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DECEMBER 2005

Forward in Christ

God's wisdom, WELS' witness



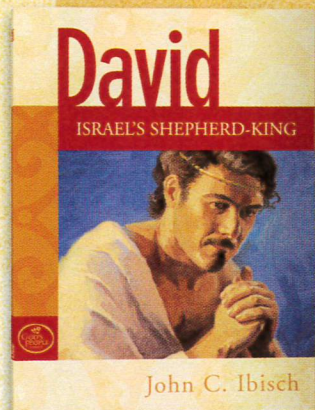
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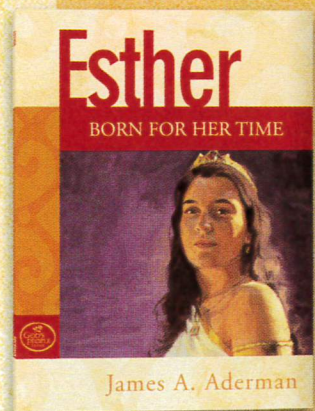
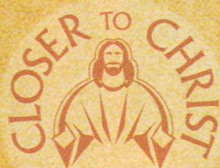
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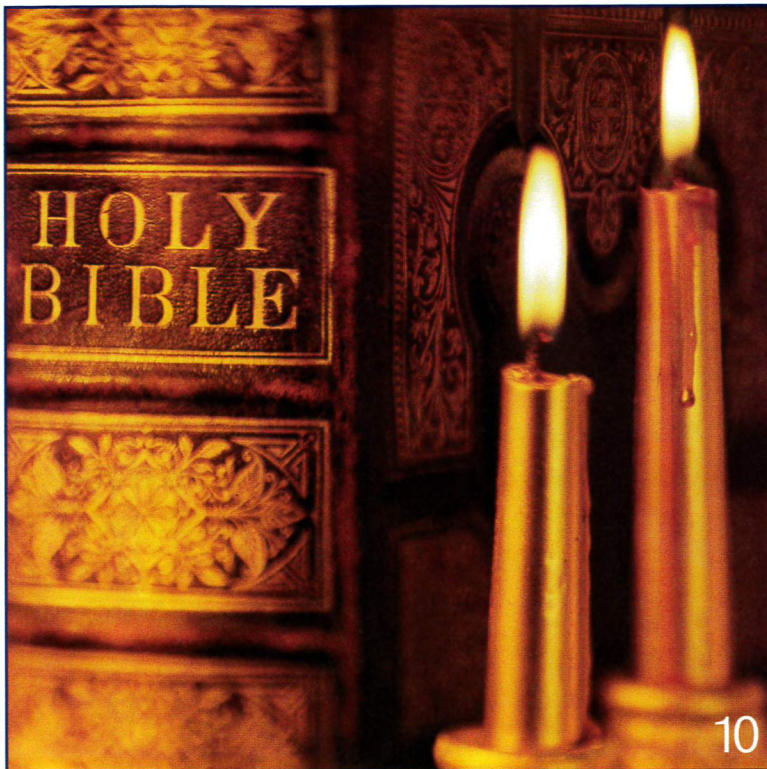
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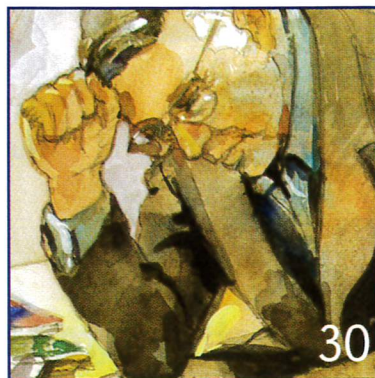
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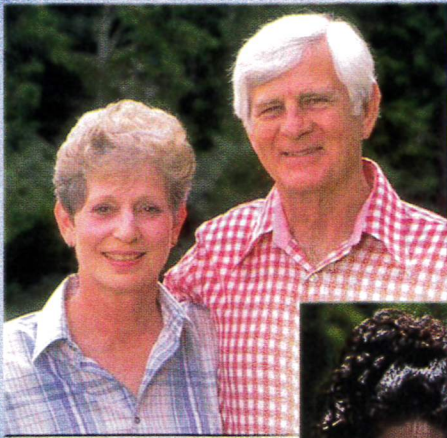


Forward in Christ

† The official magazine of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

FEATURES

- 10 GOOD NEWS THAT TURNS THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN** God’s ways are so unlike what we expect.
Paul O. Wendland
- 12 SINNERS WELCOME** We ought to adapt God’s view that our neighbors are fellow-redeemed children of God.
Mark A. Birkholz
- 14 LUKE: CONSUMMATE ARTIST** The gospel by Luke provides rare artistry in presenting God’s truths.
Theodore J. Hartwig
- 16 THE CHRISTMAS SURPRISE** God’s gift hung on a “nail” for years. But I finally looked in the “pocket.”
Bob Gove
- 17 THE MOST IMPORTANT DAY** I found comfort in remembering my baptism.
Pam Gnewuch
- 28 NO FEAR** George Thompson isn’t afraid to share his faith.
Julie K. Wietzke
- 29 FREEDOM FROM FORMALISM** Grace changes religion from ritual to relationship with God.
Paul E. Kelm
- 30 FACING ETERNITY—MAKING DECISIONS** When faced with mortality, Jim fixed on eternity.
Robert M. Fleischmann
- 36 WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR CHRISTMAS?** What we need should define the gifts of Christmas.
Reynold Heuer



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

1 Kings 8:57

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DECEMBER

WHAT'S INSIDE *by Julie Wietzke*

Christmas, for most, is a time of gift giving. We give gifts to family and friends to show our love and appreciation.

God must really love us because he showers us with many wonderful gifts all throughout our lives. What's especially great about God's gifts is that he gives us what we need, even if the gifts aren't what we think we want. Rennie Heuer explains in "What do you want for Christmas?" (p. 36).

Executive editor Gary Baumler writes about God's gifts in his life (p. 34), as he prepares to retire to Blessings(!) Lane, North Carolina. Gary has used the gifts God has given him in his 12-year ministry at Forward in Christ. Through name changes and redesigns, his goal continued to be to instruct, inform, and inspire WELS members or, as the cover says, to provide "God's wisdom, WELS' witness." His dedication, sense of humor, and Christian guidance will be missed.

As you rip off the wrapping paper on your Christmas gifts this year, don't forget God's greatest gift to you—a Son born of a virgin, sent to save you from your sins.

Have a blessed Christmas!

DEPARTMENTS



- 6 FEEDBACK**
- 7 DEVOTION**
Famous last words *James A. Mattek*
- 8 EDITORIAL COMMENT**
From Bethlehem to bedlam *Douglas J. Engelbrecht*
- 9 QUESTION & ANSWER**
Forgiveness *Richard L. Gurgel*
- 18 WHATEVER**
Molding me into me *Lindsey Jindra*
- 19 NEWS**
- 26 BULLETIN BOARD**
- 27 POTLUCK**
- 32 FROM THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE**
Gifts for our children *Karl R. Gurgel*
- 33 BIBLE STUDY**
Philippians 1:1-11; I rejoice in all my prayers for you *Paul E. Zell*
- 34 EDITOR'S PEN**
Blessings Lane *Gary P. Baumler*
- 35 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDY**
Songs for the heart *Donald W. Patterson*

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

Thanks for the articles in September—especially “I know that my Redeemer lives.” The words of the song blended beautifully with the account of a father’s last moments in a hospital bed. It’s a situation many of us have faced or will face. Hopefully the article will be remembered in those moments of passing from death to life.

*Dan Krueger
Kenosha, Wisconsin*

THANK YOU, PASTOR

I would like to thank you for including the excellent article, “Dear Pastor . . .” [Oct.]. It reminded this pastor of two reasons to apply himself faithfully to the ministry to which God has called him. First, pastors have an awesome, joy-filled task of bringing Christ and his salvation to God’s people. Second, God’s people appreciate the gospel and their pastors a whole lot more than what pastors often realize or appreciate. So, again, thank you. In a loving and profound way you reminded pastors of how much the Lord has blessed us through the ministry of the gospel.

*Dale Reckzin
Oak Creek, Wisconsin*

FREEDOM FROM SIN’S CURSE

I was somewhat confused in reading Paul E. Kelm’s article “Freedom from sin’s curse” [Sept.]. In the last part of the article the author rightly observes that Jesus endured sin’s curse for us. However, this statement does not negate the statement the author makes earlier: “. . . there is no escaping the ultimate curse of sin—death.” Yes, sin is the cause of death, but for the believer in Christ death is no longer a curse. . . .

The Bible speaks of a believer’s death in other terms. For example: . . . gathered to one’s people . . . fallen asleep . . . departing to be with Christ . . . time of one’s departure . . . absent from the body, present with

the Lord . . . the receiving of the soul by the Lord . . . the spirit returning to God. . . . A.L. Graebner in his *Outlines of Doctrinal Theology* speaks of the death of believers thus: “Though the temporal death of believers is also a consequence of sin, it is no longer a punishment of sin, but rather the cessation from sinning, and a transition from a spiritual life of faith and hope into an eternal life of perfect bliss with God” (p. 261). . . .

*Arthur Clement
Clinton, Michigan*

GOD IS IN CONTROL

Thank you for your editorial, “When Christians hurt the cause of Christ” [Oct.]. Invariably each month, you verbalize my thoughts in your editorials. After an important world issue/event occurred several years ago, my WELS pastor listened to my concerns, and then simply told me that God was in control of the earth now and forever. The solid strength that came out of Hurricane Katrina was that we learn God is still in control. There is a distinct difference between sinful fatalism and God-pleasing trusting that he is in control and working all things to the good of those who love him. Our collective prayer is that we do not preach matters of situation morality, but rather preach Christ crucified and bring praise to our Lord with our thoughts and deeds.

*Ken Zehm
Tucson, Arizona*

CREATION OF FOSSILS

I am concerned about “Lessons from the Creed” [Oct.]. I disagree with Pastor Degner who wrote, “We cannot explain all the details of how and why God created all things. The Creator may have placed some of those bones in the ground or those fossils deep in the earth just so that man would understand what the words (Genesis 2:17) meant.”

Why would God need to create dead things for an object lesson? The

Bible states that everything was good at the end of the six days of creation. Buried bones and fossils are the result of sin, not part of God’s creation. I believe that Degner’s words are incorrect and are not based on what we believe concerning the creation of a perfect world where all forms of death were absent. . . . In fact, the first death/killing took place as a result of sin when Lord covered Adam and Eve with garments of skin (Genesis 3:21). In answer to why fossils are found deep in the earth (and even in the highest mountains), the worldwide, cataclysmic deluge recorded in Genesis 6-8 gives the answer.

I agree with Degner when he states, “It is enough to believe what God says about creation in his Word.” However, what he states about the bones and fossils is not recorded in God’s Word concerning creation.

*Dennis Himm
Grand Blanc, Michigan*

Pastor Charles Degner responds: The idea that God may have created fossils in the earth was a speculation on my part. It is also speculation to say that the fossils found deep in the earth are a result of the flood. Speculating about conditions before the Fall or what the world looked like before the flood can make for lively discussion and debate. . . . It takes discipline not to say more than what the Bible says, or less. On what the Bible does say, we cannot disagree. God made the world in six days. It was very good. Sin brought death into the world. God promised and sent a Savior for sinful mankind.

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

Famous last words

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." Luke 1:18

James A. Mattek

We've all said them. They're words we've lived to regret. Usually it's an exaggerated claim: "There's no way we'll lose." And then we lose. Maybe it's a pompous prediction: "I'll handle it." But it handles me. Famous last words—words made memorable, though we'd love to forget them or retract them, but we can't.

Insulting doubt

Zechariah's last words became famous because, for what seemed like an eternity, they actually were his last words. What a shock when Gabriel silenced his voice box for three trimesters. Why were these words his famous last ones? Simple . . . with them he roared an insult that reverberated in the very throne room of God. For the messenger had announced, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God" (Luke 1:19).

Zechariah's last words were so insulting because they expressed doubt that God was telling him the truth: "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son" (Luke 1:13). To doubt God's truthfulness is to lump him together with the devil, the father of lies. To God, that's a major league insult. To silence him was the equivalent of God saying, "Stick a sock in it." Suddenly, Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22) was more articulate in the presence of an angel than this member of the clergy.

As we give Zechariah a spiritual spanking, let's get in line to get the same. We too have doubted God's truthfulness. God says, "Be joyfully generous and I will bless you" (cf. Deuteronomy 15:10) . . . but many a doubting soul is afraid to tithe. God promises, "I will never leave you nor

forsake you" (Joshua 1:5) . . . but so many insult God and pull the shades on life, sitting alone in the shadows. With Zechariah we tell God, "How can I be sure of this?" God has every right to silence us. Instead, he wants to silence our fears and remove our doubts. He wanted the same for Zechariah.

Glorifying trust

To help Zechariah, the Lord provided a visual aid . . . his wife. Zechariah sat in silence as Elizabeth's tummy began to stretch. God was confirming the truthfulness of his promise before Zechariah's very eyes. How Zechariah must have regretted his famous last words.

At the end of her second trimester, God offered Zechariah even more spiritual fireworks. A pregnant virgin showed up at his door. Spirit-filled Elizabeth prophesied that Mary's unborn baby was "my Lord" and that in her own womb her child was praising the Savior by performing fetal acrobatics. In his kindness, God was changing the doubt of Zechariah into the trust of Mary: "Blessed is she who has believed" (Luke 1:45). If only Zechariah could use his voice again to express his trust. With Mary, his spirit now "rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:47).

In his kindness, God also helps us, replacing our insulting doubt with glorifying trust. It appears that Mary stayed in the guestroom until her relative went to full term and delivered a boy. After the three-month stay Mary went home. She had six more months to ponder in



her heart the fact that the fullness of time had come.

Then the miracle baby was born. God had left the splendor of heaven for the squalor of earth. To settle the score in the cosmic battle between the heavenly hosts and the unheavenly hosts, Jesus came down. He became one of us to do battle on the devil's turf. The serpent crusher had arrived as promised. And he would win the fight, delivering forgiveness for doubters . . . for Zechariah and for us.

When his son was named "John," Zechariah's voice returned. Pent-up praise danced from his tongue. Silence was replaced with song: "The Lord . . . has come and has redeemed his people" (Luke 1:68). His famous last words would not be words of insulting doubt. Nor will ours.

Contributing editor James Mattek, chief executive officer of Wisconsin Lutheran Child & Family Service, is a member at Trinity, Watertown, Wisconsin.

