data this past December about profanity in films. Surveyed movies released in 1985 included a total of 511 F-words. Movies released last year included 22,177 uses of the same expletive.

While there are standards for how much obscene content a movie can include, over time those rules have changed to meet the demands of moviemakers. And, when it comes to streaming services, those standards are "more what you call guidelines," to borrow a phrase from *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Back when motion pictures first became popular in the early 1900s, there was no consistent rulebook for what movies could and couldn't include. But it wasn't exactly a free-for-all. Audiences were generally much more sensitive to profanity, and state censorship boards tried to keep the films in check, sometimes with concerns that seem laughable today. Pennsylvania's board, for example, was critical of references to pregnancy in movies, arguing many young viewers believed storks brought babies.

Seven years later, former Postmaster General William Hays helped form the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association, the forerunner of the Motion Picture Association of America. Hays compiled a list of "Don'ts and Be Carefuls," which became the Hays Code and later the Motion Picture Production Code. It wasn't enforced strictly at first, and "pre-code" Hollywood continued to produce films considered racy for their time, with stars such as Mae West and Clara Bow. By 1934, however, public pressure led the big studios to accept enforcement under a new code administrator, Joseph Breen. Kisses that lasted more than three seconds or uses of liquor "when not required by the plot" became no-gos. Profanity was prohibited. The MPPDA required films to get certificates of approval or face fines before audiences could view the finished product.

But then in 1948, the U.S. Supreme Court forced studios to give up ownership of theaters. The production code began to weaken slowly as studios could no longer control theaters and directors began to push boundaries. When Jack Valenti became head of the MPAA in the 1960s, he scrapped →

the code and introduced the voluntary rating system that labeled movies as G, M (changed to PG in 1969), R, or X (changed to NC-17 in 1990). PG-13 was added thanks to *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* since it included too much violence for PG but didn't merit the severity of an R rating. Because of the new rating system, the priority shifted from what filmmakers couldn't include to warning audiences about what was included.

Under this rating system, family-friendly movies have performed better in theaters than R-rated flicks. A 2006 study reported that studios like Warner Bros. and Paramount produced 12 times more R-rated films than G-rated movies, even though the G-rated ones tended to gross more profit. R-rated movies in 2022 made up the lowest box-office revenue in 25 years. (Most theaters won't show unrated or NC-17 films since excluding children is bad for business.) When implemented in 1997, the TV Parental Guidelines resembled the MPAA's movie rating system.

But over the last decade, the way people view movies has shifted away from theaters. Streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu play an entirely different ballgame. They aren't bound by FCC rules that regulate obscenity on television, and they don't have a limited number of screens as theaters do. This means they can offer NC-17 or unrated content with more freedom. In a 2022 study, the filtering service VidAngel found that in two decades, obscenity in movies and TV shows increased by 173 percent. The growth in the number of video streaming service users seems to coincide with the increase in obscene content.

Subscription-based services don't always have to submit their movies to an outside group to be rated. While most Netflix originals are rated, those labels aren't necessarily subject to the same scrutiny. If, for instance, a Hulu Original film premieres in theaters, it needs an official MPAA rating. If it premieres on Hulu, it doesn't. This doesn't mean a streaming service can slap a PG-13 label onto an R-rated movie. But it does have leeway to let a few more curse words slide. The Parents Television Council concluded that several Netflix programs marketed to teens are far more explicit than their ratings indicate: "Either the content is being rated inaccurately, or there has been considerable 'ratings creep' with the criteria used to determine an age-based rating." For instance, the PTC found obscenity in the hit TV show *Stranger Things* increased 217 percent over four seasons. By Season 4, the characters in *Stranger Things* used the F-word 20 times. But the show has kept its TV-14 label so far.

Have audiences been influenced by the influx of foul language? Many video streaming subscribers spend over three hours daily on these platforms. And while it may not be possible to document an exact effect, Business Insider three years ago posted a video explaining that the average American now curses about five times every waking hour. ■

Posters representing the movie ratings system: *Cars* (G), *Home Alone* (PG), *The Avengers* (PG-13), and *The Matrix* (R)

"Either the content is being rated inaccurately, or there has been considerable 'ratings creep' with the criteria used to determine an age-based rating."

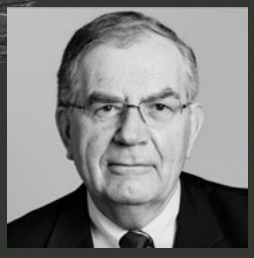
THE MISSIONARY CON

OCTOBER 16-18, 2024
JACKSONVILLE, FL

BROOKS BUSER

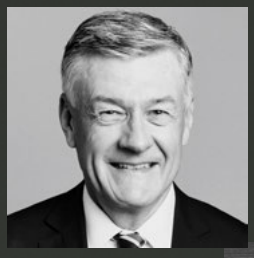
MARK DEVER

KEVIN DEYOUNG



SINCLAIR FERGUSON

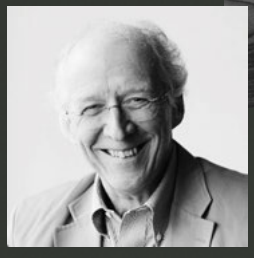
IAN HAMILTON



STEVEN LAWSON

JONATHAN MASTER

CONRAD MBEWE



JOHN PIPER

CHAD VEGAS

EARLY BIRD
REGISTRATION

MISSIONARY.NET

John Mark Comer

BOOKS

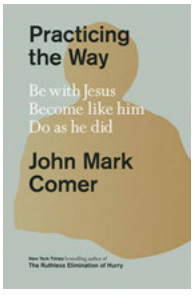
Two-tier Christianity?

Discipleship guide dabbles in pre-Reformation errors

by COLLIN GARBARINO

JOHN MARK COMER believes confusion has crept into the Church. His evidence: We often hear people use "disciple" as a verb, but "disciple" is a noun. It's something you are, not something you do.

Comer has written multiple books on practical theology, and much of his recent work warns Christians to guard against busyness and looks to ancient wisdom as a guide for faith. His new book, *Practicing the Way* (WaterBrook 2024), takes these same themes and applies them to this question of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. But the answer he gives is flawed.



Practicing the Way
JOHN MARK COMER

Since "disciple" has become such a familiar word in churches, Comer prefers to use "apprentice," emphasizing that believers are students and Jesus is our teacher. The goal of an apprentice is threefold: Be with Jesus, become like Him, and do as He did.

Being with Jesus includes the Bible reading and prayer that evangelicals typically think of as "quiet time," but Comer desires more for his readers. He recommends meditating on Jesus, feeling His presence. He wants Christians to stare into the face of God and bask in His light, knowing that God is staring back.

Becoming like Jesus involves what's typically thought of as spiritual formation, which Comer defines as "the process of being formed into people of love in Christ." Spiritual formation doesn't just happen to a person. Comer says more willpower and Bible study don't lead to a changed life characterized by love, and people are resistant to spiritual formation because our sinful hearts have already been conformed to this sinful world. Comer claims that teaching coupled with intentional practice in the context of community leads to change.

When it comes to doing as Jesus did, Comer reminds Christians of their commission to make disciples. He says we need to "make space for the gospel" in our lives, by which he means showing hospitality to those who need the gospel. Finding the time for hospitality often requires shedding other commitments, but once we've made space for others in our schedule we have the opportunity to preach and demonstrate the gospel to them.

Much of the advice Comer offers is helpful, but *Practicing the Way* is an eclectic book, blending typical evangelical Protestantism with elements from the charismatic movement and Roman Catholicism.

In the last section of the book, Comer looks to the medieval church for inspiration, arguing that Christians ought to follow a "rule of life" that mimics the rule that governs a monastery. Here Comer misses the point of a

HANDOUT

"An eclectic book, blending typical evangelical Protestantism with elements from the charismatic movement and Roman Catholicism."

monastic rule: Practitioners don't create the guidelines themselves, whereas Comer tells his readers to be flexible and make up their own rule of life. He offers suggestions like fasting, seeking solitude, and practicing sabbath, but ultimately it's up to the reader to decide what works for them.

Similarly, his discussion of the importance of being in the presence of God goes astray when he relies on the experiences of Christian mystics who were part of the 16th-century Counter-Reformation in which Catholicism attempted to regain ground from the newly formed Protestant churches. He talks about mysticism as if it is central to Christianity, but mysticism isn't distinctly Christian, showing up in various religious traditions, and throughout the history of the Church it has remained on the periphery, having more critics than advocates.

Comer ends up implicitly creating a two-tier Christianity in which super-spiritual "apprentices" of Jesus climb to a more exalted state through practicing spiritual disciplines and the rest of the Church is merely saved. The book contains some worthwhile suggestions, but readers should guard against any temptation to return to this spiritual dichotomy that the Protestant Reformation rejected. ■

BOOKS

A poet and a fighter

Confronting cancer with beauty and theology

by CHELSEA BOES

WHEN WE GET CANCER, we need poetry. Katy Bowser Hutson convinces us of this with the poems she composed during her own staredown with death. Open *Now I Lay Me Down To Fight: A Poet Writes Her Way Through Cancer* (InterVarsity Press 2023) and you're hooked: One poem leads to just one more and then another until suddenly you find yourself reading the final poem in the book.

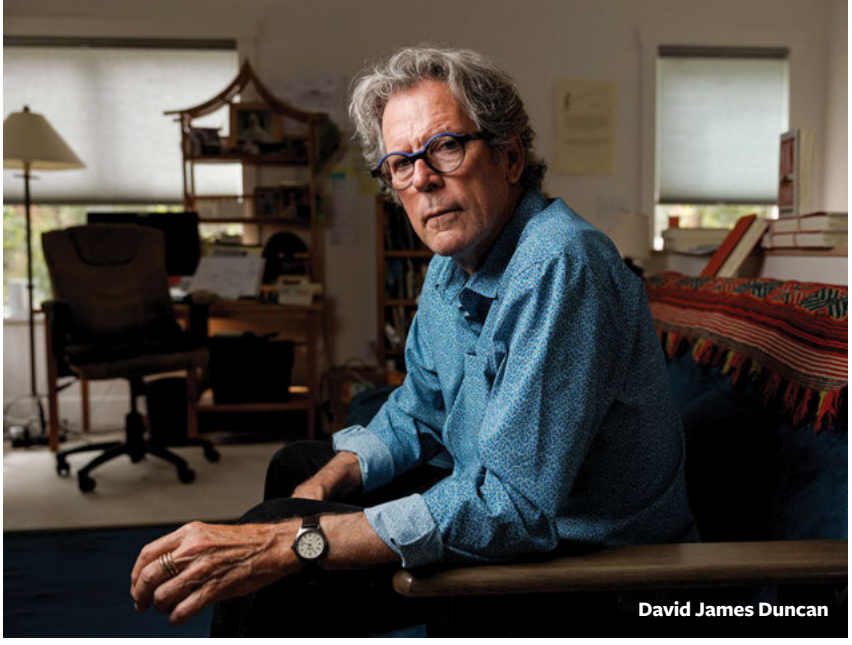
"If you've had cancer, you know you're never free of it," Hutson notes in one of the small essays punctuating her poems. Yet *Now I Lay Me Down To Fight* is not merely for people with cancer, or even for those in remission. The book is for anybody living in a mortal body and "for whom the bell tolls."

Now I Lay Me Down To Fight
KATY BOWSER HUTSON

When Hutson gets her cancer diagnosis as a young mom, reality hits hard, but her theology stays intact. Hutson wrangles the fallenness of the world in her own body and trusts in the love of God through her suffering. She comes to terms with her grim diagnosis without preaching at the reader. ("My days were measured before / Everybody's always are.") Her openness and commitment to deeply specific truth-telling manage to take the teeth out of cancer. When we sit with the poems of a person deciding whether to wear unicorn socks to a mastectomy, cancer no longer looms as the vague terror we all harbor at the edge of our minds. To borrow Hutson's words, she's "running down fear with beauty."

A book like this could easily grow depressing, but this one makes you laugh. Hutson writes this line on the first encounter with her oncologist—"Hello, so thankful to meet you: Can you save my life?" Cancer takes Hutson's hair, eyelashes, and breasts, attempting to "flatten her" and make her "into a one-dimensional character." But, she writes, "I have things to do / I'm a beauty bearer / where you, cancer, copy furiously, / I fumblingly create. / You cannot uncreate me." Regarding her surgeons noticing her unicorn socks, she quips, "I hope they see that I like my body and I'd like to keep it."

On the hard path God called her to, Hutson did a poet's work well. She forces our eyes toward beauty, noting, "Crazy as it sounds / A benefit of cancer / Is that people tell you they are glad you are alive." After spending this little book with her, we're gladder to be alive too.



David James Duncan

BOOKS

A strange, piercing longing

Spirituality, though not Christ, is central in *Sun House*

by PETER BILES

IT'S BEEN THREE DECADES since writer David James Duncan released his second novel, *The Brothers K.* In 2023 he came out with his third, *Sun House* (Little, Brown and Co.), a 700-plus page comedic epic about spiritual misfits and wanderers in the Pacific Northwest.

Duncan has never shied away from spiritual categories. In an era in which much contemporary fiction seems overly occupied with the political, Duncan's fiction will be a pleasant surprise for readers who still bear an appetite for transcendence. That, after all, is what each protagonist in *Sun House* is searching for: a sense of the world beyond the world, or, maybe more aptly, the world of meaning and spirit that houses (hence the book's title) the physical earth itself.

There's Risa, the college student in Seattle who falls in love with Sanskrit literature. Then there's TJ, the ex-Jesuit priest who is trying to make sense of how a providential and loving God could have allowed a terrible "freak accident" he witnessed involving the death of a child.