From Bethlehem to bedlam

Douglas J. Engelbrecht

The derivation of the word “bedlam” is an interesting one. In AD 1247, a hospital was founded at a priory in England called St. Mary of Bethlehem. Centuries later it was converted into a hospital for the insane. St. Mary of Bethlehem became known throughout the country for its noise and confusion . . . for being a madhouse. The original name of St. Mary of Bethlehem was gradually shortened by people quickly passing over the syllables when they made reference to it. Thus “Bethlehem” gradually became “Beth’lem,” and “Beth’lem” finally became Bedlam. That’s where we get our word “bedlam” (meaning “a scene of confusion”) from.

Many people, like the shepherds of old, take off on a journey to Bethlehem each Christmas to celebrate the birth of Christ. But instead of arriving at Bethlehem, they arrive at bedlam. Christmas turns out to be a scene of confusion, a madhouse, leaving them saying on the evening of Dec. 25: “Man, am I glad that’s over with for another year!”

How do you literally manage to get from Bethlehem to bedlam? It happens when you start skipping over sin. When you begin to ignore sin, you develop no need for a Savior anymore. Once that happens, the days that lead up to Christmas and even Christmas itself deteriorate into no more than a trip down memory lane, a meaningless exercise in nostalgia.

How fervently we need to pray to God as we approach Christmas: “Dear God, may I never set out for Bethlehem without a deep sense of my sin and my need for the Savior!”

It also happens when you start missing the manger. The angel told the shepherds, “When you get to Bethlehem, look for a baby in a manger.” So many people today miss the manger because they are looking for something else. Instead of looking for the manger and, more important, the child in that manger, they look for things like the warmth of family and friends, peace on earth, the

end to a hectic week of shopping, and Christmas parties. Once you start journeying to Bethlehem looking for everything but the Christ Child, it’s easy to wind up in bedlam. It’s easy for Christmas to turn out to be a scene of confusion, a madhouse, a time of the year that, well, the sooner it’s over, the better!

It also happens when you start shunning the sharing. If on the road to Bethlehem all we think about is ourselves, we’re really on the road to bedlam. If all we think about is what we will get for Christmas instead of what we can give others, it won’t be long before Christmas is just a mad rush to church so we can get back and find out what’s waiting for us under the tree.

Sharing the message of Christ and sharing the love of Christ with others is as integral to the celebration of Christmas as the birth of Jesus itself. If we’re not ready to share the message of Christ and the love that Christ has shown to us with others, Christmas becomes

an exercise in formality, an event to be celebrated and then packed in a box until next Dec. 25.

How do you manage to get from Bethlehem to bedlam? It doesn’t take much. It happens when you start to skip over sin, when you start to miss the manger, and when you start to shun the sharing. With a full aware-

ness of our sin and our need for a Savior, with our eyes focused on the manger and the Christ Child, and with a shepherd-like eagerness to “spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child” (Luke 2:17), may our journey to Bethlehem this Christmas be filled with peace, joy, and blessing!

Once you start journeying to Bethlehem looking for everything but the Christ Child, it’s easy to wind up in bedlam.

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



at the foot of the cross. Richard L. Gurgel

TOPIC: Forgiveness

In Matthew, Jesus says, "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (6:14,15). How do you explain that to someone who's suffered from another's damaging sin and who's still struggling with emotional scars and memories? Is this person's salvation in jeopardy?

The answer depends on the heart's attitude. Is that person clinging to bitterness and a desire for revenge? Or is that person simply struggling with the memory of the sin and its present consequences?

If I am refusing to forgive, my unforgiving heart places me in jeopardy of throwing away my salvation. If, contrary to the Scriptures' urging to forgive, I convince myself I have a "right" to be angry with someone who's wronged me, if I fan bitterness into flame by rehearsing repeatedly how unjustly that person treated me, then I'm destroying my faith. When I block forgiveness from my heart to others, I simultaneously block forgiveness from God to me. Jesus' words in Matthew 6 mean exactly what they say!

Where does that leave me whenever those words condemn my unforgiving heart? Jesus' words are an earnest call to repentance, but they are exceeded in earnestness by his desire to restore hearts crushed by those words! Among the countless sins drowned in the sea of his dying love are my sins of refusing to forgive.

Then what? Return to bitterness? Resume my grudge? God forbid! That treats forgiveness of sins as permission to sin! Instead, after kneeling in repentance at Jesus' cross, don't leave without gazing at that cross again. Consider what it means that God "does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10). Ponder that God "remembers our sins no more" (cf. Jeremiah 31:34).

Then imitate your Father! We imitate our Father by refusing to repay others according to their iniquity. We imitate our Father's "memory loss" by refusing to give in to our sinful nature's craving for revenge. Some call that "forgiving and forgetting."

But it is right here, at times, that people sometimes incorrectly apply Jesus' warning. Just because someone remembers the incident or is still struggling with its painful consequences does not necessarily mean he's refusing to forgive.

When Scripture says God "forgets" sin, that's a figure of speech. God's omniscience hasn't suffered a stroke. God's "forgetting" powerfully pictures that in Jesus he refuses to treat us as we deserve.

So, too, our "forgetting" does not mean we can no longer have a conscious memory of the sin or are forbidden to recognize its painful consequences. Nor does it mean we've failed to forgive if, for the welfare of others or ourselves, we must wait to determine if that person can again have a position of trust in our lives. Rather we have "forgotten" like our Father when we refuse to indulge in personal vengeance or fan bitterness into flame.

Perhaps there's no better example of this delicate balance in Scripture than Joseph. When years later his brothers begged him not to take revenge on them, Joseph didn't feign ignorance. "Sold into slavery? Who, me? By whom?" He acknowledged their sin as sin. He didn't deny that their sin had painfully altered their lives.

But Joseph saw beyond his brothers' sin to God's grace that turns evil into good. He refused to play God as his brothers' judge and jury. With a forgiving heart moved by God's grace, Joseph assured them he wouldn't treat them as their sins deserved.

Yes, we may remember the pain and bear the scars of sins against us. But we too can flee to our God who turns evil into good and who placed our own evil on his own Son. Resting in our Father's saving arms, we find strength to deal with others in the same merciful spirit that God deals with us.

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

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

GOOD NEWS THAT THE WORLD UPSIDE

In the good news of Jesus, God shows that he all about what the world thinks is so all-fired

Paul O. Wendland

I read the news today oh, boy," so goes John Lennon's famous tagline from the Beatles' song, "A Day in the Life." It sums up what a lot of people think when they read the newspapers. And the song does not get any more hopeful as it goes along. Life is random, a jumble of junk, filled with pointless tragedies. I read the news today, boy, and it's bad. So bad that all the heartwarming stories in the world can't make it any better.

BEWILDERING NEWS

The gospel is *good* news. Let's be clear on that first of all. The glad good news of God came down to help us—people who were unable to help ourselves. This news (not like the kind we read about in the papers) makes us sure about God's love. It changes sorrow into joy by taking care of our deepest need: the sin that makes us strangers to God. In fact, this love is so amazing that it turns everything in the whole world upside down.

One of the things that always gets to me whenever I read Luke's gospel is how topsy-turvy it all seems—I mean, how differently things work when compared to the way things usually go in this world. A master hitches up his clothes and serves his slaves. Samaritans help out Jews as neighbors.

A pious Pharisee prays loudly, but God turns a deaf ear, while a no-good tax collector goes home justified. Almost every page of the gospel is filled with astounding things like this. It's as Mary sang in her song: God fills the hungry with good things, but the rich he sends empty away (cf. Luke 1:53).

The Christmas account is no different. Caesar Augustus snaps his fingers, and Joseph and Mary have to trudge the weary miles to Bethlehem when she's nine-months pregnant. "This is the way God comes into the world?" we think, "That can't be right!"

It gets worse. David's town is so full of people, apparently, that no one can be bothered with the predicament of a woman whose time has come. They don't care at all about what God might be doing here through her. They don't even seem to have the kind of human decency anyone might show to a pregnant woman in need of some help. A more graphic portrayal of human sin and our utter lost condition could not be found.

Yet Mary and Joseph bear all this without complaint. The child is born. The King of heaven has a feeding trough for his bed, and the Lord of all has his little limbs wrapped in strips of cloth to shield him from the cold night air.

So it goes when the God of heaven joins himself to our race. No one sees.

No one cares. In fact, for all the world it seems to be just one more sad and pointless story in humanity's absurd history.

SATISFYING NEWS

Then the angel comes and announces the good news. Not to kings, or to warriors, or to Bible scholars, but to common shepherds keeping watch over their flocks. And such an announcement! All the glad exuberance of heaven is poured out on the earth's midnight sky. God's glory breaks through the darkness and fills the world with his light. Clearly God is at work here, and he's at work in this completely astounding way. Why does he do things like this?

Well . . . I remember hearing this illustration once. The world as we know it is like this huge store window in which all the price tags have been changed. All the cheap stuff is marked high, and all the really expensive things—the things that have true and lasting value—are practically being given away. The sad part is: people fall for it. They spend all their money on what does not, on what cannot, satisfy.

So God turns the world upside down. In the good news of Jesus, God shows that he doesn't care at all about what the world thinks is so all-fired important. Caesar Augustus snaps his fingers? Well, that may be, but the Messiah is born in David's

URNS DOWN

*doesn't care at
important.*

town just as God's ancient Word said he would be. Are humans self-centered and uncaring by nature? That's okay. God doesn't need them to set his love in motion in this world. His Son can have a stall for a bed and a humble mother to take care of him as best she can. God will break open the angel chorus for the benefit of a few shepherds.

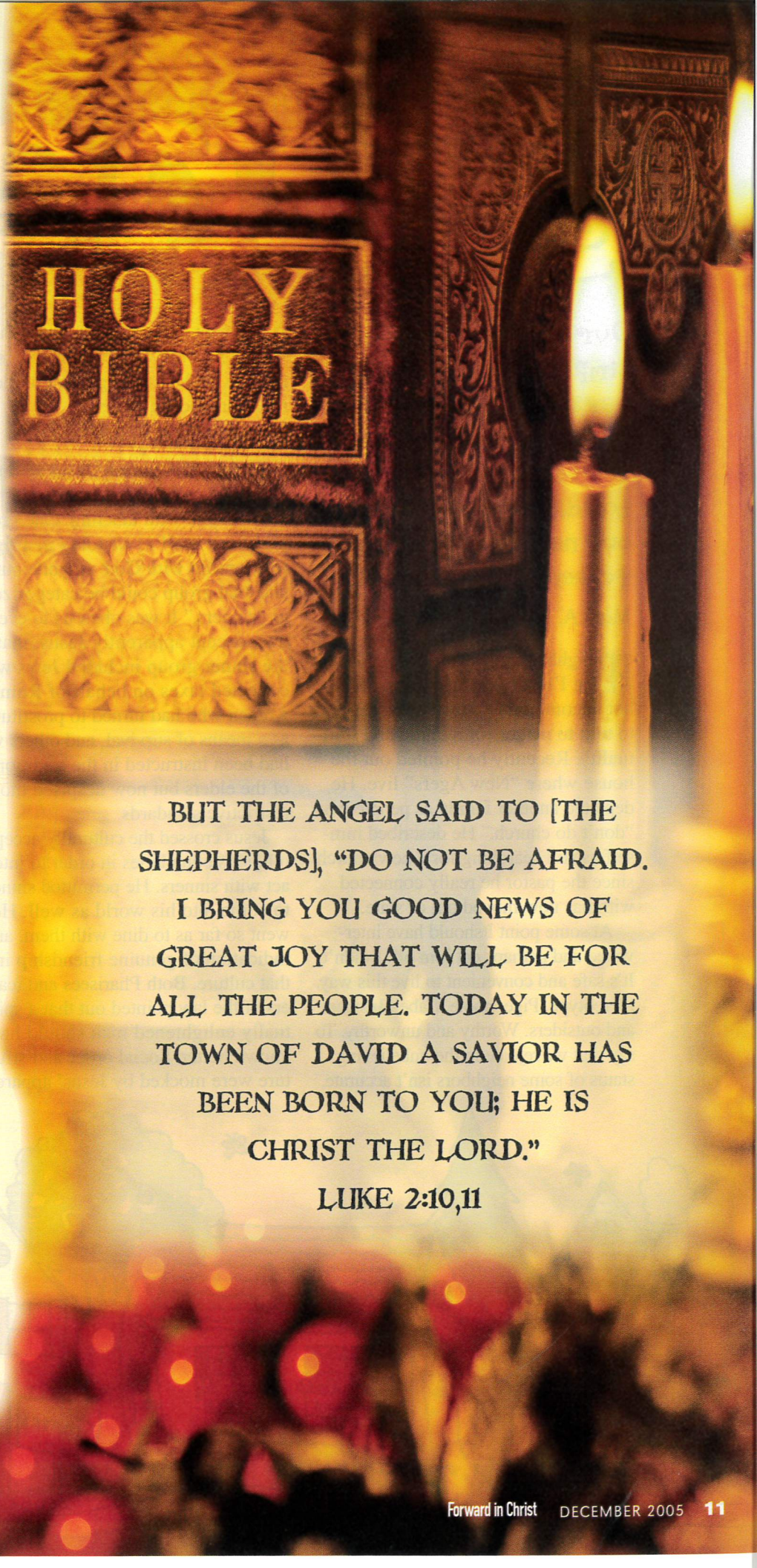
God likes to make something out of nothing, Luther said. If you think you're something, then there's not much he can do for you (cf. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 14, p. 153). But if you feel empty and weary with a life that so often seems to go nowhere, if you feel the sorrow of your sin and if you're tired of hearing all of this world's bad news, then listen here to the angel's song. It's meant for you.

To you this day in David's town a Savior has been born. Your Savior! He's the Messiah. He's the Lord himself, come down to you. He comes so small and helpless to draw you to himself. He comes to bear your burdens and make you his own forever.

There's nothing to be afraid of here. Here in this child is God for you. Utterly and always for you!

That's good news.

Paul Wendland, president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, is a member at Garden Homes, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



HOLY
BIBLE

**BUT THE ANGEL SAID TO [THE
SHEPHERDS], "DO NOT BE AFRAID.
I BRING YOU GOOD NEWS OF
GREAT JOY THAT WILL BE FOR
ALL THE PEOPLE. TODAY IN THE
TOWN OF DAVID A SAVIOR HAS
BEEN BORN TO YOU; HE IS
CHRIST THE LORD."**

LUKE 2:10,11

Sinners

Our neighbors can't be simply dismissed as "sinners" who stumbled into our churches by accident. Instead we ought to adapt God's view that our neighbors are fellow-redeemed children of God.

Mark A. Birkholz

A neighbor across the street knows that I'm a Lutheran pastor. So it's not uncommon for our conversations to turn to matters of religion and spirituality. Recently he pointed out the house where "New Agers" live. He depicted another family as people who "don't do church." He described himself as still searching for a new church since the pastor he really connected with has now moved out of state.

At some point I should have intervened and perhaps cut him off. I didn't. It's safe and convenient to live this way. Stereotype. Pigeonhole. Label. Insiders and outsiders. Worthy and unworthy. To say that we rejoice in the unbelieving status of some neighbors isn't accurate.

A more apt description might be that we can become very comfortable, sinfully so, with an arrangement of the righteous and the sinners.

Lining up with Jesus

The gospels portray Jesus as operating in a culture that was similarly comfortable with labeling. One group perceived itself as standing in a right relationship with God. Anyone outside that group could be categorized as "sinners." It was obvious to everyone, except apparently Jesus, that the sinner group included Jews who collected taxes on behalf of Rome, women who had turned to prostitution as a means of survival, and others who had been instructed in the traditions of the elders but now despised those restrictive standards.

Jesus crossed the culturally accepted religious boundaries in order to interact with sinners. He permitted sinners to come into his world as well. He went so far as to dine with them, an indication of genuine friendship in that culture. Both Pharisees and teachers of the law pointed out that a spiritually enlightened man should have known better. Social order and structure were mocked by Jesus' apparent

indifference. Religious integrity might be compromised. Private muttering became public objection: "This man welcomes sinners."

Jesus challenged the prevalent cultural view of his day with three parables recorded in Luke 15. In the parable of the lost son, God celebrates the change of heart in his wayward spiritual child. In the two shorter parables—the lost sheep and the lost coin—Jesus informs us that other inhabitants of heaven join in the celebration: "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:7). In Jesus' setting, those words would have been challenging, perhaps even confrontational. The statements have come down to us by inspiration for our consideration. They remain thought-provoking and challenging today.

Rejoicing with angels

God has allowed us to know something of the created beings known as angels. We learn of their great number



Welcome

through Old Testament visions and the words of Jesus spoken in the Garden of Gethsemane. Other adjectives and statements imply a certain structure to this heavenly army. The psalmist reminds us of their protective service, a truth we reflect with the phrase “guardian angel.” The passages of Luke 15 are especially helpful in understanding the view or mindset of the angels. Simply put, angels see things as God sees them. They are concerned about his creation and his creatures. They rejoice each time a single soul is led by the Spirit to trust Jesus as its personal Redeemer.

Wouldn't it be delightful to be in agreement with the very inhabitants of heaven, to adopt their focus and priority as your own? At the birth of Jesus, angels filled the sky near Bethlehem and sang God's praises. Luke informs us that the divine concert was both visible and audible for human beings. Apparently the concert continued, though both the audio and video feed were cut off for the earthly audience. Shepherds who had listened to the angel's announcement and directive went to Bethlehem. They saw. They trusted. They rejoiced.

In reaction the angels of heaven sang another selection of praise.

Several years ago a casually dressed young lady entered our church on a Wednesday night in December. Choir practice and the soup supper gathering were coming to an end. The midweek Advent service hadn't gotten underway. The first person to greet our female visitor was a long-time member whose attire for any worship service was impeccable. I saw their initial encounter from a distance through a large window between the chapel and narthex.

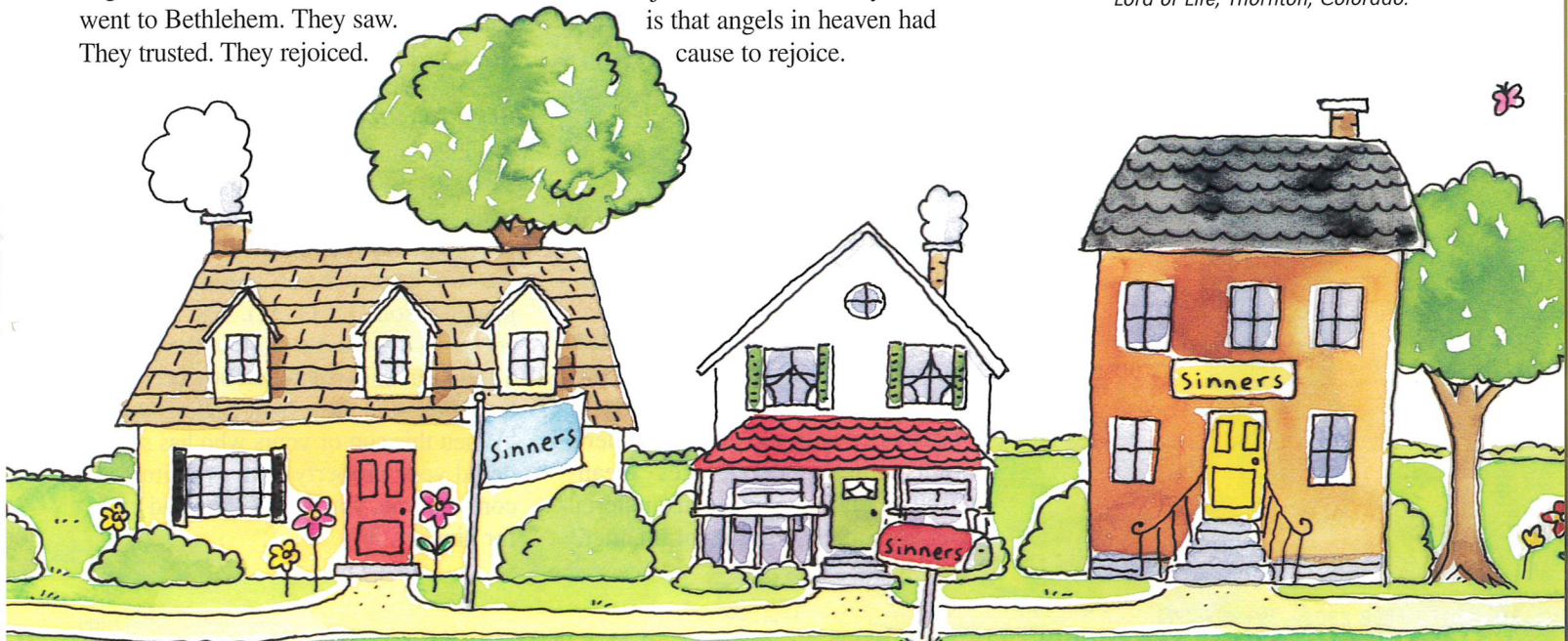
I feared the worst might occur. She might be intimidated by his mode of dress. He might scare her away with a judgmental glance at her clothing. I learned later that she had almost no spiritual background. He was a life-long student of the Scripture, and his demeanor could be intimidating.

My fears were unfounded, perhaps because this spiritually mature man understood Jesus' parables in Luke 15. He helped our visitor feel at ease. She stayed for our Advent meditation. She eventually took the adult information course and joined our church. My belief is that angels in heaven had cause to rejoice.

That life lesson from an Advent season past stands as a reminder for the present. My goal this year is to extend worship invitations to the unchurched neighbors I've come to know: the New Agers, the folks who don't do church, and even that friend who perceives himself as an “insider” but has no church home. Prayerfully, those invitations will be accepted, and the promises of God will be both understood and trusted. Angels will have cause to rejoice.

Look around your neighborhood and adapt God's view. It really isn't a case of us and them. Watch especially for those who visit your church this season. They can't be simply dismissed as “sinners” who perhaps stumbled into a church by accident. God views our neighbors as fellow-redeemed. His angels are in agreement with that viewpoint. You are positioned to be God's spokesmen on earth. His heavenly choir hopes to rejoice over even one sinner who repents and trusts God's promises through your witness.

Mark Birkholz is pastor at Lord of Life, Thornton, Colorado.



LUKE: CONSUMMATE

THE GOSPEL BY LUKE PROVIDES RARE ARTISTRY IN PRESENTING GOD'S TRUTHS.

Some 400 years after Luke's death in the late first century, a story began to be circulated that he had painted a portrait of the virgin Mary, which presumably had found its way to one of the churches in Rome. On the strength of this legend, Luke gained the reputation of an artist and was made a patron saint of artists.

Legends often contain kernels of truth. While Luke's artistry with the brush may be open to question, there is no doubt about his ability as a word painter. This is most visible in his gospel. Here he reveals himself as the consummate artist.

Art in song

This is immediately apparent in the songs he records in the first two chapters of the gospel. They are the songs of Mary at Elizabeth's home, of Zechariah at John's circumcision, of the host of angels on Bethlehem's fields, and of Simeon in the temple. Luke surely had an ear for music and perhaps also a gift for poetic arrangement of words. In the New Testament, only the book of Revelation contains more songs than Luke's gospel. That he devoted precious space at the beginning of his papyrus scroll to these four songs certainly distinguishes his gospel.

Art in order

The preface of Luke's gospel alerts us to another of his artistic talents. There he tells Theophilus that he intends to write "an orderly account of the things that have been fulfilled among us." Bible students have puzzled over the meaning of "orderly." From evidence in the gospel, "orderly" for this writer simply denotes "meaningfully." Luke organizes his materials in an artistically significant manner.

This does not require getting all the facts in exact chronological order. Given the author's stated purpose, exceptions to normal chronological order may heighten a story's meaningfulness. For example, Luke places Jesus' words to two would-be disciples (9:57-60) after the calming of the storm (8:22-25), but Matthew has it before the storm (8:18-27). However, Luke's placement is meaningful. It serves nicely as a prelude to Jesus' sending out of the 72 disciples. Meaningful placement!

Art in balances and contrasts

Luke exhibits another aspect of his art with meaningful balances. In Matthew, for example, the well-known Beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (5:3-12) present the blessings only. In Luke, however, (6:20-26) the set of Beatitudes are balanced by a set of woes. Thus, Jesus' words, "Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man" (v. 22), are balanced by "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets" (v. 26). In the blessing, note how the hatred results from faithfulness to the truth of Jesus. In the woe, note how the praise is motivated by corruption of the truth.

Another artistic balance occurs with the two sons in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (15:11-32). The contrast comes to light at the close of the parable. The older, self-righteous boy accosts his father with these fault-finding words: "When this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him" (v. 30).

"ON BYWAYS WITH THE BELOVED PHYSICIAN"



MMATE ARTIST

Theodore J. Hartwig

To which attack, the patiently merciful father responds, "This brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (v. 32).

What a meaningful contrast! What a remarkable example of that divine mercy so dear to Luke's heart! Most significantly, how this beautiful ordering of words and thoughts uplifts our faith to see, beyond the merely human, the Holy Spirit's inspiration.

Closely connected to meaningful balances in Luke's gospel are meaningful contrasts. Zechariah's unbelieving skepticism is contrasted with the virgin Mary's believing receptivity. Martha's mundane concerns are set off against her sister's spiritual devotion. The rich man's heart set on things below is compared with Lazarus' heart set on things above. The Pharisee's proud self-righteousness is set beside the tax collector's humble penitence. The positives are accentuated by the negatives.

Art in parables

High in Luke's gallery of art forms are the parables of Jesus. The gospel of Luke has more of these than the other gospels. Parables teach spiritual truths with pictures. Furthermore, we have Jesus' word for it that he employed this medium of instruction to hide his teaching from those who persistently hardened their hearts against his Word. For them the parables served for judgment and for sparing them from hardening their hearts beyond repair.

In this context one may wonder why the parable lessons should be difficult to grasp. Of course, with parables as with puzzles and riddles, the solutions are self-evident when

explained. But there is a deeper lesson to be learned with parables as with other similar experiences in life. Prejudices are horrendous obstacles to understanding and appreciating what, for an open mind, is simple and clear as day. Prejudices blind people to the truth. Prejudices blocked the critics from seeing the simple truths expounded in the parables.

There is no doubt about [Luke's] ability as a word painter.

Unique to Luke are Jesus' perhaps best-loved parables. Some of these have given us proverbial expressions. Such are the good Samaritan and the prodigal son, classic expositions of Scripture's paramount themes of law and gospel. The prodigal son illustrates the heart of the gospel. The good Samaritan teaches the proper approach to identifying and serving one's neighbor with love.


The parables enhance Jesus' teaching in yet another way. They clarify truths that may be difficult to explain with bare word definitions. Perhaps the prodigal son illustrates the human plight more graphically than a word definition. And what about faith? Not an easy concept to define. Better to show it in action, as Jesus once did for the disciples when they requested that he increase their faith (Luke 17:5). He

told them a story about an unworthy servant. It was not enough for the master that this servant had done his assigned duties all day long. When the day's work was done and it came time for the servant to enjoy deserved relaxation and bodily nourishment, the master gave him more work to do. And what was the servant's response? To boast that he'd done far more than he needed to do? No, in Christian life there is no such thing as going beyond the call of duty. The servant had it right: "I remain an unworthy servant and have only done what I'm supposed to do" (cf. Luke 17:10). That, for the disciples' edification, is the key to strong faith. It consists in living in a state of humble repentance, perfumed by love for the Lord. With the parables Luke has recorded the quintessence of the gospel's word painting.

One final example of his artistry forms a fitting conclusion to this subject. Luke's gospel begins in the temple with Zechariah at divine worship. Luke's gospel closes in the temple with the disciples at divine worship. Mere coincidence? No, this is Luke showing himself as the consummate artist. This is the Holy Spirit revealing himself as the consummate artist. The divine and the human must be kept together without division, without separation. Such is the mystery of inspiration. Such is the nature of Holy Scripture.

Theodore Hartwig, a professor emeritus at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, is a member at St. John, New Ulm.

This is the sixth of a seven-part series on Luke. To read the other articles in the series, go to www.wels.net/jumpword/ficarchive, and search by the author's first and last name.



The Christmas Surprise

Like the old jacket, God's incomprehensibly expensive gift hung on a "nail" for years. But I finally looked in the "pocket."

Bob Gove

My granddad was quite a character. He was 6' 4", and his hands seemed like bunches of bananas to my little eyes. He had a big bushy moustache and wore a ten-gallon hat. He had what you might call "selective" hearing.

Although we had to shout when we had a conversation with him, he often heard things that were said quietly in the next room. Granddad was definitely unconventional in many ways—especially his sense of humor. He lived with us the last couple years of his life, but before that he raised cows 300 miles away.

Discovering our gift from Granddad

Granddad wasn't much for giving gifts, so we were really surprised when a big package from him arrived at Christmastime one year. My mother, who loved the excitement of Christmas, had it opened in a few seconds. That's when the real surprise came. The gift was an old tan coat with leather patches on the elbows. I don't recall being all that disappointed. I had never received a gift from him before, and it felt kind of good to know that he thought about us at times.

It hung on a nail on the back porch for several days. On Christmas Eve, Dad slipped it on and happened to stick his hand in a pocket. Imagine our glee when his hand came out with a \$10 bill! Ten bucks was a really big deal in those days. It took a week to earn that much. We suddenly appreciated dear old Granddad much more, and we really had a merry Christmas.