There's Grady, Risa's ex-boyfriend who becomes enraptured by the Elkmoon Mountain range and wrestles with how to reconcile his tech job in Portland with the spiritual freedom he experiences at high elevation. And there's Lorilee, the mountaineering, dulcimer-playing woman who loves the poetry of the Beatnik Gary Snyder.

A group of Montana ranchers, led by a man named Kale, struggles with a corporate takeover of their land, where decades before, Risa's father, Davy, grew up and fell in love with the area's natural beauty. It's here where all these characters, through their particular detours and trajectories, ultimately converge.

Sun House asks how one might find a spiritual home outside the Western, masculine, institutional form of religion. Incorporating Eastern thought with the writings of St. John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, and Julian of Norwich, Duncan tries to meld Eastern and Western worldviews into something of a cohesive whole. While the book is to be commended for taking spiritual reality seriously, criticism of traditional religion for being oppressive or self-righteous runs the risk of committing its own form of self-righteousness. As a result, sometimes Duncan's characters come across as so enlightened and uniquely spiritual that they feel unrelatable, or a bit idealized. The book also has some bad language and sexual situations.

Sun House is nonetheless a deeply moving novel about a band of unlikely characters who are struck with a strange, piercing longing for "northernness," or in Lorilee's words, the "blue empty." For me, reading Duncan awakened a desire for the great mystery, for transformative encounters with the divine, and ultimately, for the unsurpassable beauty and love of Jesus. While the novel doesn'trecognize Christ as the exclusive path to salvation, perhaps it will compel readers to at least start a long journey that, God willing, will lead them home. ■

Sun House
DAVID JAMES DUNCAN

BEN ALLAN SMITH FOR THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

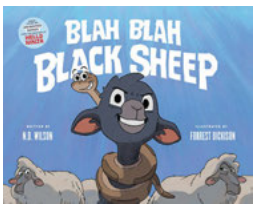
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Strong and steadfast characters

by KRISTIN CHAPMAN

Wild Blue
DASHKA SLATER
(CANDLEWICK 2023)

This sweet story opens with a little girl who loves riding her beginner bike with training wheels. The girl has grown bigger, however, so it's time to put her "pink pony" out to pasture and "wrangle a new one from the herd." This new bike she dubs Wild Blue, but learning to ride it proves challenging as Wild Blue bucks her off time after time. "This bike's not tame enough to ride!" she cries. Her dad, though, gives her the support and encouragement she needs, and the girl perseveres. Laura Hughes' delightful acrylic ink illustrations capture all the excitement and frustration that come with learning to ride a bike. ***Ages 3-7***



Blah Blah Black Sheep
N.D. WILSON
(CANONBALL BOOKS 2023)

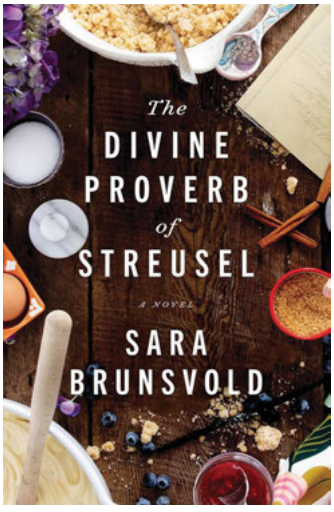
Blah Blah Black Sheep doesn't fit the mold of a proper sheep. He's continually disappointing or irritating others in his flock: "Blah blah black sheep always does it wrong. Blah blah black sheep sings the wrong song." Although at first the flock doesn't value the little sheep, when he bravely takes a stand to save his friends, he finally earns their respect. Wilson's story, slated to release as an animated series in the future, can serve as an allegory for inspiring other "black sheep" not to be afraid to be bold and brave even when it means standing out from the crowd. Kids will enjoy illustrator Forrest Dickison's rendering of the woolly protagonist. ***Ages 4-8***

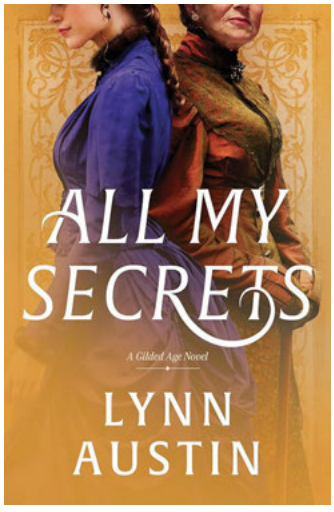
While Everyone Is Sleeping
SARAH MACKENZIE
(WAXWING BOOKS 2023)

A little shrew creeps out of bed and into the night where "Moonlight glows and beckons me, luring me to come and see secrets of the wild and free ... while everyone is sleeping." She soon discovers, though, that not everyone is sleeping: The night is alive with fluttering moths, humming crickets, and blinking fireflies. The star of the night show is the fragrant and luminous moonflower band, to which the other nocturnal creatures join in with frolicking and singing. Mackenzie's lyrical lines come alive with Gabrielle Grimard's muted pencil and watercolor illustrations that capture the beauty of woodland nightlife. ***Ages 3-8***

Gift & Box
ELLEN MAYER
(ALFRED A. KNOPF 2023)

Grandma wraps up a special Gift and then puts it in Box before shipping the package to her granddaughter. Although it is a long, bumpy, and sometimes scary trip, Box promises to protect Gift and offers comfort and encouragement along the way. Brizida Magro's crayon, ink, and collage illustrations trace their journey from the post office as they travel by conveyor belt, boat, and mail truck. When they finally reach their destination, Box's job is finished as the granddaughter opens the package and finds Gift. It seems their time together is over, but then the granddaughter has an idea that will delight young readers—and probably inspire some crafting of their own when a box gets delivered to their home. ***Ages 3-7***





BOOKS

Generation to generation

In two new novels, family histories ripple into the present

by SANDY BARWICK

A YOUNG LADY discovers valuable lessons left by a long-deceased relative in *The Divine Proverb of Streusel* (Revell 2024) by Sara Brunsvold. The book is one of two new novels that explore how the choices of ancestors can influence their descendants, even many generations later.

Four months after her parents' divorce, 26-year-old Nikki Werner learns via social media that her father has remarried. His callous disregard for her mother causes Nikki to question the sanctity of marriage and second-guess her relationship with her boyfriend, Isaac. On a whim, she drives north from St. Louis to her uncle's farm in rural Missouri, where she ends up staying for an extended period.

While helping Uncle Wes clean out and remodel the farmhouse where he grew up and where she has fond holiday memories of her grandparents, she unearths old books apparently belonging to her great-grandmother. One particular book—a cookbook—contains German recipes, most requiring scads of potatoes and copious amounts of butter. Accompanying each recipe is a paragraph of sage advice and bits of Scripture that point to God's goodness despite life's hardships—and clues to her father's personality based on his family history.

"It's not a sin to be wealthy ... the key is asking God what he wants you to do with what you've been given."

All My Secrets (Tyndale 2024) is a misleading title for Lynn Austin's latest book. It suggests a cheesy clandestine love affair—à la Harlequin—that some readers would dismiss out of hand.

It opens in 1898 in New York City. Arthur Stanhope III's untimely death shocks his wife, Sylvia, and the reading of his will delivers another blow. The tycoon's business and most of his vast wealth are bequeathed to his nearest living male relative—a distant uncle. The revelation throws his all-female household into turmoil, since women at that time had few rights apart from their husbands or fathers. Sylvia immediately plots to find a wealthy man to marry her daughter, Adelaide, in order to keep their mansion and lavish lifestyle. However, Sylvia's mother-in-law, Junietta Stanhope, doesn't want Adelaide forced into a loveless marriage for the sake of money.

A tug-of-war ensues between the two older women, and there's an abundance of tedious dialogue about money. The point of view rotates among Junietta, Sylvia, and Adelaide, but Junietta's story is the most compelling. Once she starts spilling "all her secrets," readers see how her choices alter many lives for the better because her Christian faith instructs her generosity. As their family lawyer says, "It's not a sin to be wealthy ... the key is asking God what he wants you to do with what you've been given." ■

MOVIE

The Holdovers

by COLLIN GARBARINO

- *Rated R*
- *Peacock*
- *S5/V3/L8**

DIRECTOR ALEXANDER PAYNE brings his audience back to 1970 to celebrate a dysfunctional Christmas with *The Holdovers*, a film garnering much praise this awards season.

Paul Giamatti plays Paul Hunham, an eccentric academic at Barton Academy, an elite boys' boarding school in New England. Hunham teaches ancient civilizations, and he doesn't have much patience for his pupils who suffer from an overweening sense of entitlement and who fail to see the contemporary relevance of the fifth-century Peloponnesian War. The boys, for their part, hate him as he cheerfully torments them with the likes of Pericles and Demosthenes.

But it's not just the students who dislike Mr. Hunham. His colleagues don't care for his pomposity either, and he ends up getting the jobs no one else wants to do. Consequently, it falls to Mr. Hunham to babysit the boys who have nowhere to go for Christmas break. It's only reasonable since he doesn't have a family who needs him.

But Mr. Hunham won't be in charge of the boys all alone. Also staying behind at Barton is the cook, Mary Lamb, played by Da'Vine Joy Randolph. She doesn't mind working through Christmas since her only son recently died in the Vietnam War. She has nothing to celebrate this holiday season.

Among those holding over at Barton is Angus, played by Dominic Sessa. He's a bright yet troubled boy, trying to make sense of a life that even at this young age has been filled with disappointment. During this less than ideal Christmas season, a kinship forms among the trio, and they help each other cope with their losses and dashed dreams.

Part of the charm of *The Holdovers* lies in Payne's ability to transport viewers back to 1970 without relying on cheap nostalgia. The movie possesses a sincerity of time and place without resorting to endless references to pop culture. The look and feel, right down to the title cards, hearken back to the days when cinema dealt more with human relationships than superpowers and explosions.

The film is very funny with a razor-sharp script that eventually takes the trio beyond the walls of

***Ratings from kids-in-mind.com, with quantity of sexual (S), violent (V), and foul-language (L) content on a 0-10 scale, with 10 high**

SEACIA PAVAO/FOCUS FEATURES

Barton Academy. But despite the comedy, a bittersweet melancholy hangs over this film. We feel for these three characters. And in spite of their personal foibles, they aren't objects of mockery. They aren't really objects of pity either. Their interactions reveal complex personalities tossed about by the world.

Giamatti gives an incredible performance as the curmudgeonly teacher of ancient wisdom. It would have been so easy to play this character as a type, but he portrays Mr. Hunham as a many-layered man who is slow to understand the world around him. At turns, he's acerbic, blustering, insecure, and tender. Randolph's Mary Lamb manages to project a demeanor that's both no-nonsense and motherly, and Sessa, who's acting in his first role, brings a fierceness to Angus as he longs for more innocent days. All three characters are very sad.

With these powerful, nuanced performances and the film's poignant script, it's a shame that the film includes objectionable material, because it could have become a family Christmas classic. Instead, *The Holdovers* is rated R, mainly for foul language, most of which feels authentic yet unnecessary. There's also a scene in which a boy looks at an adult magazine, and the audience gets a brief glimpse of nudity on the page. Even these elements hew closely to the film's goal of re-creating 1970, the year when strong profanity started creeping into Hollywood movies, and studios began pushing the boundaries of good taste.

The Holdovers will be one of the main contenders this awards season, which isn't a bad thing because the film is much more accessible for the average audience than much of what Hollywood promotes as great cinema. Giamatti and Randolph have both won a Golden Globe and a Critics Choice Award for their roles, and Sessa won a Critics Choice Award for best young actor. ■

PARAMOUNT PICTURES/PARAMOUNT+

MOVIE

The Tiger's Apprentice

by COLLIN GARBARINO

▶ *Rated PG*
▶ *Paramount+*

HIDDEN AWAY in an eccentric home in San Francisco lies a gem of unimaginable power, and it falls to a teenage boy named Tom (Brandon Soo Hoo), with help from a magical tiger, to protect it from a malevolent witch who wants to use it to unmake the world.

The Tiger's Apprentice adapts Laurence Yep's middle grade novel of the same name, and it's the latest example of Hollywood's new fascination with the Asian American experience. The trend kicked off with 2018's *Crazy Rich Asians*, followed by *The Farewell* (2019), *Minari* (2020), *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), *Turning Red* (2022), and the Oscar-winning *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). Then last year, we got *Elemental, Past Lives,* and *Joy Ride*. And don't forget the TV shows, like *American Born Chinese* (Disney+) and *The Brothers Sun* (Netflix).

Despite voice talent from a murderers' row of Asian actors (Michelle Yeoh, Lucy Liu, Sandra Oh, and Henry Golding), *The Tiger's Apprentice* feels like a cheap attempt by Paramount to jump on the Asian bandwagon.

Apprentice takes elements of traditional Chinese mythology and injects them into contemporary America, much like an Asian version of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. But instead of offering fresh insight into old stories, the movie piles on the clichés.

As in many films about Asian Americans, Tom wrestles with being a member of two cultures that have different expectations, but in *Apprentice* it seems like a performative inclusion.

The filmmaker also leaves the relationship between Tom and the tiger undeveloped, relying on the audience's familiarity with the master-student trope instead of telling an interesting story. Even the action sequences feel derivative. All of that makes this animated movie feel lacking.

TELEVISION

Three Little Birds

by BEKAH McCALLUM

▶ *BritBox*

SHORTLY AFTER WORLD WAR II, the British government invited residents of the Commonwealth to live in England and help rebuild the weakened labor force. Inspired by real events, *Three Little Birds* tells the story of a trio of women who leave Jamaica in search of a better life in the U.K.

Settling into the motherland proves harder than the women anticipated, though. Some Brits aren't happy to see these newcomers. "KBW"—Keep Britain White—is graffitied onto brick walls.

Tensions ran high during this time period, but the script still feels somewhat melodramatic. Every main character has a harrowing backstory, and it's hard to keep track of everyone's past trauma. Despite its clunkiness in the first couple of episodes, the show has some surprising insights about race relations.

All three women carry emotional baggage to England. Leah (Rochelle Neil) left Jamaica to escape her abusive husband. Her story takes up the most screen time, and she acts as the leader of the group. Leah's children are still in Jamaica, and she'll send for them as soon as she can afford their boat fare. Circumstances become even more complicated when she falls in love with a man she meets in Britain.

Her sister, Chantrelle (Saffron Coomber), dreams of becoming an actress. She's self-obsessed, but working as a nanny for a snobby British family takes her down a peg or two. Hosanna (Yazmin Belo), the third member of the group, is betrothed to Leah and Chantrelle's brother. She's a devout Christian whose unwavering convictions make her character seem rather unrelatable. I don't think director Charles McDougall was satirizing Christianity, but Belo's performance seemed unconvincing.

In many ways, though, Hosanna's faith highlights the importance of forgiveness even in the face of blatant and shameful discrimination. The storyline features several bigoted characters, but it doesn't turn into a showdown between whites and blacks, at least in the first season. The director suggests that repaying anger with more anger doesn't result in harmony. Even though the show is set during a time when racism was pervasive, racism isn't portrayed as the original sin that necessarily infects every white character.

There's some violence in the show, especially in an episode featuring a riot against the Jamaicans, but it's not gruesome. Aside from a few racial slurs, there's little foul language. The series does include some depictions of domestic violence and an instance of attempted assault. A bit of suggestive dancing makes it on screen.

The story seems to set up a lesbian romance toward the end of the series. If successive seasons go in that direction, it will be a shame because the show doesn't pander to the zeitgeist in any other way. ■

BOX OFFICE TOP 10

For the weekend of Jan. 19-21, according to Box Office Mojo

1. ***Mean Girls***
   PG-13 • S4 / V3 / L4 †
2. ***The Beekeeper***
   R • S1 / V7 / L10
3. ***Wonka****
   PG • S2 / V3 / L2
4. ***Migration****
   PG • S1 / V2 / L1
5. ***Anyone But You***
   R • S7 / V3 / L8
6. ***Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom***
   PG-13 • S1 / V5 / L5
7. ***I.S.S.***
   R • S1 / V5 / L5
8. ***Night Swim***
   PG-13 • not rated
9. ***The Boys in the Boat****
   PG-13 • S3 / V2 / L4
10. ***Poor Things***
    R • S10 / V7 / L8

**Reviewed by WORLD*

†Ratings from kids-in-mind.com, with quantity of sexual (S), violent (V), and foul-language (L) content on a 0-10 scale, with 10 high

INNOVATIVE HEIST MOVIES

→ ***The Lavender Hill Mob*** / 1951
→ ***To Catch a Thief*** / 1955
→ ***The Pink Panther*** / 1963
→ ***The Italian Job*** / 1969
→ ***Mission: Impossible*** / 1996
→ ***Ocean's Eleven*** / 2001
→ ***Inception*** / 2010
→ ***Ant-Man*** / 2015
→ ***Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*** / 2016
→ ***Lucky Logan*** / 2017

MOVIE

Lift

by MARTY VANDRIEL

▶ *Rated PG-13*
▶ *Netflix*

A GANG OF ingenious thieves pulls off a double heist from a Venetian auction house, kidnapping an NFT artist and, during the distraction and chaos, stealing an original Van Gogh. With this fast-paced scene, *Lift*, directed by F. Gary Gray, opens with some promise. But the promise goes unfulfilled. The plot quickly becomes predictable, devolving into an unsatisfying story.

Cyrus (Kevin Hart) is the leader of the gang: fast talking and rule breaking with a heart of gold. His criminal ring includes the obligatory computer hacker, a master of disguise, a crack pilot, and a cracker of safes. All we need is a mustachioed English spy or Indian spiritual guru to round out the festival of clichés.

The good guys at Interpol (or are they good guys?) recruit Cyrus to catch the wicked Jorgenson (Jean Reno), a terrorist mastermind so evil that he kills his enemies with attack dogs. Abby (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) is the Interpol recruiter. She and Cyrus have a romantic past, but she's determined to stay aloof from his charms. She joins the gang, who are reluctant to accept this goody-two-shoes as one of their own.

Jorgenson awaits a shipment of half a billion dollars' worth of gold to fund more mayhem and malice. Cyrus' job is to "lift" the gold from a cargo plane while it's en route from London to Tuscany. Can the good-hearted bad guys thwart the plans of the bad-hearted bad guys?

Netflix spent over $100 million on *Lift*, and it shows: The cinematography is beautiful, with sweeping scenes of London, Paris, Ireland, the Alps, and Italy. The special effects are believable, and the actors perform well. Too bad the producers couldn't afford a better script. This movie is rated PG-13 for some bad language and suggestive content.

LUCKY LOGAN: CLAUDETTE BARIUS/FINGERPRINT RELEASING; LIFT: NETFLIX

MUSIC

Our post-war music story

Hit compilation stays mostly faithful to its era

by ARSENIO ORTEZA

DUE IN LARGE PART to expiring copyrights and the ease with which computerized files can be collated, digital oldies collections proliferate nowadays like never before. Alas, too many bear the marks of mindless, algorithmic assemblage and end up inadvertently revising the very history they purport to preserve.

An exception is the unimaginatively but accurately titled *200 Radio Hits 1946-1960* (G.O.P.). Divided into 10 20-song volumes ($5.99 apiece, or 30 cents per song), the series tells a uniquely American story similar in tone if not in scale to the one told by Hollywood during that same post-Depression, post–World War II decade and a half: Happy times were here again.

OK, not entirely happy. The temptress addressed by Frankie Laine in "Jezebel" (Vol. 3) has no redeeming qualities. And not entirely American either, not with such Europe-only hits as Cliff Richard's "Travellin' Light" (Vol. 9) and Edith Piaf's "Milord" (Vol. 10).

Most of the selections, however, whether ridiculous (Kay Kyser's "The Woody Woodpecker Song") or sublime (the Platters' "Only You"), could only have gone over big with an audience optimistic enough to believe that the answer to the Shirelles' musical question "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" (Vol. 10) could, despite the red flags, be "Yes."

Some historical revisionism does take place. Why, for instance, do Bing Crosby, who reached the Top 10 28 times during the era in question (32 if you count the four times that "White Christmas" charted), and Frank Sinatra, whose contemporaneous Top 10 count was 27, appear only once apiece? (Possible reason: licensing fees.)

One might also bemoan the vocal homogenization. Telling Dinah Shore or Margaret Whiting from Doris Day, the Four Preps from the Brothers Four, or Tab Hunter from Pat Boone takes at least as much concentration as it took to tell Bonnie Tyler from Rod Stewart in 1977.

But there's vocal distinction too. Nobody else ever sang like Louie Prima, Connie Francis, Mario Lanza (though Al Martino tried), Rosemary Clooney, Johnnie Ray, Bobby Darin, Marilyn Monroe, Ray Charles, or Elvis Presley.

Yes, Elvis. Along with the Everly Brothers, Fats Domino, Roy Orbison, and Ricky Nelson, the King (represented by seven of his more subdued numbers) eases the collection into a somewhat grudging acknowledgment of rock 'n' roll.

But most striking of all is the insouciance regarding topics known to inspire 21st-century meltdowns. In an age of anti-antebellumism, "inclusive" pronouns, and "body positivity," songs as anodyne as Al Jolson's "Rock-a-Bye Your Baby With a Dixie Melody," the Ink Spots' "To Each His Own," and "Too Fat Polka" by Arthur Godfrey now feel as threatening as punk. ■

200 Radio Hits 1946-1960
VARIOUS ARTISTS

ILLUSTRATION BY BARBARA GIBSON

MUSIC

New and noteworthy

by ARSENIO ORTEZA

Featherbrained Wealth Motel DAVE BARNES
After a year of listening only to the Beatles, Dave Barnes comes up with 10 songs that—surprise—boast *Revolver*-era filigrees and clock in at a 1960s-like 26 minutes. (*A Hard Day's Night* was 30.) But while it's easy to imagine Paul and John's having come up with the melodies and the time signatures, Barnes' Christian worldview (subtle but it's there) and his distinctly non-Liverpudlian voice immunize the project against Klaatu comparisons. "Remember When (You Wanted Everything You've Got Right Now)" kicks the disc off with middle-aged wisdom, shards of which spike much of what follows. And every cut beats the latest "last" Beatles song, "Now and Then."

Archangel Hill SHIRLEY COLLINS
The folk singer Shirley Collins' late-career renaissance continues. This time she spells 11 new recordings (some rerecordings) with "Hand and Heart," a live performance from 1980 (before her voice coarsened), and "June Apple," an instrumental by her primary accompanists Ian Kearey and Pete Cooper. In the title cut, she recites a poem written by her father. Nearly every melody and lyric is traditional. Every one is spooky. "Lost In a Wood" is spookiest of all.

Indiscretion THE CURIOUS BARDS
Look up these baroque violin, baroque cittern, viola da gamba, triple harp, and traverso players online and you'll see them labeled "classical," which they are in a sense. But this magical album is straight-up 18th-century folk, hence the preponderance of terms such as "reels" and "airs" in the titles. (There's a medley of strathspeys too.) The five "songs" feature the mezzo-soprano Ilektra Platiopoulou, who you can tell is "classical" because her technique overwhelms the lyrics. But fear not: They're printed in the booklet. And, who knows? Maybe folk singers sang that way back then.

The Reset SATURNA
These 10 slabs of heavy singing and even heavier riffing connote that the hard-rock '70s are alive and well in Barcelona. How alive and well? Well, assuming that the six live bonus tracks accompanying the digital version are the same six that constitute the band's recent EP *70s Covers Night*, Saturna numbers Hendrix, Black Sabbath, the Doors, Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, and Aerosmith-doing-the-Beatles among its influences. Mix those together with a pinch and a dash of originality, and you'll have a good idea. And, yes, James Vieco sings in English.

ENCORE

Other than leading with an unintentionally hilarious title cut that confuses scat-singing with glossolalia, there's not only nothing wrong with *Beyond Words: Instrumental* (Exile), **Van Morrison**'s maiden plunge into vault digging, but there's a lot of tuneful, jig-dancing fun to boot. That Morrison could play the sax (six cuts), the acoustic guitar (four), and the harmonica (one) we already knew. But who knew that he could lay the foundations for three stylistically distinct pieces ("All Saints Beneficial," "Celtic Voices," "Mountains, Fields, Rivers & Streams") from behind an electric piano?

The liner information dates the songs to the 1970s, '80s, '90s, and 2000s, so you can extend the fun by hitting "shuffle" and playing "name the decade." More challenging is wondering whether any of the tracks were ever intended to have words and then trying to imagine what those words might've been. Hint: Trying to sing "Moondance" to "Parisian Walkabout" is a good way to warm up. —*A.O.*

ASTRIDA VALIGORSKY/GETTY IMAGES

VOICES **JANIE B. CHEANEY**

Costly kids

Scrutinizing the root of anxiety over American child-rearing

OUR TWO BABIES WERE CHEAP.

We qualified for Medicaid (my husband was between jobs both times) but didn't apply for it. We were able to work with both obstetricians on a cash basis, to deliver safely without extreme measures, and to get by with a shortest-possible hospital stay—even arriving just after midnight with our son, thus saving the charge for a whole day. Both babies weighed in at almost 9 pounds, nursed well, and developed no serious health problems throughout infancy and early childhood. We budgeted our household expenses so we could get by on one income and, for many years, one car.

We began homeschooling in the primary grades, and the money spent on curriculum we saved on school clothes. As the kids got older, we allowed one extracurricular activity for each, like dance or art lessons. After graduation our daughter attended College of the Ozarks tuition-free. Our son qualified for scholarships but decided against college and eventually started his own business instead. After some false starts and missteps they are successful adults: married with children and financially stable. How much did it cost to raise them? I would say, practically nothing.

That's not what the U.S. government would say. A graphic published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2017 puts the average cost to raise one child at $233,610, figuring in food, clothing, housing, healthcare, childcare, and education (with 7 percent left for miscellaneous). That's lower in rural areas, but $193,020 to bring up a country boy or girl still seems high. What's the reality? When an *Atlantic* article titled "Why Parents Struggle So Much in the World's Richest Country" caught my eye, I was curious what the author had to say.

Stephanie H. Murray is currently raising two children in the United Kingdom, where she can afford a part-time freelance writing career because of universal healthcare, cash stipends for parents, and subsidized early education and childcare (including full-time preschool at age 4). She believes raising children in the United States would be an emotional and physical strain as well as financial, and she's probably right—for two parents working full time in the urban Northeast, making payments on $500,000 homes, with private medical insurance, private schools, and an array of enrichment activities intended to clear a path to the Ivies for their two kids.

Murray cites two other concerns that make parenting in the United States a fearful prospect: gun violence and "the all-consuming nature of American child-rearing"—i.e., the peer pressure of helicopter parents determined to raise a star scholar, athlete, movie director, or investment banker. This pressure, like high-dollar rents, may be more intense in urban areas, but all good parents want their children to "succeed," however they define success.

Costs are going up, children get sick, and it's increasingly difficult for a young family to get into adequate housing. Even car-seat mandates can make more than two children unaffordable, because a third child doesn't just mean an extra seat—it means a bigger car. As far back as 1991, a distraught mother told the *Los Angeles Times*, "It's kind of scary. It's as if someone has sold you a $200,000 item with weekly payments for the next 17 years."

How many would-be parents are looking at the cost-benefit analysis and opting for Caribbean vacations instead?