Discovering our gift from God

Looking back on my youth I realize that for many years, my gratitude for God's gift of his Son was not much greater than my initial response to Granddad's gift of the old jacket. I think that I saw salvation as a gate pass into heaven, but I had to really work at keeping my nose clean all the time for it to be valid. How sad. Oh, I wish I had somehow got it through my thick head that salvation is a fantastic gift that Christ Jesus purchased for me. Like the old jacket, God's incomprehensibly expensive gift hung on a "nail" for years. But I finally looked in the "pocket."

Now I am finally starting to comprehend and appreciate the great gift of Jesus' incarnation on that first Christmas. By his birth and life and death and resurrection, he gave us forgiveness and redemption and justification and holiness—and his very life within us to live out his love for those we contact throughout this life. After that, he gave us life in his very presence, with everlasting bodies that will never feel disease or pain or temptation.

Another part of the great gift he has given us is the ability to thank and praise and worship him. This holiday season, let's do that with wholehearted joy.

Bob Gove is a member at Messiah, Nampa, Idaho.

The MOST IMPORTANT DAY

Faced with my own mortality, I found comfort in remembering the most important day of my life.

What has been the most important day of my life? I've had cause to think about this question recently. I can remember some very important days. There was the day I was married to a God-fearing, loving husband. There was the day our long-awaited, adopted son was placed into our arms. Then, those days that God graciously blessed us with another precious son and daughter were so important.

I know that most of us would answer this question in much the same way. These are truly important days.

Now let me tell you the reason I've had to ask that question. A while back I was diagnosed with a serious form of cancer. Almost nothing focuses a person as much as these five words, "We've found some cancer cells." It was devastating. Now I know I may die. Oh, I've always known I would die—someday. But now it was staring me in the face.

What did I do? I went to bed for two days. I cried. I felt sorry for myself and all that I would miss. I asked, "Why me, Lord?" But mostly I thought about my sins. Yes, Satan was there at my bedside, reminding me of all the sins I had done. I am a person who usually cannot remember yesterday, but the accuser clearly and vividly brought all my sins back to my memory. There were the sins against family and friends, coworkers and strangers, and especially, those sins against God himself. I was frightened and could not be comforted by anyone.

It was during these dark days that our church secretary called to say that a baptism napkin was needed for the following Sunday.

For years I have been one of the people making baptismal napkins for our church. We stitch a cross and the date of the baptism on them. Well, since I had been in bed for two days, hadn't yet died, and was starting to smell, I decided to start the napkin.

As I was working, I began to think less about me and more about God. As I looked at the napkin, God reminded me of my own baptism.

"My child, are you baptized?" Yes, Lord. "Then I have made an everlasting covenant with you."

"My child, are you baptized?" Yes, Lord. "Then I have washed your sins away in the river of my blood."

"My child, are you baptized?" Yes, Lord. "Then I will remember your sins no more."

"My child, are you baptized?" Yes, Lord. "Then I will walk through the valley of the shadow of death with you."

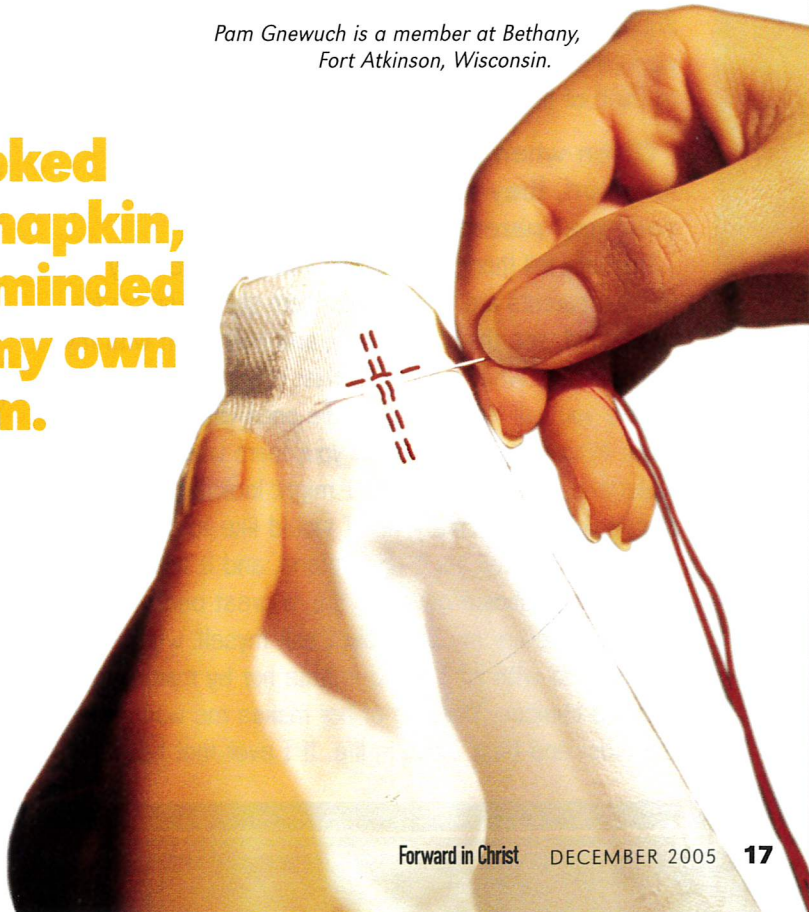
"My child, are you baptized?" Yes, Lord. "Then I have taken your punishment upon myself, so that you will receive a crown of life."

I realized the greatest day of my life is one that I do not remember. It was the day my parents carried me to the altar of God to be made his child through water and the Word.

Baptism—what a comfort! Parents, remind your children of their baptism. Celebrate it! When you see a child baptized in church, rejoice in the miracle you are witnessing. Strain your ears to listen for the angels rejoicing. And when the day comes that you face your own mortality, remember your baptism.

Pam Gnewuch is a member at Bethany, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin.

As I looked at the napkin, God reminded me of my own baptism.



WHATEVER

Molding me into me

God uses a variety of ways to shape us into who we are today.

Lindsey Jindra

When we are first born, our life is like a lump of clay waiting on the potter's wheel to be molded into something beautiful. God, the potter, uses a variety of ways to shape us into who we are today. One way he shapes us is by bringing us into contact with different people.

For me, the person who I think molded me the most is my birth mother. Although I never met her, she greatly influenced my life. My birth parents were 16 when my mother was pregnant. They were going through a rough time to begin with, barely making ends meet. They knew that they could not handle caring for a baby.

It scares me to think about how much pressure my birth mother had to be under. What was she going to do? Should she choose abortion, the "easy way out," or was there another option? She decided to give me up for adoption. She knew that she could not give me a good life, and she wanted something better for me. It makes me thankful to think of how she chose adoption over abortion.

Often when people find out that I am adopted, they ask, "Are you going to find your real parents?"

I usually tell them two things. First, I know exactly who my real parents are. I lived with them since I was a few weeks old, see them every day, and love them with my whole heart. What I mean is this: real parents are the people you call Mom and Dad, the ones who cheer for you when things go right and wipe your tears when you fall.

Second, I tell people that I might look for my birth mother but not to meet her. I would like to send her a letter. I would tell her I understand, and it was the right choice. That choice gave me life, a great one.

I truly owe her my life. Now I ask myself, what am I going to do with it? I try to imitate her by making good, positive choices. Thinking of her makes me want to do the most and best I can in life. If I ever met her, I could

never thank her enough. She made me who I am today, and I love her for that.

It makes me glad that someone in my mother's life must have told her about God. She went to a Christian adoption agency through Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service. Although this adoption agency no longer exists, it and groups like Christian Life Resources provide lifesaving counseling to young mothers. They work to save not only the earthly life of the child but also, hopefully, the eternal life of the mother. I hope that my mother took the message they gave and that someday I will meet her in heaven.

As Christians, young or old, we need to reach out and support those in trouble. Teens can have even more influence than adults can on people their age. It's positive peer pressure. You might say, "I can't help! I don't know any young mothers." However, there are many other ways to help. Prayer is powerful. If you don't have a specific mother to pray for, pray for struggling mothers in general. Donating time, talents, or gifts can help. Better yet, join a group who does this. Joining a Teens for Life or WELS Lutherans for Life organization can mean not only saving lives but also fun and fellowship.

A great potter molds his clay into a masterpiece using various tools. The potter is in control of the final piece, just as the great Potter is in control of our lives. Everyone we meet has a purpose. They help us develop our beliefs, values, and personality. My birth mother is the most influential tool God used to shape my life.

Lindsey Jindra, a freshman at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, is a member at Bethany, Manitowoc, Wisconsin.



Obituaries

Clara E. Wichmann 1913-2005

Clara (nee Oswald) Wichmann was born May 19, 1913, in New Ulm, Minn. She died July 20, 2005, in Cupertino, Calif.

A 1934 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she served Calvary, Thiensville; St. Peter, Fond du Lac, Wis.; Christ, Grand Island, Neb.; and Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.

She was preceded in death by her husband, W. F. Wichmann. She is survived by four children, 11 grandchildren, and 12 great-grandchildren.

Marianne Bame 1938-2005

Marianne (nee Albrecht) Bame was born March 26, 1938, and grew up in

Fond du Lac, Wis. She died Oct. 12, 2005, in Winter Haven, Fla.

A 1959 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she served St. John, Hemlock; St. Matthew, Benton Harbor; and Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich.; St. Peter, Fond du Lac; St. John, Lannon; and St. Peter and North Trinity, Milwaukee, Wis.

She is survived by her husband, Robert; one son; two daughters; and five grandchildren.

CORRECTION: In the September obituaries, Marvin Volkmann was incorrectly reported as serving at Mt. Calvary, Waukesha, Wis. He actually served at Grace, Waukesha, Wis.

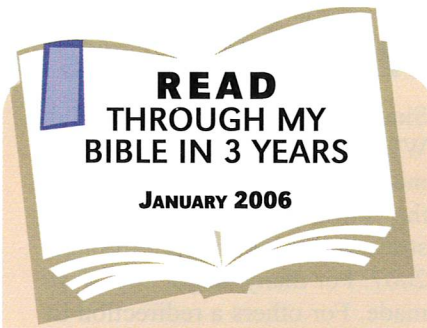
GOT A STORY TO TELL?

Teens, let us know what's on your mind. We're looking for 600-word articles with a Christ-centered focus to print in "Whatever," a *Forward in Christ* department that's written by teens for teens about teen issues. Tell

us what issues you're dealing with and how your faith helped you face them.

Share your experiences by sending your stories to "Whatever," *Forward in Christ*, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222. Or you can submit stories online at www.wels.net/jumpword/whatever.

Whatever



Start a three-year journey with us through your Bible. This Bible reading series is designed to take only a few minutes each day. We'll print a month's worth of readings in each issue.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. 2 Corinthians 6: 11-7:16 | 16. 1 Tm. 3:1-13 |
| 2. 2 Cor. 8:1-15 | 17. 1 Tm. 3:14-4:5 |
| 3. 2 Cor. 8:16-9:15 | 18. 1 Tm. 4:6-16 |
| 4. 2 Cor. 10 | 19. 1 Tm. 5:1-6:2 |
| 5. 2 Cor. 11:1-2:1a | 20. 1 Tm. 6:3-21 |
| 6. 2 Cor. 11:21b-12:10 | 21. Titus 1 |
| 7. 2 Cor. 12:11-21 | 22. Tit. 2 |
| 8. 2 Cor. 13 | 23. Tit. 3 |
| 9. Micah 1 and 2 | 24. 2 Timothy 1 |
| 10. Micah 3:1-4:7 | 25. 2 Tm. 2 |
| 11. Micah 4:8-5:15 | 26. 2 Tm. 3 |
| 12. Micah 6:1-7:6 | 27. 2 Tm. 4 |
| 13. Micah 7:7-20 | 28. Leviticus 1 |
| 14. 1 Timothy 1 | 29. Lev. 2 and 3 |
| 15. 1 Tm. 2 | 30. Lev. 4:1-6:7 |
| | 31. Lev. 6:8-7:38 |

ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

One afternoon my eight-year-old granddaughter, Kelsey, and her almost five-year-old brother, Kyle, had just arrived home from school.

Kelsey was searching through her brother's preschool stories when she exclaimed, "Kyle, you have Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and then you have Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in Egypt. They must have skipped a lot."

Kyle calmly replied, "No. They rode a donkey."

Mary Ann Doering
Watertown, Wisconsin

WELS continues to work through financial difficulties

Since the synod convention in July, WELS areas of ministry have held meetings to discuss issues raised at the convention and to determine strategies going forward through 2007. For many, major cuts were made. For others a redirection in ministry was undertaken.

The overall synod financial picture is stable. Congregation Mission Offerings show a slight increase for the calendar year. Currently the Synodical Council anticipates having a balanced budget at the end of this fiscal year (June 30, 2006) and again at the end of the 2006-2007 fiscal year. However, in order to meet that budget, the synod has had to cut over \$2 million. Here are the effects of those cuts.

WELS Board for Parish Services, with a budget reduction of 40% over the past three years, has been forced to eliminate a major outreach ministry that WELS has been a part of for more than 40 years—the chaplaincy program in Europe. The elimination of funding for both the full-time civilian military chaplain and for the part-time assistants was part of the proposed budget adopted at the synod convention. Currently, the full-time chaplain is supported solely through non-budgetary special gifts while the part-time chaplaincy assistants have been eliminated. However, unless more gifts are given, the chaplain

will be recalled at the end of this fiscal year. Parish Services will also have to consider implementing additional staff cuts to maintain a balanced budget.

The Board for Home Missions has seen its budget shrink from \$12 million in 2001 to its present \$8 million. Home Missions has adapted to this reduction because it previously had altered the way it helps do mission work. The budget for Home Missions is also impacted by congregations started in the 1990s going off subsidy. As these congregations eliminate their need for subsidy, the money is available for use by Home Missions for new efforts.

In September, Home Missions affirmed its commitment to helping establish 100 new “ministry openings” by September 2006. The emphasis is on partnering and “team ministry.” This includes subsidizing a part-time called worker, providing guidance from a mission counselor, and helping congregations expand their own ministry. Home Missions’ cross-cultural ministries have been blessed and will continue to be a focus.

The Board for World Missions, hard hit by budget cuts, eliminated eight positions:

- the associate administrator for the Board for World Missions

- two missionaries from the Dominican Republic,
- one missionary from the Latin American Traveling Theological Educators team,
- one missionary from Japan, and
- one teacher from the Apache school in Peridot, Ariz., (to be funded locally).

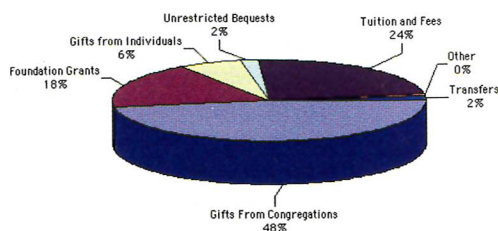
Two further reductions from Latin American fields have yet to be specified, but will be designated before the end of the calendar year.

World Missions is also proposing a plan to have a downsized world board, allowing for better operating efficiency.

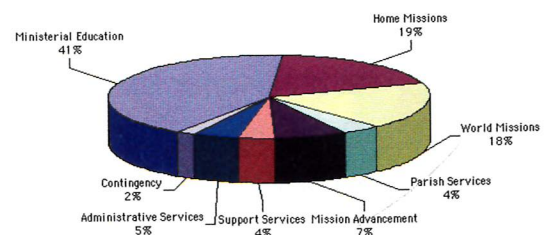
Another area of ministry that was hotly debated at the synod convention was Ministerial Education. The Board for Ministerial Education oversees Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis.; Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.; Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich.; and Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis. Currently the schools are in fiscal crisis. This school year alone WELS ministerial education schools face an unfunded deficit of more than \$2 million. It rises to more than \$4 million next school year. These projected deficits occur after the schools have applied all available funds and cost-saving measures.

Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod FY 2005-06 Budget

Support & Revenue Total: \$42.3 million



Expenses Total: \$42.3 million



Commit to the Lord whatever you do

The schools need to depend on independent funding to cover their deficits and are actively seeking such support. Each school has begun a Mission Advancement office in cooperation with WELS Ministry of Christian Giving. In addition, WELS Ministry of Christian Giving is making plans to raise a sizeable endowment fund for the schools while raising the overall congregational mission offerings through biblical stewardship training.

First Vice President Wayne Mueller says, "As bad as the situation is, God has allowed us to keep all of our ministries open. There is regret and sadness over the losses in every area of ministry, yet the leaders who enact budget cuts tried to preserve the essential aspects of those ministries. They wanted to make sure the ministry could be built back up when God provides the resources to do so."

He continues, "A critical element in our recovery of lost ministry is for each of us to see our part in the overall ministry of our church. God leads us to such insight when we hear his law and gospel. Starting with me, each of us needs to review his support of the one thing needful. We need to stand closer to Jesus and farther away from the material world. As God strengthens our faith and moves us to action, he will by his own power resolve our struggles."

In late August, two buildings on the Apache reservation in East Fork, Ariz., were dedicated as the Apache Christian Training School (ACTS) to train native Apaches for church leadership. The fact that these newly renovated buildings were being dedicated was miraculous considering the state they were in just eight months prior. However, the project has actually been a labor of love for more than seven years.

The need for an Apache seminary and worker training facility was seen by the Board for World Missions as a priority in 1998. Two buildings on the reservation that had been built in 1922 and vacant since 1993 were used for this new endeavor. Pastor Kirby Spevacek was called to be the coordinator of the Apache Christian Training School (ACTS), and he quickly began the process of getting the buildings renovated.

The buildings were inspected and deemed structurally sound. However, there were major problems. Leaky roofs had left walls badly damaged, plumbing and electrical work was outdated and unsafe, and badly cracked exterior walls let in daylight and exposed the interior to the elements. One of the buildings was usable enough to begin the first seminary classes in 1999. However, a carbon monoxide leak led to the evacuation of the building in 2003.

An initial commitment of \$60,000 from the Board for World Missions for renovation proved to be just the beginning of what was needed to get the buildings back in working order. In the summer of 2004, the Ladies Guild of Shepherd of the Valley, Surprise, Ariz., contacted ACTS to see how it could help. After an initial visit to the reservation the women committed themselves to the project.

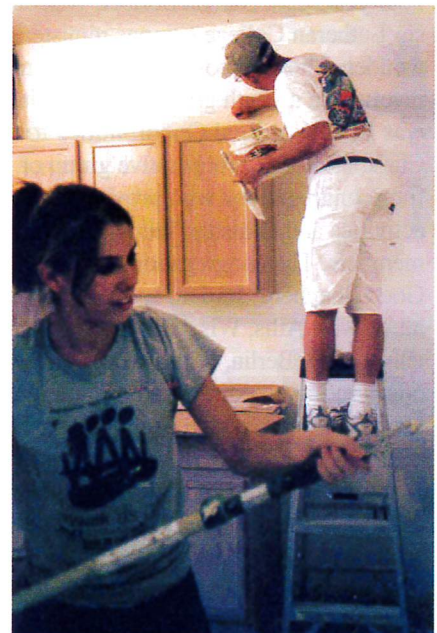
What resulted was amazing. Hundreds of volunteers from across Arizona and from Builders For

Christ came to help with construction and renovations. Donations of office supplies, furniture, interior decorating, and transportation, as well as monetary contributions were also heartily welcomed.

After eight months of renovation, the ACTS facility was dedicated. Four students are currently enrolled in the seminary, and classes are held throughout the week, giving leadership instruction to future Apache Sunday school teachers and church leaders.

More work, however, needs to be done. A number of major improvements need to be completed, including replacing roofs and rebuilding a sinking foundation. However, those involved with ACTS know how God can move the hearts of people and send unbelievable blessings. They hold fast to the truth, "Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed" (Proverbs 16:3).

Lori Neumann



Volunteers from Builders For Christ and Arizona Lutheran Academy work to renovate one of the buildings for the Apache Christian Training School.

Equipping congregations with the tools to reach out



How does a congregation locate potential members and nurture those contacts so that they are connected to the Word of God? Better yet, how does a congregation connect to the community

and raise awareness of its ministry? Answers can be found by attending a Prospecting Seminar offered by the Commission on Evangelism.

Since January, the Commission on Evangelism has worked with district evangelism commissions to offer more than 55 prospecting seminars throughout the United States and Canada. The seminar, usually offered as an all-day Saturday workshop, gives congregations a practical approach

to locating unchurched people in their communities. Participants learn strategies on how to invite people to come to church and also how to go out and meet people in the area and promote their congregation's ministry.

However, as many congregations know, that is only half of the equation. Often congregations are able to locate prospects but are unable to maintain a thorough follow-up plan of action. The seminar's second component helps equip congregations with the tools to connect their prospects to God's Word. Such tools include using devotional materials to reach prospects and training congregation members to make evangelism calls to keep in contact with prospects.

"As part of our synod's North American outreach initiative, I am excited about the program because the content presented in the seminar will help congregations reach more

unchurched people," says Pastor Mike Hintz, Commission on Evangelism administrator. "Evaluations from the congregations show that they truly appreciate the seminar and are very positive."

Pastor John Huebner, a WELS mission counselor, put together all of the material presented in the seminar. Participants don't leave the seminar empty-handed either. Every participant is given a booklet and a CD-ROM of resources that can be immediately used to enhance congregational outreach efforts.

Although many of the scheduled seminars have already taken place, congregations can still request presentations through their district evangelism commission.

For complete information on the seminar and for registration information, visit www.wels.net/jumpword/evangelism.

Teens flock to ROCK

Four years ago, Nathan Strobel, Wisconsin Lutheran College campus minister, wondered how he could get more teens involved in a youth group. What resulted was ROCK or Real Opportunities for Christian Kids, a cooperative group of four congregations who provide great activities and Christian fellowship to its members. The congregations involved—Good Shepherd, Jordan, and Woodlawn, all of West Allis, Wis.; and Star of Bethlehem, New Berlin, Wis.—work together, contributing an equal share of young people, adult help, and overall effort.

What makes ROCK most unique is that in addition to the youth leaders from each church, four student directors from Wisconsin Lutheran College (WLC) help lead the group.

"Our youth leaders from the four churches and the WLC students work hand in hand with all ROCK activities. We meet monthly, nearly all year long, planning and scheduling for ROCK," says Hans Metzger, staff minister at

Good Shepherd and one of ROCK's leaders.

He continues, "The WLC students plan the Bible studies for our events. They have made these studies terrific parts of our events as their connection with young people is tremendous. These directors are spiritually strong adults who love young people and love their Savior."

Activities take place at the church campuses as well as at Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee. Some of the activities include caroling in neighborhoods for Christmas, a January lock-in, and a Christian rock concert in the spring. ROCK members also take part in service projects such as traveling to East Fork, Ariz., to help paint East Fork Lutheran School and planning a carnival for kids in an area hospital.

While ROCK is mainly aimed at eighth- through tenth-graders, some teens attend throughout high school. Funding for the group comes from yearly congregational support.



ROCK members gather for a horseback riding trip in the mountain trails of Estes Park, Colo. Kneeling are Jessica Earsley and Brittany Szaj. Standing are (l to r) Joe Zabrowski, Pastor Ben Wessel, Jon Tracy, Jenny Parbs, Liz Tracy, Megan Gajewski, and Kim Gajewski.

Could this type of youth group work in your area? Metzger thinks so. "I believe this kind of format can work for other congregations, but it takes commitment from the churches. We all need to have a wider outlook for our youth, not just those in our own congregations. There are so many benefits in many people putting their heads together for the love of Jesus and the good of these young people."

Harvesting workers through the Congregational Assistant Program

“It was [Jesus] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11). Those words lie at the heart of the Congregational Assistant Program (CAP), a program designed to help congregations train their own members for local ministry and evangelism.

Professor Lawrence Olson, director of staff ministry at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., and head of the program, explains: “Jesus tells us to ask for more workers to be out in the harvest fields. Not all workers will come to us through a formal, full-time, on-campus training program. In fact, each member of a local congregation has the same baptismal calling as our formally trained and called workers, many of them have the qualifications to serve in representative ministry as

member ministers on a volunteer basis, and some of them have what it takes to serve as part-time (or even full-time) staff members in their own congregations. It’s exciting to see how the CAP is able to provide training that will allow these people to grow in their ability to serve.”

Students enrolled in the program study Bible history and doctrine as well as receive training in evangelism, Bible study teaching, visitation ministry, Christian leadership, and the Christian family. Although most courses are taught by the student’s pastor, there are opportunities for students to study together either with another pastor or with an outside instructor for a weekend seminar.

Says Olson, “One of the strengths of the Congregational Assistant Program is that students are able to serve their congregations while they are studying and what is learned can immediately be applied in their congregation’s outreach efforts.”

A final component of the program, the only element not offered locally, is a 10-day Capstone Session. Students travel to New Ulm, Minn., and Milwaukee and Mequon, Wis., to meet others in the program and take courses such as WELS History and Structure, Basics of Culture, and Biblical Interpretation.

Although the program certification is standardized and recognized by WELS, it also allows for each student to specialize in an area according to his or her congregation’s needs. Assistants are called by their congregation and can take the form of a volunteer, part-time, or full-time position. The program is open to men and women.

John Kramer of Peace, Cedar Crest, Minn., recently completed his certification. He says that the main benefit in taking the course was that “I learned how to tell someone about Christ in a more meaningful way. I can share my faith, having confidence that my answers will be right and that I won’t just give someone my opinion.”

Graduate John Underwood of Living Hope, Omaha, Neb., concurs: “I have been blessed to be pretty active over the years in lay ministry, serving in almost every church leadership position. So my kingdom service hasn’t been altered too much [by completing the course], but I feel more prepared to serve as the Lord would direct me.”

Currently there are 24 certified assistants in WELS churches, with another 172 people enrolled in the program. Students are spread across 28 states and two Canadian provinces with 133 congregations involved in the program.

For more information about the Congregational Assistant Program, visit www.welscap.org or call the CAP office at Martin Luther College, 507-354-8221, ext. 383.



Ellen Krueger, from Abiding Love, Cape Coral, Fla., plays catch with residents at a local nursing home. Visiting nursing homes is included in Krueger’s call as a congregational assistant.

In the news



The *Sleepy Eye Herald Dispatch* featured **Jill Windschitl** and her work in teaching English in Taiwan in a June 23 article. The article discussed how Windschitl serves in Taiwan, including teaching English as a foreign

language as well as sharing the gospel with the local people. Windschitl continues to serve in Taiwan through WELS Kingdom Workers.

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* featured **Pastor Joshua Yu** and the start of Chinese-language worship services at St. John, Wauwatosa, Wis., in the Sept. 23 edition. St.

John has dinner, Bible study, and worship every Saturday evening for the Chinese in the area. In 2005 Yu graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, as the school’s first Chinese national graduate. Says Yu in the article, “I hope to set a model for WELS to do Chinese ministry.”

WELS Hmong ministry begins in Sacramento

On Aug. 14, Pastor Neng Lor, a graduate of the Pastoral Studies Institute at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, was installed as pastor to the Hmong people of the Sacramento area. One hundred seventy-five people attended, including many Hmong from Sacramento and Fresno. Three native choirs—adults, teens, and children, including eight children—sang beautiful songs in Hmong and English.



Twenty-two WELS pastors were present at the installation of Pastor Neng Lor (center), including Pastor Jay Lo (in black gown), Pastor Pheng Moua (in black suit), and Pastor Leon Piepenbrink (far left in suit), who all traveled from St. Paul, Minn. Others represented the Arizona-California District.

Lor is partnering with St. Andrew, Sacramento, Calif., to reach out to an estimated 25,000 Hmong souls within a five-mile radius of the church. Sacramento currently is home to the third largest Hmong population in the United States. Lor states, “The work is very hard because the people do not know the Savior. They look to a god in heaven as one they must appease with sacrifices to gain his favor. To them heaven is not a place of peace and salvation.”

In his exploratory visits to Sacramento over the last three years, Lor has found 15 families that are strong prospects for the congregation. There is also the potential for more outreach as Sacramento continues to receive dozens of new Hmong families from

the Wat Tham Krabok refugee camp in Thailand.

Due to the current financial constraints for WELS Home Missions, Lor holds a tent ministry call. What this means is that in addition to his part-time work to his congregation, he also maintains a part-time job to support his family and subsidize the ministry. St. Andrew is currently working to find volunteers to help cover

Lor’s shifts at his job so that he can have more time to devote to outreach and sharing the gospel. The congregation is also trying to raise special funds for Hmong outreach in Sacramento to alleviate some of the costs.

WELS Hmong ministry, which began in 1992, serves people for whom Hmong is their first language. Currently,

native Hmong pastor or evangelists serve 10 congregations in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, and California. In addition, 12 Asian students are studying for the ministry through the Pastoral Studies Institute.

Pastor Leon Piepenbrink, Hmong Ministry Coordinator, reminds WELS members to “continue to pray for our overall Hmong missions around the United States. Pray that God continues to bless the studies of our Hmong ministry students, many of whom are holding full-time jobs while studying part-time and conducting evangelism part-time. Pray for the Hmong members of our congregations that they may grow in faith and in knowledge of God’s Word.”



Let your light shine

In the spirit of Matthew 5:16, we’re sharing examples of people who live their faith. If you have an example to share, send it to us at 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398.

I knew that Christmas 2004 would be difficult for my four children and me. Our Andy, beloved husband and father, was unexpectedly called home in March. This would be our first Christmas without him.