We all have individual choices to make and priorities to set. And since raising future citizens is worth some government investment, federal and state governments could encourage parents with practical help, such as stipends, tax credits, or educational savings funds. But the choice to have a baby is personal, and there's the deep-seated cause of much anxiety: When children are a personal decision rather than a gift of God, raising them often becomes a project to justify that decision. Estimates about the cost of raising children began after *Roe v. Wade*—is that a coincidence? When did we start talking about what they cost instead of what they're worth? ■

Email *jcheaney@wng.org* ***X*** *@jbcheaney*

Dehydrated Food That Can Save Lives.

From this.
To this.

Through our partners at Blessings of Hope, PA, Barnabas Aid is able to take bulky, fresh food like this spinach, and dehydrate it for easy shipping around the world to Christians who need it most. Our first fortified dry soup shipment has been sent to Haiti, please give today so we can send more to desperately poor countries.

food.gives | *A project of* **barnabas**aid

To donate visit: **barnabasaid.org/world7**
or call **703-288-1681 (toll free 866-936-2525)**
Email **usa@barnabasaid.org**

ECFA ACCREDITED

COVID-19 vaccines were supposed to help. Researchers—and government officials—are loath to admit that for some people, they actually hurt

BY EMMA FREIRE

Illustration by Krieg Barrie

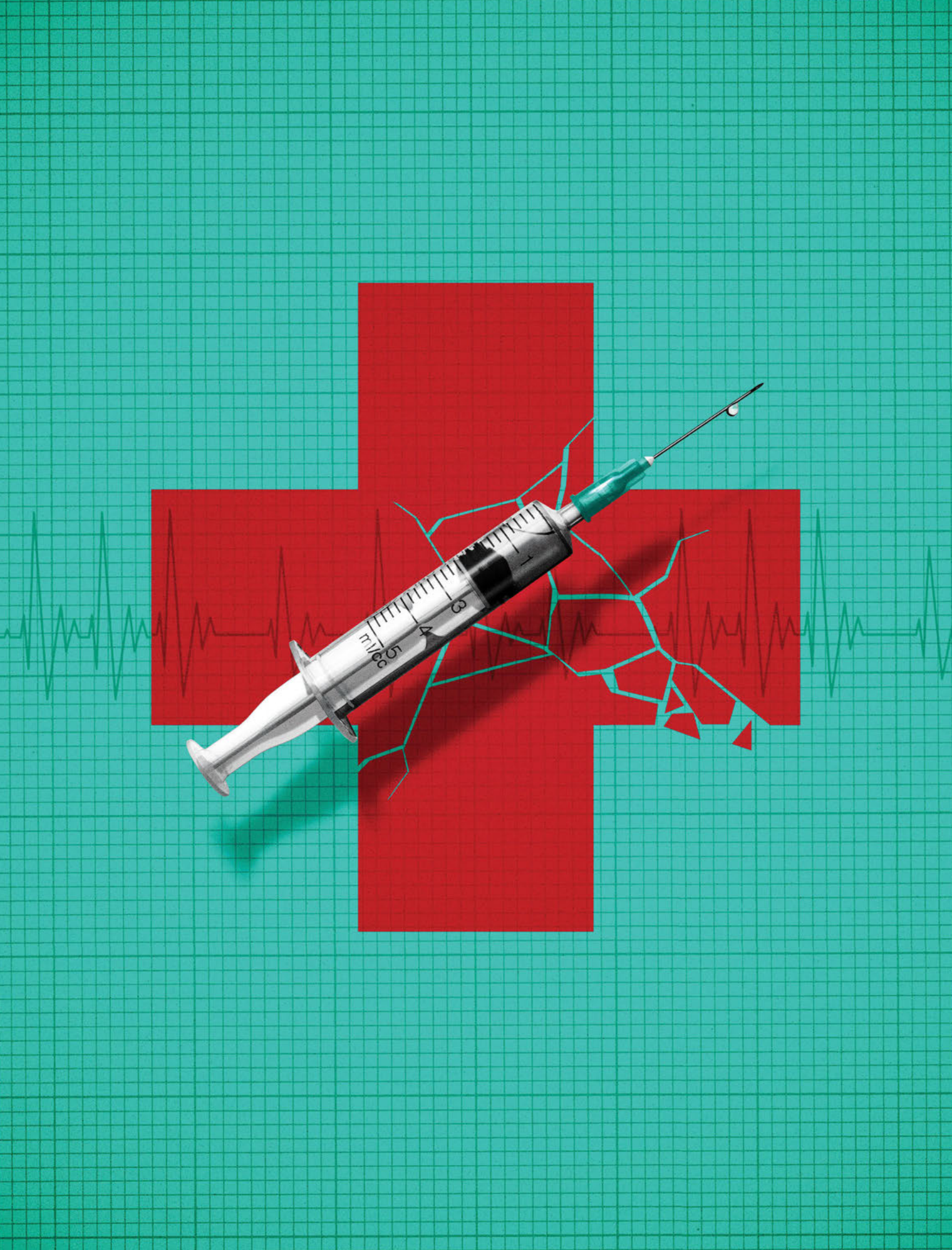
COLLATERAL DAMAGE

BRIANNE DRESSEN rested her sore arm on the car door and closed her eyes. It was Nov. 4, 2020, and she'd just gotten her first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. She and her husband had been running errands that afternoon. They stopped for her appointment, and he was driving her home. They hadn't gotten very far when Dressen noticed a painful tingling sensation in her arm.

"Something doesn't feel right," she said.

Not long after they got home, Dressen knew something was definitely wrong. Her vision began to blur and her hearing was off, as if she had big seashells covering her ears. After putting her children to bed, she tried to distract herself by watching television. But the single screen morphed into two screens stacked on top of each other. Even as she wondered whether this was a normal reaction to the vaccine, she had no idea how bad her symptoms were about to get.

When COVID-19 vaccines became available in late 2020, millions of Americans lined up to get them, hoping to finally bring an end to the nightmare of the pandemic.



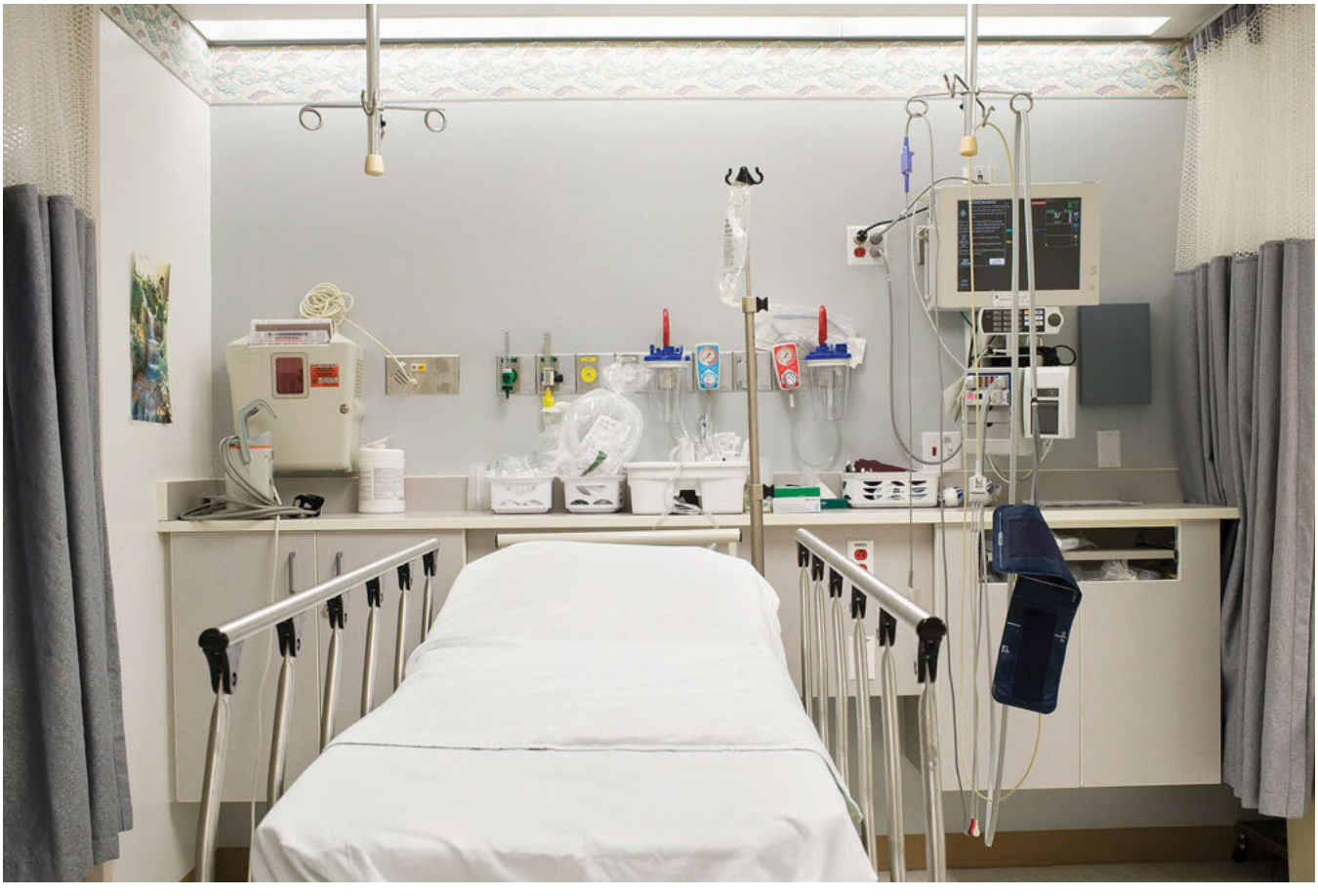
Over 80 percent of Americans got at least one dose of a vaccine. Some of them, like Dressen, believe they suffered a serious adverse reaction, or vaccine injury.

No one knows exactly how many people suffered a COVID-19 vaccine injury, but it likely runs into the tens of thousands. Public health officials acknowledge, in theory, that vaccine injuries can occur. But in practice, they are loath to recognize any victims, possibly because they fear vaccine opponents would seize upon such cases. Even before the advent of the COVID-19 shots, the government had a poor track record of caring for people with vaccine injuries.

During the pandemic, people like Dressen tried to do the right thing by getting vaccinated. But she and others who experienced adverse effects became collateral damage in the public controversy over vaccine safety. "The trauma of being dismissed and gaslit by ... medical teams is actually just as traumatic as the injury itself," she told me.

Dressen, a wife and mother of two young children, worked as a preschool teacher when the pandemic hit. She and her husband took COVID seriously. Her job meant she was considered high risk. "I don't know if you've

"The trauma of being dismissed and gaslit by ... medical teams is actually just as traumatic as the injury itself."



ER PRODUCTIONS LIMITED/GETTY IMAGES

ever seen little kids in masks, but it never goes well," she said.

Dressen, who lives in Utah, was in great physical shape, often going hiking and mountain-climbing on her days off. She had taken vaccines her whole life without any problems, so when she was offered the chance to participate in the clinical trial for AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine, she didn't hesitate. "I loved those kids. I loved their families. I knew some of them had high-risk grandparents [living] with them, and I didn't ever want to be the reason why anyone else died or was harmed in any way."

The morning after she got her shot, Dressen discovered she couldn't walk normally. She bumped into doorways as her left leg kept giving out. She made it to work, but the children's voices sounded unbearably loud. Eventually, she put them in front of an educational TV show and huddled in a corner until their parents arrived. That was the last day of preschool she ever taught.

Nearly every aspect of the public health response to the pandemic generated controversy, nothing more so than the vaccine. Mandates, from both the government and private employers, further stoked resentment. Some Americans were forced to choose between their livelihoods and a vaccine they didn't want to take. For example, more than 8,000 military service members were discharged for refusing the shot, though Congress has now established a path for them to rejoin.

Many worried about the speed with which the vaccines came to market. It normally takes five to 10 years or longer for a new vaccine to reach the public. But doctors insist safety was always a top priority and has never been compromised.

Paul Goepfert is a professor of medicine at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He called vaccine trials "a very rigorous process."

"We do phase 1-2 studies, which is just in a few people ... we just want to make sure that it's immunogenic, and there are no huge safety issues," he said. This is followed by much larger phase 3 trials. For the COVID-19 vaccines, these included tens of thousands of participants.

Once the vaccines became available to the public, health officials began looking for signs of trouble. "I think people don't understand the whole context, and all the real-time surveillance going on," said Amesh Adalja, an infectious disease specialist and senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. Adalja insists public health officials are especially alert to potential problems with the COVID vaccines because they know many people have concerns about them.

FOR DAYS AFTER her symptoms started, Brianne Dressen left frantic voicemails with the clinic that had administered the shot. The painful tingling that started in her arm had spread all over her body, and the effect was like a series of internal electric shocks. She lost control of her legs and her bladder. She developed tinnitus that sounded like "a freight train in one ear and ringing in the other." She was so sensitive to sound, light, and touch that she had to stay in a dark room alone. Her children could not be near her—the stimulation was too painful.

The clinic didn't return her calls for several days but eventually brought her in for tests. Health workers there suggested she might have had an underlying case of multiple sclerosis and promised they would report her experience to AstraZeneca.

"I still have yet to speak to an actual person at AstraZeneca, to this day," Dressen said, three years later. The company withdrew its application for FDA approval after long delays caused by irregularities in its trial data. Still, its vaccine was approved and widely used in Europe.

As Dressen's symptoms spiraled, she went to the emergency room four times before finally being admitted to the hospital. Doctors diagnosed her with "anxiety due to the COVID vaccine."

Dressen herself was too weak to speak. But her husband Brian said, "Are you kidding me?"

The anxiety diagnosis haunted Dressen as she went to other appointments, where more doctors told her the problem was all in her head. Her husband is a biochemist. Desperate to help his wife, he reached out to other scientists around the world. Eventually, his networking connected Dressen with Avindra Nath, a senior investigator specializing in the nervous system at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). In June 2021, the NIH flew Dressen and about 20 other people who believed they had a COVID vaccine injury to its headquarters for study and treatment.

During that trip, researchers diagnosed Dressen with "post-vaccine neuropathy"—damage to the peripheral and small fiber nerves. They contacted her doctors in Utah to confirm her diagnosis.

That made life easier, at least when it came to getting treatment. But after that, the NIH canceled a follow-up trip in September 2021. Three months later, Nath asked her to stop telling others with vaccine injuries to contact him. He said they should get care from their local doctors instead.

When I emailed Nath to get his side of the story, an NIH media representative referred me to the FDA, which in turn referred me back to the NIH. But emails Dressen provided confirmed her account of their conversations.

RESEARCH INTO a vaccine's safety does not stop once it's approved. Public health officials engage in extensive real-time surveillance to spot potential problems. To that end, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed V-safe specifically for the COVID-19 vaccines. It's a text messaging system that lets people report health issues after they get vaccinated. Over 10 million people participated in V-safe.

The Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS), a database co-managed by the CDC and FDA, is another critical surveillance tool. VAERS collects information about health events after any vaccine—not only COVID-19 shots. Private individuals and medical professionals can submit reports. Human beings experience all kinds of health events all the time, so symptoms suffered soon after vaccination aren't necessarily caused by the vaccine. If VAERS shows a higher-than-normal rate of certain health problems, it sends out a "safety signal." Officials then notify the Vaccine Safety Datalink, a collaboration between the CDC and 13 healthcare organizations across America. Goepfert says that allows doctors to look for those specific health effects among their patients.

Adalja notes the Department of Defense first flagged myocarditis, now a widely acknowledged adverse event from the COVID-19 vaccine, as it monitored service members who got the shot. That prompted "multiple CDC meetings and calls and everything about it when they detected that signal," Adalja said.

Goepfert cited the Johnson & Johnson (J&J) vaccine, which he helped develop, as an example of prioritizing safety. It was one of the first three major COVID-19 vaccines approved in the United States, along with shots from Pfizer and Moderna. But the company took it off the market due to a small number of cases of a rare blood clotting disorder.

Still, all that vaccine monitoring has led to a list of confirmed side effects that, when compared with the broad array some shot recipients say they have experienced, is notably short. The CDC acknowledges anaphylaxis (an acute allergic reaction), myocarditis, and pericarditis for all COVID-19 vaccines. It also acknowledges Guillain-Barré syndrome (the immune system attacking the nerves) and thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome—the blood clotting disorder—but only for the J&J vaccine. Tinnitus and paresthesia are listed as side effects in Europe but not in America.

JOEL WALLSKOG is an orthopedic surgeon who lives in Wisconsin. When the pandemic hit, he worked for a large healthcare system in and around Milwaukee. Wallskog had an asymptomatic case of COVID-19 in fall 2020 that he believed gave him natural immunity, so he debated not getting a vaccine.

"But then I had a good friend of mine that had COVID and almost died and got intubated and got a tracheostomy, and that kind of gave me a little shake-up," he said.

When he got an email announcing it was his turn to get vaccinated during the rollout to healthcare workers, he drove to a hospital in Milwaukee and rolled up his sleeve for the Moderna shot.

That was Dec. 30, 2020. A few days later, as he climbed out of bed on a cold Wisconsin morning, he noticed his feet were numb. He'd had neck problems and a herniated disk in the past but never issues with his legs. A few days later, though, he was talking to a patient when he realized he could not stand up. He tried to push himself up with his arms and fell down backward.

He immediately ordered himself an MRI, multiple labs, and a spinal tap. "Being in the healthcare system, I

"The message was clear, which was for me to shut up. But I didn't. I became more vocal."

can navigate it very quickly," he said. A fellow doctor diagnosed him with transverse myelitis, an inflammation in part of the spinal cord. He recalled reading that the clinical trials of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine in the United Kingdom had been paused over cases of the same condition.

Wallskog reported his condition to VAERS and made multiple calls to the CDC. One of its physicians finally got back to him. "They said they'd look into my case, and I never heard back. Ever."

Today, Wallskog can only stand or walk two to four hours a day. Both his blood pressure and heart rate are erratic and usually high. Worse, he randomly loses consciousness. As a result, Wallskog was forced to stop working as a surgeon.

After his diagnosis, Wallskog started speaking out about his condition. A year and a half later, the healthcare system that still technically employed him launched an investigation into alleged prescribing irregularities.

Wallskog views the investigation as an attempt to intimidate him into silence about his vaccine injury. "It was a threat," he said. "The message was clear, which was for me to shut up. But I didn't. I became more vocal."

The investigation went nowhere, and he eventually took early retirement using his private disability insurance.

BRIANNE DRESSEN initially kept quiet about her injury. She believed her case must be highly unusual and did not want to discourage others from getting vaccinated. She told the parents of her preschool students only that she was too sick to continue teaching—but she didn't share the cause of her sickness. Over time, however, she started connecting online with other injured people. Many of them had also been diagnosed with conditions like anxiety. She knows of many people who were even driven to suicide.

"I stopped counting at 20," she told me, but she estimates the

SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES

"The Marburg University Hospital, which treats COVID-19 vaccine injuries, estimates that 0.2 per 1,000 vaccinated persons suffered an adverse event, or 1 in 5,000 people."

number may be as high as 27. Often these people had family members who did not believe the vaccine caused their symptoms. Dressen decided she had to speak up for them: "I wouldn't have believed it's as bad as it actually is had I not lived through it firsthand."

In November 2021, Dressen met Wallskog at a press conference in Washington, D.C. Sen. Ron Johnson, a Republican from Wisconsin, hosted the event, which featured scientists and people with vaccine injuries. But it didn't raise the kind of awareness they had hoped. The scant media coverage focused instead on Johnson's history of vaccine skepticism.

Wallskog, Dressen, and others talked afterward and made plans to start a nonprofit to help people like themselves. They named it React19. Dressen says the organization aims to provide emotional, physical, and financial support to those harmed by the COVID vaccines. Today, React19 has over 30,000 members who believe they were injured.

React19 conducts extensive surveys of its members and has found many of them report symptoms similar to long COVID, including fatigue and brain fog. The demographics are similar, with women far more likely to be affected than men. The symptom members say they would most like to be rid of is painful neuropathy. The CDC does not currently acknowledge any of the neuropathic symptoms.

React19 members also frequently report cardiovascular issues, such as rapid heart rate and heart palpitations, and a smaller group reports autoimmune conditions.

No one knows how many people have suffered a COVID vaccine injury. Adverse reactions are both complex and rare, when compared with the number of people who've received one or more shots, so it takes time for doctors to understand them. The symptoms themselves are also difficult to track and categorize: Some symptoms reported to VAERS or doctors are actually not connected to the vaccine,

DHIRAJ SINGH/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

genuine vaccine-related symptoms may go unreported.

Several foreign countries have studied this issue, including Germany. The Marburg University Hospital, which treats COVID-19 vaccine injuries, estimates that 0.2 per 1,000 vaccinated persons suffered an adverse event, or 1 in 5,000 people. If that number held true in the United States, it would amount to 54,000 injured people.

On social media, discussion about adverse COVID vaccine events has focused on sudden deaths of young people, supposedly resulting from myocarditis. Dressen and Wallskog say that's a serious concern, but they find it unhelpful to speculate without a confirmed link to a COVID vaccine. Both say that only leads to further polarization over the vaccine.

Wallskog insists on looking at the data. "Let's make sure they get autopsies, and let's figure it out versus just this reactionary thing, where every death is from the shot, because I don't think that's true."

DOCTORS HAVE long acknowledged vaccines can cause adverse events and even death in extremely rare cases. Despite that, the victims of vaccine injuries struggle to get the help they need.

In the 1980s, Congress established the Vaccine Injury Compensation Program (VICP), also called the vaccine court, as a way to provide compensation. It serves as a no-fault alternative to traditional lawsuits. Congress created the program after several huge, vaccine-related jury awards threatened to cause vaccine shortages and reduce vaccination rates. When it began, VICP only covered six vaccines for children. Now it covers 16, including the annual flu shot offered to adults.

Attorney Renée Gentry has practiced vaccine-injury litigation for 20 years. She says adding the flu vaccine in particular exponentially increased the number of people eligible to file claims.

But the vaccine court itself never grew. Gentry says the biggest bottleneck is the lack of special masters, the vaccine court's equivalent of judges. VICP began with eight and that number never increased. As a result, claimants face long delays to get the financial help they need to pay their medical bills. The day before we talked, Gentry argued a case before the vaccine court—a date that had been scheduled two years before. She has seen cases in which seniors injured by the flu vaccine died before their claim was resolved.

COVID-19 vaccines do not currently fall under the VICP because they were developed in response to a public health emergency. And COVID vaccine makers are exempted from legal liability under the Public Readiness and Emergency Preparedness Act of 2005. But people like Dressen can apply for help with medical bills, and families can apply for death benefits, under a program called the Countermeasures Injury Compensation Program (CICP) run by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Gentry calls CICP a "dumpster fire of a program." Before the pandemic, it had received about 500 claims, mostly related to the H1N1 vaccine. Only 30 of those were compensated. After the pandemic, 9,500 claims connected to the COVID-19 vaccine flooded the system, plus another 3,000 claims for other COVID treatments. People who call Gentry tell her they spend entire days on hold with HHS without ever reaching a human being. Dressen applied for compensation and has been waiting two years for a response. In October 2023, React19 filed a lawsuit against the HHS alleging the CICP is unconstitutional because it violates the right to due process and a jury trial.

A bill proposed in Congress, the Vaccine Injury Compensation Modernization Act of 2023 (H.R. 5142), would transfer COVID vaccine claims out of CICP and over to VICP. The legislation faces a hard road because vaccines are still a loaded subject. But Gentry is hopeful it will pass. "I think if you want a strong, universal immunization program and you want to protect that—which I think we do for public health—you have to have a vibrant safety net," she said. "And the safety net is showing a lot of wear and tear right now."

React19 isn't waiting for the government to act. It has raised over $600,000 to fund grants of up to $10,000 to help members with medical bills. "I'd like to do more, but it's certainly more than the compensation program from the HHS," Wallskog said. He helps review medical bills to determine eligibility.

These days, Dressen manages her pain by getting intravenous immunoglobulin every two weeks and following a strict hydration, food, and sleep routine. She takes several prescription medications, particularly at night so she can sleep.

"Every morning, I'm greeted by this horrific electrical pulsing in my body when the meds wear off," she said. The toll on her health has been ruinous. Her dream is to live long enough to see her children graduate high school.

On top of all her medical challenges, Dressen sometimes faces abuse online. A few days before we talked, someone on social media told her she belongs in hell because she is "enabling liars and spreading fear." This kind of abuse doesn't faze her. "I don't know how anybody could see what I've seen and just turn away from it and not lean in to try to fix it." ■


FRIMSA
FRIMSA

Seeds of hope

CHRISTIANS IN ISRAEL SERVE THEIR NEIGHBORS AS WAR BRINGS SUFFERING AND FEW PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

by Jill Nelson

On a crisp December evening in the hills of Shoresh, 11 miles west of Jerusalem, five young boys chase each other around a hotel parking lot. Their families are among nine who came to the hotel from City of Life, a Messianic congregation in Sderot—a city just 1 mile from Gaza's border and one of 22 villages and military outposts Hamas infiltrated on Oct. 7.

Fearing additional attacks, the Israeli government urged residents to evacuate an area known as the Gaza envelope that includes all communities less than 7 kilometers (4.3 miles) from the coastal enclave Hamas took over in 2007. Many of the families who fled ended up in hotels like the one in Shoresh.

After giving some instructions to his two sons, Pastor Michael Beener ushers me inside the hotel cabin where he lives temporarily with his wife, mom, and kids. It's a shelter for the family and a staging ground for outreach. Despite the trauma and displacement among his congregation of 50 people, his church's mercy ministry remains active, delivering food, diapers, heaters, blankets, and other necessities to more than 100 families in Sderot who could not evacuate. Nearly 3,000 of the city's 30,000 residents, including many elderly, stayed behind.

Across Israel, Christians are stepping into areas of need and suffering, looking for creative ways to minister and provide hope in a time of war. Many are serving amid their own wartime challenges. And as Israel battles rocket attacks from three different fronts and faces mounting international pressure to wind down its deadly campaign to wipe out Hamas in Gaza, the work of churches ministering to those on both sides of the conflict has grown increasingly important.

Once we're settled around a small table in the cramped but tidy cabin, Beener tells me his story.

Pastor Israel Iluz (left) delivers a box of meals to soldiers at an army base near Kiryat Shmona.

PHOTO BY JILL NELSON

It began at 6 a.m. the day of the attack when he awoke with "an urgent sense to pray."

Thirty minutes later, the city's alarm began to sound. Residents of Sderot, dubbed "the bomb shelter capital of the world," knew the routine well. Beener and his wife had 15 seconds to get to their bomb shelter—a room that doubled as their boys' bedroom. But 10 minutes later, they emerged to a scene far more frightening than one of the usual rocket attacks.

Outside their window, Beener's wife spotted men shooting machine guns as they yelled "Allahu akbar."

"We understood the bomb shelter won't save us anymore because the terrorists may get in. It doesn't lock," Beener explains.

Minutes later, friends texted photos of bodies at the bus stop near his home. Elderly women on their way to visit the Dead Sea on Shabbat had tried to run from their bus to the station's bomb shelter. Hamas fighters gunned them down. Beener shows me the pictures and points out a woman his wife knew.