I was cleaning out two bookcases in our bedroom, and the Lord sent me a wonderful idea to remember Andy this year. I found two books for each of my children that were specific to each child’s individual interests and had belonged to their dad. After wrapping the presents, I found a Christmas card and a specific Bible verse I wanted to share with each child. On the front of the envelope, I wrote, “I AM the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, will never die”—Remember this, when you think of your dad.” I put two packages each in a large Christmas gift bag and put a note on top that said, “Give to Mom—LAST.” I put both bags under the tree in a back corner.

After all the other presents were opened, these bags were handed to me. I told each child a story about Andy that had a special connection to each one of them. I then handed each child a present and had each one read the card out loud—so the message would be heard.

This became the most memorable Christmas for all of us, and we definitely felt Andy’s presence in the room. If we cannot have Andy here, living with us now, then knowing that he is living in heaven with our Lord and Savior is the most comforting thought we carry each day.

Linda Hill
Santa Maria, California

District news

Dakota-Montana

Ascension, Mitchell, S.D., received an anonymous gift that paid its entire WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc., loan of more than \$175,000. Pastor David Reichel commented, "What can any of us say except, 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow!' We are stunned and overjoyed by this incredible gift!"

Nebraska

Dewid, Daniel, Bounkeo, Ger Lor, and their wives traveled to northern Thailand in July to welcome a congregation of Hmong Christians in Chiang Kham, Thailand, into fellowship. The group of 161 Hmong Christians has been in continual contact with the Lors over the past three years. The Lor brothers, members of Rock of Ages, Kansas City, Mo., are in their final year of study for ministry through the Pastoral Studies Institute.

South Atlantic

Living Savior, Asheville, N.C., broke ground for its new building on Aug. 14. Builders For Christ will be assisting with the construction in February 2006.

Prince of Peace, Martinez, Ga., dedicated an education wing to its church building on Sept. 11. The modest 1,425 sq. ft addition was completed with the assistance of Builders For Christ and paid for without any borrowed funds.

North Atlantic

Cross of Christ, Liverpool, N.Y., cel-

ebrated the ordination and installation of Pastor **Jeremiah Gumm** on July 24. Gumm is the congregation's first resident, full-time pastor in a decade.

Northern Wisconsin

The **Hands 2 God Puppet Team** from **Eternal Love, Appleton, Wis.**, recently traveled to Crown of Life, Cadillac, Mich., to assist with the church's first community outreach event.

South Central

Lutheran Collegians, the campus ministry group at Texas A&M University, staffed a table at the annual Student Organization Open House. Students hung a banner with "WhatAboutJesus.com" displayed. More than 100 students visited the display, and 30 students left their e-mail address. WhatAboutJesus.com also reported an increase of over 200 hits on the Web site.

Happy Anniversary!

NE—Barb Baumann, Good Shepherd, Omaha, Neb., celebrated 25 years in the teaching ministry on Sept. 11.

St. Paul, North Platte, Neb., celebrated its 50th anniversary on Sept. 25.

NW—Pastor Glenn Unke, Immanuel, Manitowoc, Wis., celebrated his 50th anniversary in the pastoral ministry on July 31. This date was the exact 50th anniversary of his ordination. Unke has served his entire ministry in the Northern Wisconsin District.

Southeastern Wisconsin



Risen Savior, Milwaukee, students Angel Atempa-Lopez and Jeron Washington break ground on behalf of Risen Savior children as Pastor Ken Fisher (left) looks on. The groundbreaking on Oct. 16 was the second time in three years that the church has undertaken a building project. Due to Risen Savior's growing school, Hispanic ministry, and increasing attendance, the expansion will include classrooms, offices, storage, and parking, and will double the size of the sanctuary.

SEW—Staff minister Tom Hering, and teacher **Monica Dierker**, Our Savior, Grafton, Wis., celebrated 25 years in the ministry on Nov. 13.

These pastors are the reporters for the districts featured this month: DM—Wayne Rouse; NA—Harland Goetzinger; NE—Donald Wichmann; NW—Joel Lillo; SA—Christopher Kruschel; SC—William Gabb; SEW—Scott Oelhafen.

World news

New methods for harvesting embryonic stem cells reported—In October, scientists reported two new procedures to harvest embryonic stem cells without killing the embryo. Researchers hope these techniques will avoid ethical and religious objections to using embryonic stem cells to treat other diseases.

A release from WELS Pastor Robert Fleischmann, director of Christian Life Resources, reports: "The first procedure involves . . . extracting a cell from an embryo and then stimulating that cell to

produce stem cells. This procedure remains problematic because human life at this stage of the development is exceptionally fragile, and therefore this cell-extraction procedure is extremely dangerous. The cell extraction can often be fatal for the developing unborn child.

"The second procedure involves . . . 'disabling' a gene within the developing embryo to prevent it from growing, or more specifically, embedding in the womb. The logic is that because it could not survive it should not be an offense

to destroy it for its stem cells. . . .

"We would reject the first procedure because it is too dangerous to the fragile embryo. We also reject the second procedure for its obvious slight-of-hand approach of cutting short a child's potential for continued life."

[*LifeWire*, Oct. 18;
www.christianliferesources.com]

Most news reported in this section is derived from Religion News Service. Items do not necessarily reflect the views of WELS or *Forward in Christ*.

CHANGES IN MINISTRY

Pastors

Doletzky, Paul A., to Salem, Escanaba, Mich.

Hatzung, Michael R., to Ministry of Christian Giving, Milwaukee

Hein, Robert M., to Good Shepherd, West Bend, Wis.

Lueneburg, Kurt A., to Ministry of Christian Giving, Milwaukee

Putz, Marvin A., to retirement

Voigt, Daniel R., to Mt. Olive, Tulsa, Okla.

Pastor assignment

Moore, Phillip, to Calvary, Milwaukee

REQUEST FOR COLLOQUY

Donald Forss, a 1970 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., has requested a colloquy for the purpose of serving in the pastoral ministry in WELS. Correspondence related to this request should be addressed to President Douglas Engelbrecht, Northern Wisconsin District, 249 E Franklin Ave, Neenah WI 54956-3028; nwdpwels@sab.wels.net

NOTICE FOR CONGREGATION TREASURERS

The cutoff date for Congregation Mission Offering receipts in the synod's post office lock box is the last business day of each month. December 2005 offerings sent to our lock box will be credited as 2005 receipts through Jan. 9, 2006, as long as they are received in the lock box on or before that date and are clearly labeled as "December" offerings on the remittance coupon. We ask that you continue to mail your offerings to the lock box. That location, our bank, will provide you with the fastest deposit process for your congregation.

Todd Poppe, chief financial officer

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

There will be vacancies in several WELS boards and commissions as of July 1, 2006. The Synodical Council is seeking names of individuals to serve on these boards and commissions.

The following boards and commissions have vacancies:

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

All pastors, professors, male teachers, congregations, and voting members of congregations are invited to nominate qualified individuals. Position descriptions can be found at www.wels.net/jumpword/nomalert. Nominations should be by Jan. 31 to Roger Crawford, Human Resources

Director, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222; roger.crawford@sab.wels.net. The list of candidates will be published at www.wels.net/jumpword/nomalert in early February. At its Feb. 24-26 meeting, the Synodical Council will elect the board and commission members from the slate of candidates who have consented to serve.

ANNIVERSARIES

Grafton, Wis.—Our Savior (40). Dec. 4. Services, 8 & 10:30 A.M. Refreshments after each service.

Benton Harbor, Mich.—Good Shepherd (50). Dec. 11. Service, 9:30 A.M. Catered meal to follow. RSVP, 269-926-2095.

COMING EVENTS

Living Nativity—Dec. 2-4, every 20 min. from 6 to 9 P.M. St. Paul, Howards Grove, Wis. Free admission, parking, and refreshments. Signed presentations for the hearing impaired only on Dec. 3, 6 & 7 P.M. 920-565-3780.

Christmas concerts

- **Wisconsin Lutheran College**—Choral concerts, Dec. 2 & 3, 8 P.M. & Dec. 4, 3 P.M. Band concert, Dec. 9, 8 P.M. Tickets: adults, \$5; seniors, \$4; students, \$2. 414-443-8802.
- **Lakeshore Lutheran Chorale**—Dec. 3, 7:30 P.M., Trinity, Kiel, and Dec. 4, 4 & 7 P.M., Immanuel, Manitowoc, Wis.
- **Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis.**—Dec. 11, 3 & 7 P.M.
- **Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.**—Dec. 11, 2 P.M.
- **Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis.**—Dec. 11, 3 P.M. & Dec. 16, 10 A.M.
- **Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich.**—Dec. 16, 7 P.M.

Mid-year graduation service—Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., Dec. 15, 9:30 A.M.

Women's retreats

- **WELS/ELS Ladies retreat**, Jan. 13-15, 2006. Spring Hill Suites, Sarasota, Fla. Retreat, \$75. Lodging, \$89. July Becker, 941-355-6591.
- **God's Gift of Renewal**—Feb. 11, 2006, 8 A.M. St. Lucas, Kewaskum, Wis. Registration fee, \$15. Includes presentations and lunch. Lynn Garvey, 262-626-4749.
- **Pathways to Christ**, March 17-19, 2006. La Sure's Hall & Hawthorn Inn, Oshkosh, Wis. www.martinlutheroshkosh.com.
- **Christian Woman Today**, March 24-26, 2006. Olympia Resort, Oconomowoc, Wis. Maureen Sertich, 262-784-0412.

WELS marriage retreats—Adult Discipleship will offer marriage retreats in 15 locations in 2006:

- Atlanta, Ga., Jan. 13-15
- Appleton, Wis., Jan. 20-22

- Minneapolis, Minn., Jan. 27-29
- Milwaukee, Wis., Feb. 3-5
- Flint, Mich., Feb. 10-12
- Los Angeles, Calif., March 17-19
- San Francisco, Calif., March 31-April 2
- Washington D.C., April 28-30
- Phoenix, Ariz., June 23-25
- Tampa, Fla., Sept. 15-17
- Denver, Colo., Sept. 22-24
- Omaha, Neb., Sept. 29-Oct. 1
- Seattle, Wash., Oct. 13-15
- Anchorage, Alaska, Oct. 20-22
- Houston, Tex., Nov. 10-12

Registrations will be limited. For more information, 414-256-3278 or www.wels.net/jumpword/marriageretreat.

International WELS Brass Festival—Jan. 21-22, 2006. Fox Valley LHS, Appleton, Wis. All brass musicians are invited. Festival co-sponsored by Fox Valley and Soli Deo Gloria Institute for the Arts. Translators in Spanish, German, and French available. Dr. Patricia Backhaus, 262-549-1506 or www.solideogloria institute.org.

National Men's Rally—March 4, 2006. St. Paul, Muskego, Wis. Register by Feb. 28, 2006. Brian Arthur Lampe, 414-422-0320, ext 119.

NAMES WANTED

WELS members in the U.S. Army stationed at Fort Drum, N.Y. (10th Mountain Division)—Cross of Christ, Liverpool, N.Y., 315-622-2843 or pastorgumm@yahoo.com.

Corpus Christi, Tex.—Chris Horn, 806-898-0855. Gethsemane, Sunday worship, 9:30 A.M.; Bible study, 10:45 A.M.; and Wednesday Bible study, 7 P.M. Church, 361-854-8481.

Chicago, Ill.—Mike Borgwardt, 312-409-3204 or info@crossroadschicago.org.

West Point, N.Y.—Donald Tollefson, 908-876-5429.

POSITION AVAILABLE

Registrar—Bethany Lutheran College (ELS), Mankato, Minn., invites applications for the position of Registrar. The Registrar reports to the Vice President for Academic Affairs and is responsible for the administrative and operational activities of the Registrar's Office. Application review will begin Jan. 2, 2006. For a full position description and qualifications, visit www.blc.edu/search/?q=jobs.

To place an announcement, call 414-256-3210; bulletinboard@sab.wels.net. Deadline is eight weeks before publication date. An updated bulletin board is available at www.wels.net/jumpword/bulletinboard.

Bits o' the Bible –The birth of Jesus

1. Which gospel makes no mention of the birth of Christ?
2. Which prophet foretold Jesus' virgin birth?
3. Which prophet foretold Jesus' birthplace?
4. What is a manger?
5. Which angel told Mary of the impending birth?
6. How long did Mary stay with Elizabeth after she heard the news?
7. What Roman Emperor issued the decree for a census to be taken?
8. Who praised God with the words "my eyes have seen your salvation" at Jesus' circumcision?
9. Who was the prophetess that also gave thanks for Jesus that day?
10. Where did the Magi (wise men) find the baby Jesus?
11. How many wise men were there?
12. Why did Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to Egypt?
13. What prophecy by what prophet did the trip to Egypt fulfill?
14. Who was reigning in the place of Herod when Mary and Joseph returned from Egypt?
15. Where did Mary and Joseph settle and why?

Picture this



The floor of the temporary facility at Shepherd of the Hills, West Bend, Wis., becomes an obstacle course of baby seats following Sunday worship. In the past year, this small congregation has been blessed with the birth of 12 babies, including a set of twins. Shepherd of the Hills began as a daughter congregation of Good Shepherd, West Bend, Wis., in 1998. Groundbreaking for the new church was held on Sept. 4—none too soon!

Pictured are some of the newest members. Back row (l-r): Kate Moeller, Jeffrey Koepke, John Koepke, Brayden Haferman, Karah Stoffel. Front row: Owen Kolkema, Mathew Lundberg, Emalyn Pieper.

Submitted by Deborah Hoenecke

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

ANSWERS

1. Mark
2. Isaiah 7:14
3. Micah 5:12
4. A trough or box to hold food for animals in a stable
5. Gabriel
6. Three months
7. Caesar Augustus
8. Simeon
9. Anna
10. At a home in Bethlehem
11. We don't know. The Bible doesn't say. Legend from the 7th century names three: Gaspar, Melchior, and Belthasar.
12. Because an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to go.
13. Hosea 11:1: "Out of Egypt I called my son."
14. Herod's son, Archelaus
15. Nazareth, because Joseph was warned in a dream not to settle in Judea.

ANSWERS

George and Celestine Thompson



NO FEAR

George Thompson isn't afraid when it comes to volunteering his time and sharing his faith.

Julie K. Wietzke

If you ask George Thompson what he is afraid of, he'd say, "Big dogs tearing my leg off."

That's understandable.

But Thompson, a member of Sola Fide, Lawrenceville, Ga., is not afraid of two things that may make others shudder—volunteering his time and sharing his faith.

Volunteering his time

Thompson has been volunteering for years in his church and his community. He has served on practically every board in his church, has worked for 30 years in the Lutheran Pioneer program in the South Atlantic District, delivers food for the Meals on Wheels program, and serves as chapter vice president for his local American Association of Retired Persons (just to name a few).

"My wife is beautiful at scheduling things," says Thompson.