Beener has dark circles under his eyes. Months of leading his ministry from a hotel, sleeping in tight quarters, and creating a Bible school structure for the church's kids has left him exhausted.

But he's grateful to be alive. The terrorists shot out his windows and set fire to the cars on his street but didn't enter his home, a close call he says felt a bit like the Passover in Exodus. Still, the stories of what Hamas did to their neighbors and friends haunts his small community.

Beener's 11-year-old son didn't sleep for weeks, and many women in his church have persistent nightmares. But that hasn't stopped them from serving, or praising God.

A giant, white tent straddling the grass in front of the cabins serves as a temporary worship center, or tabernacle as Beener likes to call it. It's also their supply center.

"In 2001, Hamas proclaimed Sderot the 'city of death' and vowed to wipe it off the map," Beener said. "This is why we named our ministry City of Life. We want to bring hope to people who have experienced generations of trauma."

JACK GUEZ/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Three miles east of Sderot and just outside the Gaza envelope evacuation zone on Dec. 6, four buses and several vans full of volunteers pulled up next to a grassy field at Kibbutz Dorot—home to 870 people before the war began. Dorot is part of a collection of 10 kibbutzim called Sha'ar HaNegev that lost hundreds of employees due to the attacks and resulting war. Since then, managers have struggled to harvest ripe produce and keep the farms running.

Most of the newly arrived volunteers were from local churches, but some Christians came from other countries, including South Africa, Germany, and the United States. As nearly 250 people poured onto the field, an explosion sounded in the distance.

"If you are not close enough to a bomb shelter to get there within 30 seconds, you will immediately get down and cover your head," coordinators from the Fellowship of Israel Related Ministries explained in both Hebrew and English as everyone gathered for instructions. "And just a reminder," they added. "If you choose to work in agriculture, there are no bomb shelters around. So that's what you'll be doing whenever the siren goes off."

That warning didn't deter Esther Arnusch, a homeschool mom of five from Jerusalem. "It might be nice to pick fruit. I enjoy being outside," she noted as she passed by the groups designated for cleaning and repairing a

new school building and laying irrigation lines.

Arnusch joined dozens of other volunteers going to nearby Kibbutz Ruhama to pick pomelits—a cross between a grapefruit and a pomelo. The seemingly endless rows of trees teemed with ripe fruit, and the group quickly went to work, twisting and pulling the large pomelits while avoiding the trees' thorns. Another group of agriculture volunteers picked tomatoes.

Ran Ferdman is CEO of the agricultural company managing three of the local kibbutzim. He described some of the more urgent items on his to-do list: harvest the cotton fields before the rain arrives, pick the fruit before it rots, fix the irrigation lines, and sow the winter crops to avoid a future food shortage. Already done: planting carrots and potatoes for nearby kibbutzim hit hard on Oct. 7.

More than 75 percent of Israel's carrots and potatoes grow in this fertile region, but it has been under near-constant rocket attacks for several months. "You see missiles in the air and explosions all the time," Ferdman said. "But we don't have any choice. We have to supply food to Israel."

The loss of manpower compounds their challenges. Before Oct. 7, his company had 60 full-time and 100 part-time employees. He was left with only 12 workers in the aftermath of the attacks. Neighboring farms suffered similar losses.

Ferdman said 20 percent of his employees were part of the 360,000 reservists called up, and another 20 to 30 percent took their wives and young children to a safer location. His Thai workers returned home.

Hamas murdered all seven of his Palestinian workers from Gaza—further evidence of the terrorist group's crimes against its own people. Ferdman identified the men, shot to death inside their vehicle, when he was on his way to Kibbutz Mefalsim a day later.

It's against this backdrop that hundreds of volunteers arrived to help in the kibbutzim, many sharing their own personal challenges as they worked. Desta Tekla had just finished her military service, a minimum two-year requirement for most Israeli citizens. "I wasn't in combat or anything, but it's very much impacted me emotionally, spiritually, and mentally," she said. She came to volunteer with her mom and members of her church in Haifa.

Taffy Carpenter has three kids in their 20s serving in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). She said a resolve had set in to overcome evil with God's light. "We all know in our family that we're each called not just as a family, but as individuals, and now as adult children, to lay down our lives and to serve," she explained as she briefly paused her work in the fields.

LEFT: Israeli soldiers walk by the former Sderot police station, damaged during battles to dislodge Hamas militants. BELOW: A woman living in Sderot is overwhelmed with emotion as she describes how Hamas gunmen attacked and took over the police station.

TAMIR KALIFA/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

Gaza isn't Israel's only security crisis. It takes a little more than two hours to drive from Jerusalem to Israel's northernmost city, where Hezbollah rockets rain down almost daily from southern Lebanon. It's a stark reminder that this tiny country has enemies to fight on multiple fronts.

Most of Kiryat Shmona's 20,000 residents left in the wake of escalating Hezbollah rocket attacks and fear of a terrorist rampage similar to what Hamas perpetrated. The Iranian-backed terrorist group has 25,000 full-time fighters, including an elite commando force 2,500 strong, and has long planned to use its own vast network of tunnels to slaughter Israelis across the border.

Despite the dangers, a dozen people from Congregation Kiryat Shmona stayed behind to cook meals for IDF troops stationed nearby. On a Thursday afternoon in early December, Pastor Israel Iluz held a giant pot of ground beef, vegetables, and rice while others helped dish the food into individual containers.

"How much did we do today, Gabi? How many dishes?" he asked his 21-year-old daughter, who was busy drawing smiley faces for the cardboard covers. "Around 350," she responded. Some days they prepare as many as 500 meals.

A small speaker near the kitchen played Israeli music while several of the women sang along. At a nearby table, an 81-year-old couple from Jerusalem folded napkins around plastic utensils. They help the church ministry during the week and return home on the weekends.

Iluz said Israel was unprepared to house and feed the surge of soldiers sent to the north after the war began, so the family decided to convert his 28-year-old son's new restaurant into a church ministry opportunity. "Instead of worrying about what's going on, we are busy giving as Jesus basically did. You know, He fed the multitudes," Iluz said. Much of their funding comes from overseas churches, he added.

As we drove into the nearby foothills to deliver the first two crates of meals, we heard a loud explosion—Israeli troops firing at Hezbollah, Iluz explained. He pointed over the hill to where the Iranian-backed terrorist group is stationed. "As long as there is no siren, we're good," he said.

Hezbollah has an estimated 150,000 missiles, more than most countries in the world, and many have long-range capabilities. According to Iluz, the terrorist group typically doesn't begin firing rockets until after 5 p.m.

Still, the soldiers at the first military checkpoint turned us away because of increased attacks near the base in recent days. A missile killed a farmer in a nearby field later that evening.

But our next three stops were in safer territory, and a group of soldiers at one of the military outposts promptly dug into the food as they sat around their makeshift tables, a tank parked nearby.

As we drove back to the church, Iluz shared his concern about the religious roots of the conflict. Hezbollah, he said, is on a mission to wipe out Israel and proclaim victory for Islam.

"It's not going to end with us. It's going to come to you guys," Iluz noted after he showed me where a Hezbollah rocket recently incinerated a vehicle and damaged an apartment up the street from his home. "They say, 'Let's start with the little Satan, and then we go to the big Satan.' That is America."

The Christians I met in Israel embraced the importance of serving their neighbor, but they also understood the conflict at a human level—one that speaks to both its religious roots as well as the sinful nature of man.

David Pileggi has lived in Israel since 1980 and for the past 15 years has pastored Christ Church Jerusalem, a 175-year-old Anglican congregation in the heart of the Old City. Around 30 members are serving in the IDF, including one of his sons.

The West "doesn't really believe people take religion seriously," the rector explained as I took a seat in his church's library, a stone building with arched walls.

"If you're going to comment on the Middle East, you need to somehow enter into the minds and lives of the people who live here," Pileggi said. In this part of the world, he added, respect and honor are hugely important and often fused with religious identity.

Hamas and the wider Muslim community have an eschatology—a view of the last days—that says Muslims will rule the world under Shariah law. That worldview influences their perception of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

"In the last hundred years or so, they have come to import a lot of Western anti-Semitism and conspiracy theories, and they somehow believe that the Jews, and in particular the state of Israel, is hindering [the end times]," Pileggi said. "The lie that's being spread in the West is that Hamas

Israeli soldiers gather to eat meals provided by Congregation Kiryat Shmona.

is reacting to the occupation. No, they're fighting against the existence of Israel."

But Pileggi also cautioned against a Christian eschatology that objectifies Jews instead of approaching them as real people who have suffered trauma over the centuries. "I don't know how many times thoughtful Israelis have told me that they simply suspect that all this Christian love and outpouring of support for Israel is not based on anything, but it's our way of somehow engineering the return of Jesus," he said.

As Pileggi walked through Christ Church's ancient building, just steps from the Old City's Jaffa Gate, he translated the Hebrew writing in the stained glass windows and the Communion table. One of the windows lists the three persons of the Godhead, and the 150-year-old Communion table displays Jesus' words, "Do this in remembrance of me."

Since its founding in 1849, this church has always had a contingent of Jewish Christians. But it also has an Arabic service and a vibrant ministry to Arabs and Muslims that includes legal aid, food and medicine, and plans for helping the West Bank's deaf community by providing watches that vibrate during a rocket attack. Pileggi said the global Church should be careful not to turn all Muslims into enemies.

"On one hand, we're talking about an ideology that's quite dangerous," he said. "On the other hand, we're talking about millions of people who are made in the image of God. And this becomes an ethical challenge for the state of Israel and even for the West." He believes Christians should strongly oppose anti-Semitism but avoid writing the state of Israel a blank check to do what it wants.

In early January, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said once Israel destroys Hamas and frees the hostages, "Gaza can be demilitarized and deradicalized, thereby creating a possibility for a better future for Israelis and Palestinians alike."

Heavy Israeli bombing has killed more than 24,000 Palestinian civilians and militants, according to Hamas officials. Those numbers can't be verified, but nearly half of Gaza's structures have been destroyed. The coastal enclave will likely take decades to rebuild, and many churches have teams of people ready to go to work.

Amid the practical and political planning, Pileggi said, Christians should keep the spiritual elements of the conflict in mind.

"It should drive us to our knees to pray," he said. "It should cause us to be more missional, and to act ethically and morally, even when those around us no longer do so." ■

COURTESY OF ISRAEL ILUZ

NEW YORK MINISTRIES STRUGGLE TO HELP MIGRANTS RELEASED INTO THE COUNTRY WITH LITTLE HOPE OF STAYING

by Grace Snell

In a red brick food pantry in downtown Manhattan, Avril Roberts sat facing a prospective client. The woman had recently arrived from Ecuador and had come to the free legal aid clinic run by Open Hands Legal Services. She was already working night shifts to make ends meet and looked utterly exhausted.

As Roberts listened, the woman explained why she had come to the United States. Back in Ecuador, a cartel had taken over her town and gang members started killing people to shore up their reign of terror. One day, the woman opened her front door to find a dead body lying almost on her doorstep.

After that, she took her child and fled. Together, they traveled almost 3,000 miles to New York City—joining the more than 160,000 migrants who have flooded the city since 2022.

Many of the new arrivals hail from countries like Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador, and most come across the southern border. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has bused over 35,000 to New York City and sent more than 60,000 to other Democrat-run areas.

New York City spent over $1.4 billion sheltering and supporting migrants in the fiscal year that ended in June 2023, and about 68,000 people still rely on the city for food and shelter.

Migrants in the city who are seeking asylum usually have temporary authorization to remain in the country. Some arrived having secured one of the less than 1,500 daily asylum appointments available at border checkpoints through a new app called CBP One. Others crossed illegally and were apprehended or presented themselves to border patrol agents to request asylum. That leads to a Notice to Appear in immigration court, and migrants must fill out an asylum application within one year of arrival.

But most migrants have no clear path to permanent legal status. Asylum is a tough legal standard, one that many migrants probably can't meet. Cases take years to resolve, delaying the inevitable deportation and encouraging more people to come as the city buckles under the strain and federal politicians battle

SANCTUARY STR

SARA HYLTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

AIN

A man walks to a laundromat the day before his planned departure from the historic Candler Building in Times Square, which was being used temporarily to shelter migrants in Manhattan.

LEFT: Migrants browse through free clothes at a church in the Bronx. RIGHT: Migrants out in the cold wait to go into a shuttered Catholic school now functioning as a shelter in the East Village.

over the border. Nonprofits across the city are pitching in to help, but say there's only so much they can do under current immigration policies.

The woman sitting across from Avril Roberts began telling her story of cartel violence in a matter-of-fact tone. "Like she's saying, 'I went to the park,'" Roberts recalled. But when the woman noticed the look of shock on Roberts' face, her expression changed. "It's almost like the horror of what she's saying to me hit her when she sees my reaction," Roberts said.

As she listened, Roberts felt torn. The woman's plight broke her heart, and she wanted to help. But Roberts also knew she had to separate those feelings from the legal question at hand: Does this woman qualify for asylum? Roberts knew that all too likely, she didn't.

Asylum has a very particular legal definition. In order to qualify, applicants must prove they face targeted persecution in their home countries based on protected traits such as race, religion, or political opinion.

Roberts said lots of migrants she encounters don't seem to meet this standard. But they want to take their cases to court anyway and won't get a final decision for at least three to five years.

Most come to the legal clinic with the same question: "How do I get a work permit?" She has to explain they're only eligible for a work permit if they have another immigration application pending.

And if they work illegally, Roberts said, migrants jeopardize their chances of legalizing later on. But they also need to survive. And that leaves migrants vulnerable to exploitation by fraudsters promising green cards or employers paying below minimum wage—all based on the fact that "they're not legally present."

Whether fleeing violence or poverty, migrants who enter the United States illegally set themselves up for a different set of problems—legal status, identification, housing, and work eligibility among them. That's one reason many crowd into the asylum system, hoping to find a legal way to stay. Current border policies extend migrants' legal limbo by allowing them to remain in the country without immediately evaluating whether they have a valid asylum claim.

Migrants who cross the border illegally can ask for asylum once they reach American soil and turn themselves over to immigration officials. After their asylum applications have been pending for 150 days, migrants can apply for a work permit. That gives them a chance to make a living, but most probably won't be allowed to stay.

Since 2021, U.S. Customs and Border Protection has released over 2.3 million migrants into the United States.

LEFT: ADAM GRAY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: KEVIN C. DOWNS/REDUX

A few miles north, a small man in a brown robe swept into a lobby adjoining the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, where a crowd of migrants already waited. Julian Jagudilla is a Franciscan friar and has directed the church's migrant center for the past decade.

After the migrant surge started in 2022, Jagudilla opened a drop-in center to help migrants get winter clothes. But after eight months, he realized that wasn't the migrants' most pressing need: "What we saw that they need more is legal assistance."

Jagudilla started training volunteers to help immigrants with their asylum applications. When the Biden administration granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Venezuelan migrants, Jagudilla's team started helping with those registrations as well. Now, he manages a team of about 55 volunteers who work in daily shifts of 10 to 15.

On Dec. 18, he started doing group sessions to try to keep up with the demand. Now, he hosts two intakes a day with about 20 people in each. Later in the afternoons, the teams also offer scheduled appointments.

Jagudilla said the migrants they work with come from all over. In addition to South America, many come from the Caribbean or from West African nations like Senegal and Mauritania. Most of them speak Spanish, French, or Arabic. That creates a challenging language barrier, and Jagudilla is always looking for more translators: "We need a lot of hand-holding here."

But the hardest part of the job is the uncertainty. Jagudilla said it's disheartening not knowing what happens to the people he helps. And he knows many of their asylum claims likely won't succeed.

Meanwhile, migrants face a 30-day shelter limit for singles and a 60-day limit for families. When the clock runs out, they have to pack up and wait for a new spot to open, which often takes weeks. Sometimes, they end up sleeping on the streets.

On Dec. 27, Mayor Eric Adams imposed new restrictions on charter buses carrying migrants from the southern border. Drivers who fail to give the city 32 hours' notice or unload passengers outside designated drop-off zones now face a misdemeanor charge. On Jan. 4, the city filed a $700 million lawsuit against 17 different bus companies.

During a media briefing, Adams decried Gov. Greg Abbott's busing campaign as "inhumane" and accused the Texas governor of using migrants as "political pawns." He joined two other Democratic mayors in calling for more federal aid. Abbott fired back, saying it's time for the rest of the country to share the burden of caring for the millions of people streaming over the border into Texas. The migrants brought to New York came voluntarily.

Meanwhile, on Capitol Hill, a bipartisan group of lawmakers is trying to hammer out a deal on a bill to enact new border security measures—action Congress has failed to take for decades.

Amid the political wrangling, Jagudilla continues to help migrants apply for legal status within the existing framework.

"We provide a welcome here in our church, following Jesus' command that whatever we do to the least of His sisters or brothers, we do it to Him," Jagudilla said.

That's Avril Roberts' hope as well. In mid-December, Roberts was working on 43 open cases, and she can't represent everyone who comes to her. But she does her best to make sure each one has a chance to be heard. "Sometimes clients just want to tell you their story," she said.

Meanwhile, more and more migrants keep coming to ask about asylum and work permits. With each new client, Roberts tries to untangle the facts.

When people don't have a legal way to work, she tells them directly. "It's not something they like to hear, but it's something you have to be clear about."

Roberts said she's shed a lot of tears over her work, but she also draws encouragement from her clients. She said many of them come from religious backgrounds, and even when she's giving them bad news—"No, you don't qualify. No, you can't get this"—clients will look her in the eyes and tell her, "God has carried me this far. I will pray for this." ■

GOD'S WORLD NEWS

FREE TO BE KIDS

Draw near to the Lord, each other, and His world with God's WORLD News.

The print magazines and online articles are for them; the teaching guides and discipleship resources are for you.

These publications meet kids where they are, covering relevant topics and school subjects and helping them grow into godly, discerning adults.

Browse free samples at gwnews.com.

God's Big World

DISCOVER
Ages 3-6

WORLD TeeN

DISCERN
Ages 11-14

WORLD KIDS

EXPLORE
Ages 7-10

RenewaNation

Helping Children Develop a Biblical Worldview

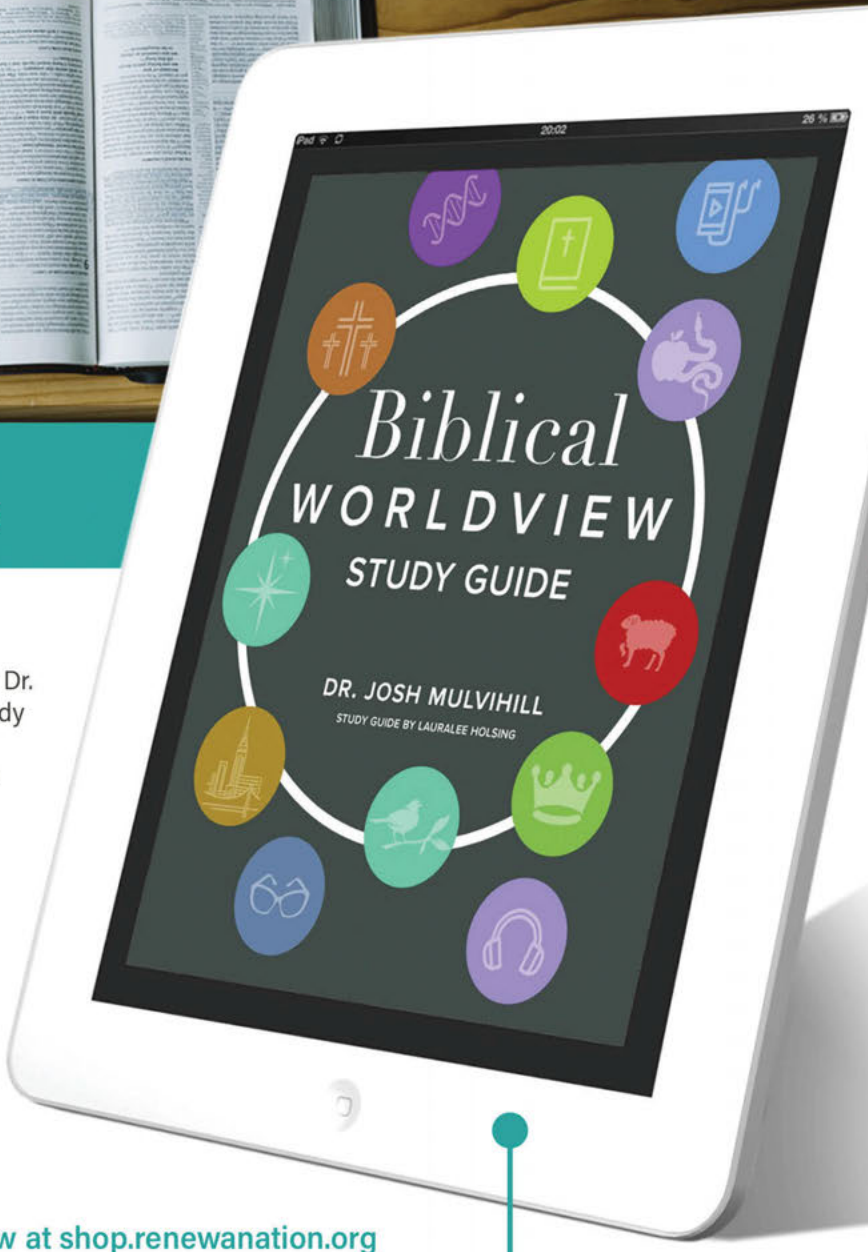
Help the next generation develop lifelong faith in Jesus

with the new *Biblical Worldview Study Guide*

Thousands of people are discovering the timeless biblical principles in the *Biblical Worldview* book by Dr. Josh Mulvihill.* The much-requested companion study guide is now available and includes a summary of each chapter, key points, and questions to generate discussion.

Perfect for individual use, classroom instruction, small groups, or Sunday School classes, the *Biblical Worldview Study Guide* is clear, concise, and easy to read. A deep and lasting faith begins with a biblical worldview, and this new resource will help you lay a strong biblical foundation in the lives of those you are ministering to.

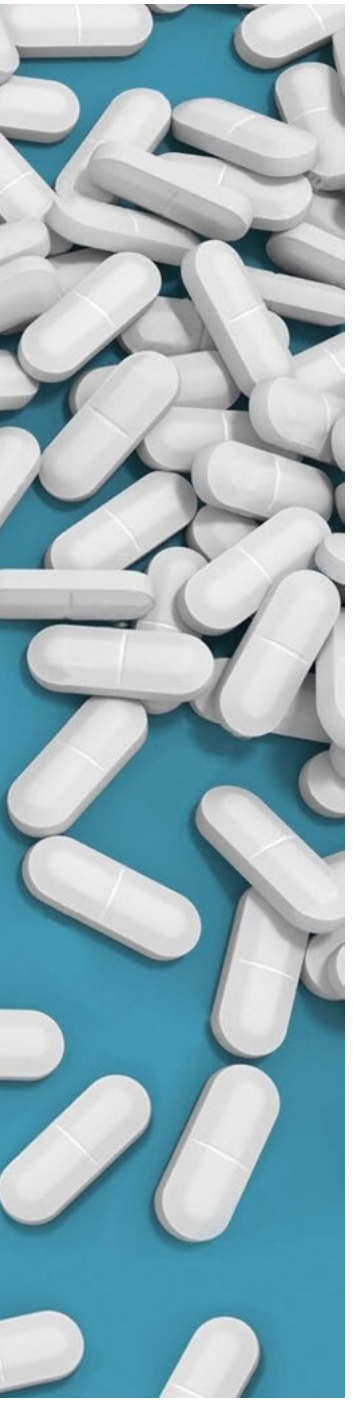
**A copy of the Biblical Worldview book is necessary to get the most out of the study guide.*



Available now at shop.renewanation.org as a 43-page printable document

NOTEBOOK

ILLUSTRATION BY RAÚL ARIAS



SCIENCE

Artificial research

A recent surge of academic fraud spells trouble for scientific integrity

by HEATHER FRANK

LONNI BESANÇON, an assistant professor in data visualization at Linköping University in Sweden, is also a detective of sorts. A self-described "opportunistic" sleuth, he spends his free time hunting down fraudulent research papers.

According to Besançon, a quick Google search can easily expose fake academic authors and institutions. Less obvious fabrications require more digging, and some expertise: "That would be like, you know, looking at the plausibility of p-values."

The professor is one of a host of scientific integrity sleuths sounding the alarm on counterfeit research. The number of research articles retracted in 2023 hit an all-time high, with over 10,000 papers pulled for fraudulent practices. The fraud ranges from images recycled from previous papers to entirely fabricated datasets. The sham papers aren't only annoying; they're harmful to scientific fields and in some cases even dangerous. Such academic cheating may be driven in large part by the strong career pressure researchers face to publish frequently.

The number of papers retracted increased more than fivefold between 2013 and 2023, according to a *Nature* analysis. A 2012 study in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* found that two-thirds of retracted biomedical and life sciences papers were withdrawn due to misconduct, including fraud, duplicate publication, and plagiarism.

Besançon argues the body of fraudulent research is actually far greater than what's being retracted. "Ultimately we're just catching the easy-to-catch ones," he said.

The majority of articles retracted in 2023, over 8,000, were published by Wiley subsidiary Hindawi. Acquired by Wiley in 2021, Hindawi recently published a white paper blaming the uptick in pulled papers on "paper mills," third-party individuals or groups that offer researchers authorship of sham papers for a fee.

David Bimler, a retired psychology researcher in New Zealand, sniffs out paper mills under the pseudonym Smut Clyde. He said that in Hindawi's case, the paper mills exploited the publisher's periodic special issues. Such issues focus on a particular topic, rely on a guest editor to recruit article authors, and require little publisher oversight, making them easy targets for scammers to slip in sham research.

Wiley has closed four especially problematic journals and in December announced plans to retire the Hindawi →

"If the research community offered protections and compensation, the number of researchers engaged in sleuthing might rise to meet the surge in counterfeiting."

brand name. Matthew Kissner, Wiley's interim chief executive officer, told *Nature* he anticipates the paper retraction scandal will cost his company $35 million to $40 million in revenue.

Integrity sleuths believe fraudsters are primarily responding to the pressure to publish. Researchers are assessed based on three metrics: number of publications, number of citations, and the h-index, which roughly quantifies a researcher's productivity and impact. Besançon said those metrics can incentivize unscrupulous scientists to produce "bogus stuff. ... There's no value in doing one very good paper, but there's value in doing six good enough papers."

Hiring a paper mill makes it easier for a dishonest scientist to churn out a bogus paper—it's like the high school jock who hires a math nerd to do his homework. "People clearly have strong career requirements to have a paper," said Bimler, who believes some researchers view paper mill use as the price to get ahead.

While researchers exposed for fraud may face serious consequences, the fraudulent papers themselves carry serious implications for the scientific community. Some researchers may continue to rely on sham research unwittingly, even after an article has been retracted. If, for example, an investigator is running a human clinical trial relying on false claims that a certain medication has health benefits, the consequences could be catastrophic. "Imagine you then give that [medication] to people in another study somewhere else to just reproduce the results, and then you end up killing people," Besançon said. "That could happen."