Thompson and his wife don't volunteer only in their church and community. They also go across the country to help Builders For Christ, a division of WELS Kingdom Workers, build facilities for WELS congregations.

The Thompsons' first project was in Tulsa, Okla., six years ago, when a friend invited them to participate. Even though they had no building experience, the Thompsons weren't afraid to jump right in. And they haven't looked back since.

"Fear comes from the unknown," says Thompson. "But you'll never know unless you get out there and join in."

They have participated in nine projects, and they aren't done yet.

"Whatever I gave [Builders For Christ] in work, I gained back in love for the people and knowledge," says Thompson.

Sharing his faith

Thompson not only builds churches; he also builds people up in their evangelism skills.

After serving nine years on the South Atlantic District evangelism commission, he now works with Mission Counselor Ed Schuppe to help congregations in the Southeastern Wisconsin and South Atlantic districts prioritize prospect lists. He also trains members how to canvass.

But this isn't just classroom training. Thompson goes out canvassing with the members. "They need to feel comfortable to go back out there when I'm gone," he says.

Although Thompson isn't afraid to share his faith with anybody, he realizes that this makes many people nervous.

"They think that they have to do something, but it's not really up to them. All they have to do is move their legs and walk up to the door and let the Lord take it from there."

He continues, "You need to get the people inside the church and let the Holy Spirit do the work rather than put a

burden on yourself to try to convert someone."

Thompson recommends speaking from the heart rather than memorizing a script. "If you work from the heart, you tell people why you love Jesus and what he's done for you in your life."

He also shares canvassing advice that he learned from a group of women he worked with in Atlanta: "Pray before you go to the door."

He continues, "The only thing I prayed about before was 'Don't let that dog bite me.' I started praying for [the Holy Spirit's guidance], and it made me so relaxed. I didn't have to shudder at the thought that this guy was going to rip my faith apart."

Thompson still is afraid of being bit by a dog. He even prays about it when he's canvassing: "I say, 'Lord, if you let him tear my leg off, I won't be able to walk up these steps anymore.'"

And do you know what? He's never had a dog bite.

Julie Wietzke is assistant editor of Forward in Christ

RESOURCES

- For more information about Builders For Christ, contact Dale Mueller at WELS Kingdom Workers, 1-800-466-9357; www.welskingdomworkers.org.
- Go to www.wels.net/jumpword/evangelism for resources to help you share your faith.
- Sign up for an e-newsletter, *Proclaim!*, that provides articles and helpful links on telling more people about Jesus. www.wels.net/jumpword/proclaim.
- Talk to your pastor if you're interested in doing evangelism work in your congregation.

Freedom

FROM FORMALISM

Grace changes religion from ritual to relationship with God.

Paul E. Kelm

Maybe you've heard the statement: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." It may be difficult to agree on the line between tradition and traditionalism, but you can recognize the musty smell of religion better suited to a museum than a marketplace.

Going through the motions

Ritual becomes ritualism when you can't remember why you do what you do the way you do it. Externalism is the superficial practice of what was once sacred. Jesus described it this way: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain" (Matthew 15:8,9).

Here's another word for the malady: formalism. Formalism turns worship into "going to church." Some of the symptoms include

- half-hearted singing in disinterested tones by disengaged pew-sitters,
- mindless recitation of liturgical verbiage memorized but not personalized,
- offerings given grudgingly as "dues" to pay the church's bills, and
- resentment when the service exceeds the contracted hour.

There are other evidences of formalism: meal-time prayers that are just a checkered flag launching a race to the potatoes; baptism that is merely a "christening;" confirmation becoming simply a rite of passage; weddings in church because the justice of the peace won't put up with all that hoopla; rent-a-clergy because somebody has to bury Uncle Harry. You get the picture.

Really expressing our faith

When Israel's worship degenerated into going through the motions, God sent the prophet Amos with the scathing words: "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies . . . Away with the noise of your songs!" (Amos 5:21,23). Eight centuries later Jesus challenged the hypocrisy of a Sabbath that had lost its meaning in formalism: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27,28). The woman at Jacob's well represents those 21st-century churchgoers whose faith is hung up on a place. Jesus told her: "A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23).

Article XV of the Apology to the Augsburg Confession confronts the gravest danger of formalism—when

people assume they are earning favor with God through their worship forms. "From this point of view there is no difference between our traditions and the ceremonies of Moses. Paul condemns the ceremonies of Moses as well as traditions because these were thought of as works meriting righteousness before God, and therefore they obscured the work of Christ and the righteousness of faith" (*The Book of Concord*, Tappert, p. 216).

Grace changes religion from ritual to relationship with God. The gospel is life-transforming truth that transcends mere tradition. Jesus frees us from our religious rut with his resurrection. The gospel is not just truth; it is power. Christianity is engaging and exciting; it is real.

We are free from cultural taboos and social inhibitions. We can "clap [our] hands [and] shout to God with cries of joy" (Psalm 47:1). Just as David "danced before the LORD with all his might" (2 Samuel 6:14), so can we. Or we can bow our heads in silent awe and kneel in reverent sorrow over our sin. We can thrill to an organ processional or sway with a gospel choir or tap our feet with the drummer in a praise song. We can be real, in whatever idiom expresses grateful praise. Jesus made us that free.

Paul Kelm is pastor at St. Mark, De Pere, Wisconsin.

This is the fourth of a six-part series on Christian freedom. To read other articles in the series, go to www.wels.net/jumpword/ficarchive, and search by the author's first and last name.



When faced with life-and-death natural to think about God's

Jim knew he wasn't feeling quite right. Though normally hesitant to even visit a doctor for life's bumps and bruises, this time he thought he should go in for a checkup.

Those who regularly visit a doctor can't understand the thoughts running through Jim's mind at such a time. For one thing, a doctor's visit is eye-opening for people who don't go to a doctor much. Yes, the health care professional still checks how much you weigh and how tall you are. Now, however, your vital statistics can be obtained in less invasive ways: your blood pressure can be checked without a stethoscope, your body temperature can be taken by inserting something in your ear for only a few moments, and the amount of oxygen in your blood can be determined by putting a clamp on your finger. Things are different. The technology and options are more available.

Questions in need of answers

When Jim went to see his doctor he was presented with a list of tests he could undergo. Some were fairly simple and obvious. Others were a bit more invasive. "So what do you think, Jim?"—an easy question for the doctor to ask, but a difficult one for Jim to answer.

Looking to his wife of 27 years, Jim found the assurance to start slow

and begin with the easy, noninvasive testing. Two weeks later new questions were raised from those tests to try the more invasive testing. He needed to spend a night in the hospital. Now the decisions were getting really tough for Jim.

It seemed so much easier years ago. There were fewer options and, therefore, fewer decisions. Back then the doctor made most of those decisions, and the patient obediently followed the direction. Today, with increased options and litigation risks for the medical profession, the patient must make more decisions. He decides on the treatment, the timing, the medicine, and the testing. He can do it all—or some of it—or none of it.

How far does one go in treating an illness? Does a person ever do too much to save life? When does ordinary care become extraordinary? How do we know when God wishes us to fight harder to preserve life or when he is truly taking life?

Answers in need of tests

Because of the blessings of technology and increased knowledge of the human condition more options and greater potential to extend life are available. A century or two ago, a poisonous snakebite in the wild meant certain death. Today emergency helicopters can whisk persons to treatment and likely preserve their life.

How do we decide? Few of us have enough medical training to make a good decision about taking aspirin, let alone invasive medical testing. Yet, those are the questions and challenges of our time.

As Jim considered the serious

nature of his tests, he knew his situation was more than a bump or bruise. This caused him to seriously think about his own mortality and the fragile nature of his life. Years ago, when serving on the church's evangelism committee, he used to ask a prospect, "If you were to die tonight, do you know where you will be?" Now, for the first time, he asked himself that same question.

Jim rejoiced in his knowledge of the Savior, but he had to admit that the barrage of medical decisions made him nervous. At times he thought of his own mortality with eagerness. He could hardly wait to die and be with Christ, which he knew was better than anything on earth (Philippians 1:23). He also had to admit, however, that there were times when he was scared to die (Mark 9:24).

The answer of faith

He found the blessing of circumstance in the crisis of decision-making. For the first time he looked at his own life on an eternal timeline. While it bothered him to see the anxiety in the eyes of his loved ones, he found in his faith an unexpected strength to face what was ahead.

Jim felt frustration because, before his medical crisis, he lived a rather uncomplicated life. He enjoyed great health until this point and obviously felt unprepared for this change. But he found in this circumstance not only the inner strength of his God-given faith but also an opening to talk about his faith.

That was an odd experience. Yes, he was on the evangelism team at one time. Yes, he memorized a few

Facing eternity—

Robert M. Fleischmann

decisions, Jim found it more promise of eternal life.

passages and was able to share the message that fit his evangelism calls. Now, however, his circumstance concerned others, and the attention they paid to him provided a wonderfully unique forum to talk about life, death, and life that does not end.

As Jim talked with coworkers and friends about his forthcoming medical tests in the hospital, he was surprised about how natural it was for him to talk about his faith. It wasn't as formalistic as it was when he made those evangelism calls. He also was surprised at how well his words were received. Fellow Christians found encouragement by his witness. Non-Christians patiently listened and began to wonder about the inner strength he was displaying (1 Peter 3:15).

Faith-aligned priorities

When he registered at the hospital, Jim was asked if he had a living will or some form of medical directive. He came prepared. He and his pastor spent time among other things discussing such a document. Jim was able to fill out a Christian medical directive that not only designated his wife as his health care agent but also witnessed to this faith that was sustaining him through the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

As it turned out, the testing indicated a congenital heart problem, and a relatively simple surgery was performed. Jim went home the next day and rested for a few more days. In the quiet days that followed, he reflected on the events since his initial visit with the doctor. He marveled at the advancements of medicine that allowed tinkering with his heart one

day and recovery at home the next. He prayed often to God, thanking him for the successful surgery. He also thought again about all the decisions.

Without a doubt, medical issues are challenging and often complex. The old "take two aspirin and call me in the morning" just doesn't cut it. Although Jim hoped for a burst of medical knowledge that would have made the decision-making easier, instead he found something more. He found in faith that God had realigned his priorities. His concerns were muted by the overriding opportunity God had given him to live his faith.

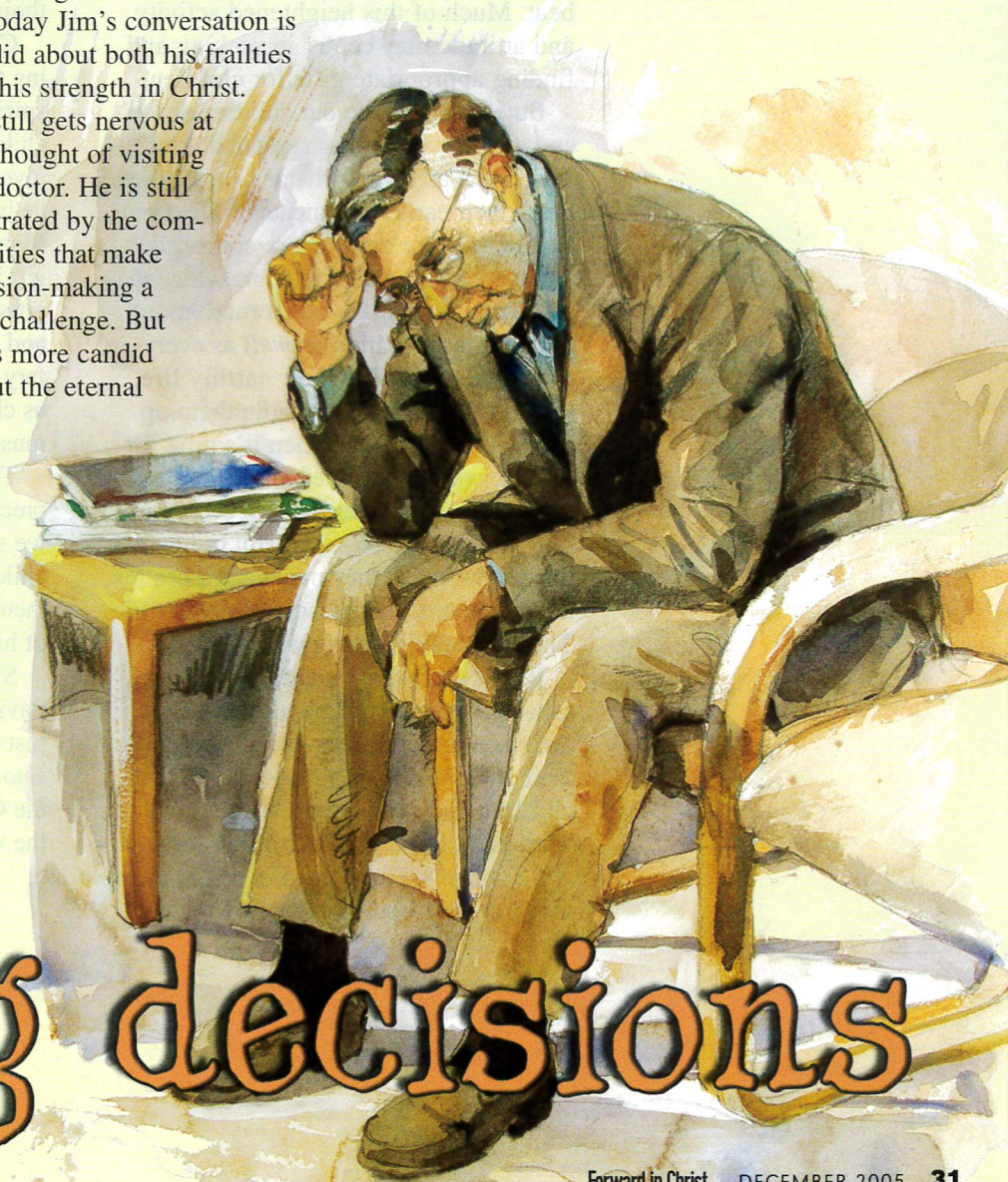
Today Jim's conversation is candid about both his frailties and his strength in Christ. He still gets nervous at the thought of visiting the doctor. He is still frustrated by the complexities that make decision-making a real challenge. But he is more candid about the eternal

life he has in Christ. Although some of his decisions seem overwhelming, he rejoices in God's decision to send his Son as the Savior.

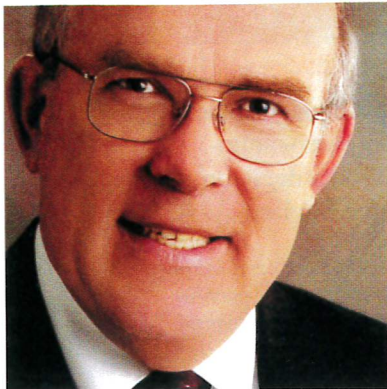
Robert Fleischmann, the national director of Christian Life Resources, is a member at St. Paul, Slinger, Wisconsin.