Besançon thinks integrity sleuths are getting better at detecting paper mill–generated research, though. His colleague Guillaume Cabanac has developed a software tool called the Problematic Paper Screener. It identifies "tortured phrases," strangely worded expressions resulting from automated attempts to hide plagiarism. But Besançon is less optimistic about sleuths' ability to catch researchers who use more sophisticated fabrication methods.

Besançon said integrity sleuths aren't paid for their work and instead often receive legal threats—or even death threats. If the research community offered protections and compensation, he suggested, the number of researchers engaged in sleuthing—as well as the amount of time spent sleuthing—might rise to meet the surge in counterfeiting.

"There's more and more people interested in doing this, but there's also more and more threats for doing it." ■

BANKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

EDUCATION

Student slump

States try new tactics to fight chronic absenteeism

by LAUREN DUNN

ON JAN. 10, Massachusetts' Department of Elementary and Secondary Education announced it was running new English and Spanish television and radio ads encouraging families to prioritize children's school attendance. "School," says state Secretary of Education Patrick Tutwiler in one ad, "can be a place to heal."

Chronic absenteeism has more than doubled in Massachusetts elementary schools since before the COVID-19 pandemic. Twenty-two percent of all Massachusetts students missed at least 18 days of school during the 2022-23 school year, up from 13 percent pre-pandemic. Like other states, Massachusetts is trying new tactics to boost attendance.

In Indiana, 1 in 5 K-12 students was chronically absent last year, with the highest rates among high schoolers and kindergartners. The state's Department of Education said its chronic absenteeism rate had dropped since the previous year but remained 8 percentage points higher than it was pre-pandemic. In October, the state announced plans for an early warning dashboard that would consider data including attendance and inform parents when their child might be at risk of not graduating.

Elsewhere in the United States, some districts have hired private companies to check up on students and bolster attendance, ProPublica reported Jan. 8. Advocates say reasons for absenteeism can include poverty, mental health problems, or a greater concern about illness. Some families blame paperwork requirements or lax study habits their children developed during online learning.

CHINA BUILDS THE SCHOOLS; IRAQ DELIVERS THE OIL

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani cut a ribbon ceremonially to open a new school in Nasiriyah, Iraq, on Jan. 8. A Chinese company built the school as part of a construction deal Iraq made with two Chinese firms in 2021. The Chinese project—involving the construction of 1,000 Iraqi schools—is expected to be completed this year. Iraq is using oil products to pay for the new buildings. The nation reportedly needs about 8,000 new schools to accommodate students after years of war destroyed many schools and COVID-19 restrictions further hampered education.

China has expanded its influence in other Iraqi sectors as well: Chinese firms have built health facilities and power plants and reconstructed an international airport. Some observers worry China is drawing Iraq into dependence while also benefiting from Iraq's oil resources. —*L.D.*

CHAIR: ADAM GLANZMAN/BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES; IRAQ: AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

RELIGION

Continental dissent

African bishops reject Vatican's same-sex "blessings"

by ELIZABETH RUSSELL

A COALITION of African Catholic bishops has rejected Pope Francis' recent decision to allow priests to bless gay couples. Cardinal **Fridolin Ambongo Besungu**, president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar and a member of the pope's Council of Cardinals, wrote Jan. 11 that "unions of persons of the same sex are contrary to the will of God and therefore cannot receive the blessing of the Church."

Since the pope's doctrinal office released guidelines for nonliturgical, same-sex blessings in December, clergy reactions have varied. But Ambongo said the African bishops are united in their decision not to offer the blessings, given the Biblical injunctions against homosexuality—and African cultural norms. The blessings, he added, would make it "very difficult" to preserve the Biblical definition of marriage.

But Ambongo appears unlikely to draw the Vatican's ire. He did not decry use of the guidelines outside Africa. He wrote the letter with permission from the pope and the head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, including a note that the pope is "opposed to any form of cultural colonization in Africa" and therefore willing to allow the African bishops to disagree.

PRIVACY LIMITS

In a case testing the boundaries of Canadian religious liberty, British Columbia's Supreme Court has ordered two Jehovah's Witnesses congregations to turn over records containing personal information about two former members' break with the religious group. The ex-members, Gabriel Wall and Gregory Westgarde, both asked to see their records in 2020. When the Jehovah's Witnesses denied their requests, they turned to the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner (OIPC), which ordered the congregations to turn over the records. The congregations went to court, claiming the order infringed their religious freedoms. But on Jan. 8, Justice Steven Wilson ruled that the Coldstream and Grand Forks congregations have no right to withhold the records from the OIPC. The OIPC will evaluate the records to verify that they don't qualify for artistic, literary, or journalistic protections before turning them over to Wall and Westgarde. *—E.R.*

PUNISHING PRAYERS FOR PEACE

A prominent Russian Orthodox priest was fired in early January and is facing expulsion from the church after refusing to read a prayer for victory over Ukraine. Aleksiy Uminsky, who served a Moscow church for 30 years and led Mikhail Gorbachev's funeral, lost his position after telling fellow priests to "pray more for peace than for victory." **Patriarch Kirill** made the pro-Russian "Prayer for Holy Rus" mandatory after the invasion of Ukraine. *—E.R.*

SPORTS

Scoring a safety

California pauses an effort to ban youth tackle football

by RAY HACKE

CALIFORNIA GOV. Gavin Newsom on Jan. 16 effectively sacked a bill that many parents in his state hated.

The legislation, introduced by lawmakers in the California Assembly earlier in January, would have prohibited youth sports organizations and leagues from offering tackle football to children under age 10 starting in 2027 and under age 12 beginning in 2029. But California parents mounted a vocal opposition.

After the Assembly committee tasked with regulating California sports voted 5-2 to send the bill to the Assembly's full chamber, Newsom vowed to veto it. That prompted Assemblymember Kevin McCarty (D-Sacramento), the bill's sponsor, to pull the proposal.

No state has yet banned tackle football for children. However, legislators in not just California but Illinois, New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Maryland have tried to do so. Their goal is to prevent brain injuries in youth, but many parents believe the benefits of tackle football outweigh the risks, providing structure, discipline, and an outlet for aggression they feel will benefit their children—boys in particular.

In California, Newsom's opposition to the bill may seem surprising, as he isn't exactly hailed for being a champion of parents' rights: The governor declared in a statement that while he is "deeply concerned about the health and safety of our young athletes," he also wants to ensure that "parents have the freedom to decide which sports are most appropriate for their children." It is possible Newsom's position is aimed at maintaining Democratic support among minority families who value the opportunities football offers.

Concerns about the safety of youth football center on the effects of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), which kills nerve endings in brain cells: Some scientists believe that not only concussions, but repeated, less severe blows to the head following high-speed collisions with opponents can adversely affect football players' cognitive abilities, mood, and behaviors later in life. Studies of some former NFL players who have committed suicide—such as Dave Duerson, Junior Seau, and Aaron Hernandez—showed those players had high rates of CTE.

A 2016 study published in *Radiology* showed that a single season of tackle football can affect the brains of players as young as 8. However, research in *JAMA Network Open* in 2021 didn't find a link between youth football and later cognitive and behavioral problems. Some experts point to the other health benefits of organized sports, like exercise.

Since 2021, California law has required tackle football coaches to complete concussion and head-injury training annually. But it's possible the state's legislators may try again to stop young children from playing tackle football. McCarty has tried to pass a ban since 2018.

Evan Mata'u is the president of the Milpitas Knights, a youth football program serving a small city in the San Francisco Bay Area. He's also the father of six sons ranging in age from 6 to 30. All of them have played or are currently suiting up for the Knights, who have sent roughly 20 "AlumKnights" to NCAA Division I colleges or the NFL, including current Tampa Bay Buccaneers defensive lineman Vita Vea.

While Mata'u understands concerns about the injury risks inherent in football, he believes such concerns are overblown—especially since younger kids don't run as fast, and thus don't hit each other as hard when they collide, as players in high school, college, or the pros do.

"Soccer has a high rate of concussions, too," Mata'u said. "They [youth football's detractors] don't put that out there." ■

RICHVINTAGE/GETTY IMAGES

VOICES **ANDRÉE SEU PETERSON**

No more trifling with sin

What I learned about myself when my father died

"WHOEVER HAS SUFFERED IN THE FLESH has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do" (1 Peter 4:1-3).

Now that a year has gone, it is right to share what my father's death did for me. Claims made too early after a sudden trauma are rightly suspect, but 14 months is a kind of track record.

This isn't going to be pretty. I console myself vis-à-vis my readers with the hope that no one is totally useless; you can always be a bad example.

There was a sin area I let slide for many years. As far back as the '70s, someone warned that I was only "trifling with Christ," and must get rid of the old ways and walk in the new—"put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life ... put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24).

I was not particularly alarmed. Sanctification is a process, I reassured myself. More than that, it is a process accomplished by *God*. I was willing to wait contentedly until such time as God was ready to rid me of sin by His sovereign initiation and *sola gratia* operation. Any striving against sin on my part was works righteousness (a distorted takeaway from seminary). I decided my well-meaning friend had a streak of Pelagianism.

That plan worked about as well as you can imagine. I soldiered on in a life of unconquered sin, ever awaiting divinely wrought transformation. To be sure, I adopted certain observable proofs of salvation, such as regular Bible reading, Bible teaching, church attendance, and hospitality of various kinds. On occasion I would run across the inconvenient verses that whoever sins at one point in the law is breaking the whole law, inasmuch as it is the same Lawgiver who commands all (James 2:10-11).

My father's death was attended with an unexpected thwack of fear-of-the-Lord in which I stumbled around concussed for days. In an instant the enormity of my deadly trifling was revealed to me—the way I give myself to moodiness just because I can; the way I make certain people in my presence walk on eggshells, just because I'm saved so it doesn't matter. The epiphany brought to mind the Golden Gate Bridge suicide survivor who, only in the moment his hands left the railing, saw with clarity the folly of his actions.

So I learned something about Satan when my father died—how he really is by turns the Deceiver and then the Accuser; how if you are too lazy to do the work of "resisting the devil" (James 4:7), then you will find in the end that you have been "taken captive to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:26). Once you have messed things up royally, he retreats, removing the great delusion you labored under, so as to mock your lucid view of your true estate.

I learned something about God too. I distinctly heard in my spirit that this is my last chance. It was my *mene, mene, tekel, parsin* moment (Daniel 5:25), with the exception of a slender thread of hope extended that if I—even now—start doing right, God may yet relent of forfeiting my life (Jeremiah 18:8).

I memorized all of Psalm 51. My husband became a happier man, the kind who doesn't walk on eggshells: "The heart of her husband safely trusts in her" (Proverbs 31:11).

It was Christmastime when my father died, so we watched both the 1984 George C. Scott *A Christmas Carol* and the 1951 Alastair Sim *Scrooge* version. I snuggled on the sofa with my husband because he likes that.

I noticed in the movie that Ebenezer was a man advanced in years when he finally came around. That made me happy. ■

Email *aseupeterson@wng.org*

BE TRANSFORMED.

ROMANS 12:2

REAL FAITH. REAL LEARNING. REAL LIFE.

Where real discipleship, biblically centered education, and authentic friendships happen.

Apply at oakhills.edu

OAK HILLS
Christian College

Renée Gentry

Working for a safety net

Vaccine injury lawyer Renée Gentry defends patients and public health

by LEIGH JONES

IN EARLY DECEMBER, Emma Freire spent a morning with a lawyer who represents clients seeking compensation for vaccine injuries. It's a niche job that involves arguing against government lawyers in a special administrative court. In her story on p. 44, Emma explains how the system works and why many people believe it's failing those who suffered legitimate harm. I asked her what else she learned during her visit to Washington, D.C.

How did lawyer Renée Gentry get involved in vaccine injury litigation? She was working as an immigration lawyer on 9/11 and lost her job a few days later. So she took a temporary job at a vaccine injury law firm collecting medical records. She knew nothing about the field when she started, but ultimately stayed at that firm 19 years. When the law partner there retired, she struck out on her own.

Gentry's work is often emotionally taxing. How does she handle that? She cares deeply about her clients, but she also needs time to decompress to remain effective as a lawyer. So, she has a policy of "no crying moms on Friday." She said the mothers are very understanding. Still, there are some cases she can't handle. Early in her career, she was assigned to cases involving infant deaths. Reading the autopsy reports was too difficult, and she asked her boss not to give her any more of those cases.

Even though she represents people who have injuries, Gentry is pro-vaccine. How does that stance factor into her work? She believes a strong social safety net is a critical part of a public vaccination program. Injuries are rare, but they do happen. People need to be confident that, should it happen to them or their child, their financial needs will be met. Gentry fears that failure to help the injured with their medical bills will further inflame anti-vaccine sentiment.

Based on her clients' experiences, Gentry has some advice on how to avoid vaccine injury. What is it? One of the most common types of injuries among her clients is a SIRVA injury. That stands for "shoulder injury related to vaccine administration." It's usually caused by a shot administered too high on the arm. When getting vaccinated, Gentry says to make sure the nurse is at the same level as you. If you're seated, the nurse should be seated too. She recommends avoiding drive-thru vaccination clinics. She also suggests wearing a short-sleeved shirt to your vaccine appointment. If you have to pull your sweater down your shoulder, the needle might go in too high. ■

PHOTO COURTESY OF RENÉE GENTRY

"CHRISTIAN" ISN'T ENOUGH.

Pursue your education at a university where:

Students are truth-seekers, not truth-makers.
The authority of Scripture is upheld and taught.
Critical thinking has not been co-opted by critical theory.

Learn More

Cairn UNIVERSITY | *Walk a Different Path*