This is the second of a four-part series on end-of-life issues. To read other articles in the series, go to www.wels.net/jumpword/ficarchive, and search by the author's first and last name.

Jim's pastor provided him with a Christian medical directive produced by Christian Life Resources. You can purchase one from Christian Life Resources by calling 1-800-729-9535 or download one for free at www.ChristianLifeResources.com.



making decisions



Carl R. Hugel

Gifts for our children

Christmas is for children. Yes, Christmas is for all of us, but it's built especially around children and grandchildren. With very little imagination, from the memoried archives of Christmas past, we "hear" their excited voices, anticipating what Christmas may mean for them. We can visualize their frenetic activity (as if they needed any additional burst of adrenaline), heightened by the sugar plums of the Christmas season.

We adults are not immune, either, to these seasonal emotions. More than at any other season, Christmas causes adult hearts to beat faster or to skip a beat. Much of this heightened activity and attitude may center in seeking and finding appropriate gifts for children.

But giving gifts to our children doesn't end with the Christmas season, does it? We continually want what is best for them. From their earliest moments of life, even before they are born, we're concerned about their physical well-being. Once they are born, we remain concerned about their proper nutrition as well as everything else regarding their earthly life. Here in the north, we bundle them up to keep them warm. When it's time for school, we're concerned about their education. We want them to learn everything they will need to be successful in life. All this we do so that they may have a healthy, happy, secure, and successful earthly life. There's nothing wrong with that.

But as Christian parents, we also are especially concerned about nurturing their non-material, non-physical side—their soul. While they may only be our children for a few years at most, we want them to be God's children forever.

So, when we tuck them in bed at night, wanting their bodies to receive the nec-

essary sleep, we read them Bible stories—praying with them, tending to their souls. As they sit down with us at the table, nourishing their bodies, we feed their souls with the Bread of Life—praying with them, having family devotions. When we clothe them with proper clothing to match the weather, we want their inner selves to be clothed with Christ, his grace pardoning them and empowering them for lives of Christian service. Even as their heads are crammed full of earthly knowledge, we desire that they have the heavenly wisdom which makes sense of it all, giving them an eternal focus for their lives. Their bodies and their souls are treasures to us.

Christmas is a good time for remembering the total concern—physical as well as spiritual—that we have for our precious children. God surely showed his complete love for us in the gift of his Son. Physically he became one with us, born of the virgin Mary. More important than every material gift he gives us, though, are the immortal gifts he provides for our souls. His pardon and the peace it brings us are not temporary. His death to achieve eternal life for us clearly shows what a treasure our souls must be to him.

This Christmas, any Christmas, let this precious gift guide all our gift giving. As we show with gifts what a treasure our children are to us, may we also remind them, pointing them to God's greatest gift of his Son, what a treasure they are to him.

Since every soul is a treasure to our Savior, this is also a gift for giving beyond just our own families. This Christmas let's also focus on giving every soul a treasure—the Christmas story, the gift of God's Son, the world's Savior.



Philippians 1:3-6, 9-11

³I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. . . . ⁹And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

I rejoice in all my prayers for you

Just as Paul joyfully prayed for his fellow believers, we need to bring our requests for love, knowledge, discernment, sincere faith, and fruitful living to our Lord.

Paul E. Zell

St. Paul's letter to the Philippians is often called "the epistle of joy." For good reason! Paul uses a form of the word "joy" 15 times in the four chapters of Philippians. "Rejoice in the Lord always!" he insists. "I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). In the epistle's opening passage Paul demonstrates that joy as he prays for his fellow believers.

That God's good beginning will continue

Philippi had been Paul's first stop in Europe. Read Acts 16:11-40. Shortly after arriving, he and fellow missionary Silas were beaten and thrown in jail without a trial. Set free once again, the uproar over their message was so fierce that they had to hurry out of town.

You're not impressed? Then consider this: Lydia and her household immediately welcomed the news of Jesus and were baptized. Likewise the jailor and his household! In the face of violent opposition, others too were added to the family of faith.

After Paul left, the little congregation at Philippi held firm. For the next dozen years they supported the globetrotting apostle with prayers and offerings. "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray

with joy," Paul writes, "because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." The grace of the Lord is so powerful, Paul was convinced that the One who made a beautiful beginning at Philippi would "carry it on to completion" all the way until his return.

So what now? Have the members of your household been baptized? How about the members of your congregation? Although that does not impress the world, it is a beautiful beginning. One precious soul after another, the Lord Jesus, by water and Word, washes sinners sparkling clean. In baptism he presses his seal of ownership on the redeemed, committing himself to caring for them until the day he comes back in glory. When we pray for those who "share in God's grace" (1:7) with us, we too petition the heavenly Father with joy.

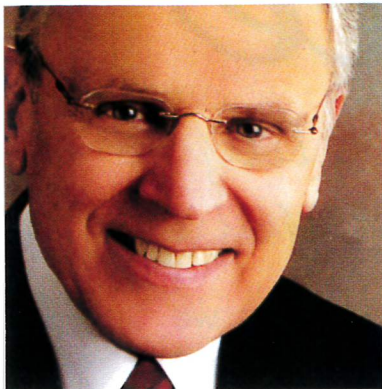
That spiritual fruit will abound

Paul asked God to give the Philippians the kind of love that keeps overflowing its banks. He asked that they be given the ability to discern what really matters in life. He asked that when Jesus examines them on the Last Day, he will find his saints to be sincere and blameless. He asked that their lives would be full of good fruit, with many deeds done and many words spoken to the glory of God.

Too many items on that prayer list? Hardly! Each request seeks a spiritual blessing from a generous God. The apostle knew Jesus' famous promise that "your Father in heaven [will] give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Luke 11:13). He was pleased to pray in line with that promise.

When you pray on behalf of your fellow saints, won't you too put those great spiritual blessings on your list? In fact, why not make it a long list! In Jesus' name bring your requests for love, knowledge, discernment, sincere faith, fruitful living, and more. Pray for your fellow believers. Pray as Paul prayed. Pray with joy.

Contributing editor Paul Zell, a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, is a member at Grace, Milwaukee.



Harry J. Baumbler

Blessings Lane

When you read this, I, God willing, will be preparing for life on Blessings Lane on a mountain in North Carolina. Yes, I am retiring; and, yes, my new home address will be Blessings Lane.

Many blessings led up to the naming of our mountain road, but more and greater ones lead me to say that I have lived my whole life on Blessings Lane. So also, I pray, have you.

It's appropriate that I start telling of blessings with these 12 years I have served as the editor of *Northwestern Lutheran/Forward in Christ*. In that time the Lord has allowed me to come into contact with many wonderful Christian people: people who have dedicated themselves to making this magazine a witness to the grace and glory of God, people whose stories have moved me to tears and whose faith leaves me in awe, writers whose clear and consistent witness to Christ have made editing easy. I especially salute you who read this magazine and you who care enough to write back. Through you the Lord teaches me thankfulness and humility.

The blessings of my public ministry have filled a full 40 years now, and I rejoice at 67 years of being loved as a child of God. Talk about being on Blessings Lane! That's exactly what I want to talk about for all of us.

There has always been a Blessings Lane, open for all to follow. My Blessings Lane in North Carolina is a short road that comes to a dead end, but the lane we all live on in Christ began in eternity and stretches into eternity.

We see it coming out of Eden and are led to it by the promises of our God, who is love. Blessings Lane moves, ever straight, directly through a lonely stable in Bethlehem, the shortest, no, the only path between us and God.

There we find a miracle baby, his mother a virgin. At his birth the angels sing "Glory to God!" and lowly shepherds come to worship. There we can start our walk on Blessings Lane as we think of who that baby is and what he came to do. There he reaches out his tiny hand, the hand of God, to lead us on the way. Ever with him, always blessed!

The way, though marked by blessings, is not easy—for him or for us. It leads by way of the cruel cross. It depends on that baby remaining pure for a people not pure. It calls for him to forgive a people who will keep on sinning, to sacrifice himself so not to lose us.

No, it's not an easy way. We often stumble, maybe even lose our way for a while. We learn eventually that suffering in this life is more the rule than the exception. We question our "blessings."

But then the Lord beckons us in his Word. "My grace is yours," he reminds us. He directs us back to our baptism: "You were washed clean. You are my child." His Son invites us to his table and tells us, "Here, with this bread, is my body. Here, with this wine, is my blood." His messenger adds, "Go in peace"—on Blessings Lane.

Once again his hand is in ours, and his truth warms our heart. Comforted now we look ahead, and we see that this lane so full of God's love will turn at last into solid gold and all the suffering will disappear. If you can find more blessings elsewhere, take them. But beware of imitations, of roads leading nowhere, of lanes lined with death.

When you are with the virgin-born Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, you are on Blessings Lane. There is no other such road. Say with angels and with me, "Glory to God!"

*A song for
the heart
that is . . .*

lonely

*anxious about
finances*

*frustrated with
the wicked*

*anxious about
the future*

feeling guilty

fearful of death

*seeking purpose
in life*

*longing to be
close to Christ*

*seeking Christian
friendship*

peaceful

joyful

*thankful for
God's Word*

Songs for the heart

Donald W. Patterson

Bill is suffering from cancer. If he doesn't get miraculous healing soon, he will be in heaven. I went to see him the other day to give him the Word of God and the Lord's Supper. In his two-and-a-half-year struggle with his disease he has come to faith and grown in his discipleship by leaps and bounds. In our visit I asked him if there were any faith-based questions he was pondering. He was quick to answer. "What is heaven like?"

He'd been thinking a lot more about the inevitable. My first thought was, "What a staggering question! I have never been there. This man might be there soon, and he is asking me?" I knew why he asked me. He trusted that I knew what God's Word said about heaven and that was where he wanted his answer to come from. We talked about all the passages I could think of about heaven. He was satisfied that Jesus was preparing a wonderful place for him.

What do you trust for answers to life's most important questions? Since you are reading this article, I'd guess that it is the Word of God. You've learned to filter everything people say

through the Word of God because you have found it to be the only source for spiritual truth.

There is a psalm that sings about your love for the Word. It will even increase your love for God's Word as you read and meditate upon it. It is the longest psalm in the Bible, Psalm 119. It has 176 verses about the Word of God and the psalmist's love for that Word.

As you read it, you will find some familiar jewels and some brand new gems. This psalm is composed of 22 stanzas with every stanza having the first letter of its every sentence beginning with the same Hebrew letter (an acrostic psalm). The poet went through the entire Hebrew alphabet before he finished writing. The acrostic underscores that God's Word is completely sufficient for our faith. Saints of all ages have learned to trust the Word of God more than anything else when it comes to truth about history, the way to live, and what heaven is like.

Read the entire psalm slowly. Let it teach you to love God's Word more. Below is a study of three passages from Psalm 119.

Featured verses: Psalm 119:67,99,105

⁶⁷Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. . . . ⁹⁹I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. . . . ¹⁰⁵Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

Points to ponder

- Look at verse 67. What is it about afflictions that lead us to obey God's Word better in the end?
- Why then is it important to bring God's Word to the sick and the dying?
- Look at verse 99. How does God's Word make us so smart that we might even get more insight than those trying to teach us?
- Look at verse 105. How could this passage be a comfort for us when we are about to start a brand new venture, for example being first-time parents or starting college?

Treasures to share

- Comb through Psalm 119 for passages that mean a lot to you. Then write one down in a card to a friend.
- For 22 days read the 22 sections of Psalm 119 antiphonally as a family in your daily devotions. Read one section a day.

Other Scripture verses that show thankfulness for God's Word

Isaiah 40:8; Isaiah 55:1-11; Jeremiah 15:16; John 8:31; John 17:17

Contributing editor Donald Patterson is pastor at Holy Word, Austin, Texas.

Find this article and possible answers online. Go to www.wels.net/jumpword/fic, and click on "Songs for the heart." Answers will be available after Dec. 5.



Not what we want,
but what we need,
defines the gifts
of Christmas.



What do you want for CHRISTMAS?

Reynold Heuer

Did you get everything you wanted for Christmas? When you walked to the tree on Christmas morning did you recognize the size of the packages and know that your wishes had been heard? Did you open each gift with a look of knowing anticipation, and was your look of surprise mingled with a look of relief that you had received exactly what you asked for?

Did you get what you wanted? I didn't.

What I want

First, I need to give you a little background so you can better understand my thoughts as I opened each of my gifts. I'm a tool guy. I love tools. I collect them, use them, and care for them. When I decide I need a tool for a particular task, I research. I ask around and see what others are using. I shop around for the best price. I have a magazine index on my computer that covers more than 30 woodworking publications going back nearly 20 years. I have available to me reviews on nearly every type of woodworking tool, and I consult them prior to making a purchase. When Christmastime comes along, I'll actually make a list of all the tools I'd like to have, the stores that have them in stock at a good price, the aisle they can be found in, and the price and SKU

number of the item. Fanatical? Yes, perhaps—but you'd have to be a tool guy to understand.

Now, back to those Christmas presents. As the gifts were removed from under the tree and the stack of unopened gifts began to grow at my feet, I practically broke into a cold sweat. These boxes were all wrong! Wrong size, wrong weight, wrong, wrong, wrong! What was going on here? As the rest of my family was shouting with surprise and yelling "thank-yous" across the room, I was gingerly lifting each box and carefully opening them to find the totally unexpected. Shirts! Pants! Jeans! Socks!

Didn't anyone read my list? I began to think that this was some cruel joke and the tools were secreted away in some closet to be brought out at the last minute. Soon, the last of the gifts were opened, and the crumpled wrapping paper was being forced into bags to be placed on the curb for pick-up. But no new packages were being brought out. I sat on the couch, surrounded by my new wardrobe, wondering what could have possibly gone wrong. Why didn't I get what I wanted?

What I need

It took a while, but a light finally came on in my head. I started to

understand what was going on, and I learned a little bit about Christmas in the process. I didn't get what I wanted because my loving family, fully understanding of my wants, was also aware of my needs. They knew what was best for me, even if I was not willing to admit it.

Christmas is not about getting what you want. It never has been. When God decided to give us the greatest gift of all he was not concerned with our wants. He was concerned with our needs. We wanted a king; he gave us a King. We wanted to be saved from the Romans; he saved us from ourselves. We wanted to live a life of peace; he gave us a peaceful life. We wanted food to sustain our lives; he gave us the Bread of Life. We wanted to live out our lives being left alone; he gave us everlasting life surrounded by our brothers and sisters. When we cried out for help, he refused to help but rather did it all. We thought we knew what we wanted; he knew what we really needed.

Did I get what I wanted for Christmas? Yes, and I got what I needed too!

*Rennie Heuer is a member
at Messiah, Nampa, Idaho.*