

FORWARD IN CHRIST

December 2003

The Word from the WELS

www.wels.net



A guide to
Christian
meditation

Do you need
a Christmas
reality check?

How to find
volunteers

A MYSTERY REVEALED

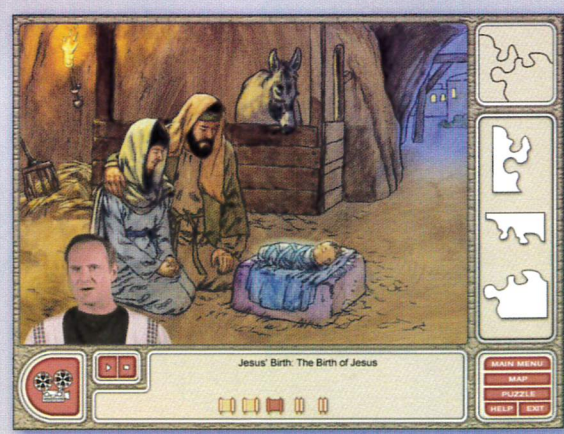


Travel^{back} to Bethlehem and discover God's Promise

You have probably read the story of Jesus' birth many times, but you've never experienced it like this. *God's Promise: An Interactive Journey through the Bible* is a multimedia CD-ROM that combines visuals, sound, and interactions to make the story of the Bible come alive!

This remarkable CD-ROM contains 12 sections detailing the fall into sin and promise of a Savior, the birth and life of Jesus, and the start of the Christian church. Each section provides a guide to walk you through the many scenes. You can also click on interactive scrolls, projectors, or animated people to hear Bible stories presented from several unique angles. When you are finished with a story, click on puzzle pieces to challenge your knowledge.

God's Promise is recommended for adults but is also suitable for inquiring young minds.



GOD'S PROMISE
An Interactive Journey
through the Bible
2 CD SET
LU35N0116, \$39.99
[expires 12/31/03]
Regular price \$49.99



Minimum Windows™ System Requirements: Windows™ 98 or higher, Pentium® 266 or better, 32 MB of RAM required (64 MB recommended), CD-ROM drive, 8x required (16x recommended), 20 MB of free hard-drive space recommended, 800 x 600 resolution, sound card, speakers, mouse

All registered trademarks, trademarks, and logos are the property of their respective owners or holders.



To order, call **1-800-662-6022**, or order online at **www.nph.net**.

Only __ days remaining until salvation

The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. Romans 13:11

Paul M. Janke

The airliner was on its final approach to the runway for a routine, late-night landing. Then, suddenly, the runway lights went out. The pilot was able to bring the plane down anyway, but since he had no idea where he was on the runway, he slammed on the brakes and blew the tires before skidding safely to a stop well before the end of the runway.

The pilot acted wisely. If he had simply assumed that he had plenty of runway left and made a normal landing, he may have gone off the end of the runway and had a collision that could have injured the passengers and crew.

Our salvation is near

Some people live under the assumption that their lives have plenty of runway left. It's not just the young and healthy, but sometimes also the old and the ill who don't acknowledge that their lives could be over—or that Christ could return—at any time. That's why the apostle Paul advises us to know what time it is.

What time is it? "Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed," Paul writes. "Aha!" the skeptics respond. "The passing of nearly 2,000 years has shown Paul's belief in the nearness of Christ's return to be erroneous." But Paul doesn't set any dates. He simply



wants us to know that the "next big thing" that God's people are watching for is the return of our Savior. The salvation God planned in ages past, the salvation that appeared to all men when Jesus was born—that salvation is going to reach its glorious culmination on the day that our Lord comes again and claims us as his own.

This salvation is near because Christ could appear at any time. It's certainly nearer than it was when we first came to faith in Jesus. With each passing day we find ourselves 24 hours closer to the day when we will experience the fullness of the salvation Jesus won for us.

It's time to wake up

What time is it? It's time to wake up from our slumber. This is an odd

kind of sleepiness that has people staying up late trying to satisfy the desires of the sinful nature. This sort of slumber finds people dulling their senses with immoderate amounts of alcohol, which lowers inhibitions and can lead to sexual immorality. Jealousy and dissension also dull our spiritual awareness. They sap the energy that might otherwise have been used to serve fellow believers and win the lost.

So Paul issues a wake-up call, loud and clear. It's time to get up! We answer this call when we repent of our sins, putting aside the deeds of darkness and clothing ourselves with Jesus Christ. Then, clear-eyed, clear-headed, and wide awake in Christ, we live each day in the full assurance of faith, rejoicing that Jesus, who came the first time to bear our sins, is coming again to take us to glory.

How many days remain before our salvation arrives? No one can say precisely. It's not like counting down the days to Christmas. But the day is drawing near. So, even as we move closer to another celebration of our Savior's first coming, we live in eager expectation of his second coming.



Paul Janke is pastor at St. Peter, Modesto, California.

FORWARD IN CHRIST

formerly Northwestern Lutheran



Official magazine of the
Wisconsin Evangelical
Lutheran Synod

December 2003 / Vol. 90, No. 12

www.wels.net

Editorial office

Forward in Christ magazine,
WELS, 2929 N Mayfair Rd,
Milwaukee WI 53222-4398

FAX, 414/256-3862
<fic@sab.wels.net>

Editor

Rev. Gary P. Baumler, 414/256-3230
<garyb@sab.wels.net>

Senior Communications Assistants

Nicole R. Balza, 414/256-3232
<nicoleb@sab.wels.net>

Julie K. Wietzke, 414/256-3231
<juliew@sab.wels.net>

Seminary Consultant

D. P. Leyrer

Contributing Editors

J. D. Buchholz, K. A. Cherney, D. J. Engelbrecht,
R. L. Gurgel, E. S. Hartzell, R. K. Hunter,
P. M. Janke, P. L. Kieselhorst, M. J. Lenz,
A. J. Panning, T. A. Westra, P. E. Zell

Art Director

Paul Burmeister

Graphic Designer

Carianne Ciriacks

Photographs and Illustrations

Comstock, p. 3; Renate Lohmann, p. 8; Ed
Koehler, p. 10; Mrs. Kevin Scheibel Photography,
p. 14; Punchstock, p. 16; Siri Weber Feeny,
p. 18; Rubberball Productions, p. 20; Hare
Strigenz Designers, p. 30; Jane Dippold, p. 36

Forward in Christ

Forward in Christ (ISSN 1541-8936) is published
monthly by Northwestern Publishing House,
1250 N 113 St, Milwaukee WI 53226-3284.
Periodical postage paid at Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Rates: USA—\$12; single copy—\$1.50. Canada—\$12.84;
single copy—\$1.61. All other countries—air mail \$43.20.
Postage included, payable in advance to NPH. Write for
multi-year, blanket, and bundle rates. For single issues,
Wisconsin add 5% sales tax; Milwaukee County add 5.6%
tax. Also available on audiocassette from Mission for the
Visually Impaired, 559 Humboldt Ave, St. Paul MN 55107.

Subscription Services

1-800-662-6093, ext. 8. Milwaukee
area 414/615-5785. Or write NPH, 1250 N 113 St,
Milwaukee WI 53226-3284. Order on-line:
<www.nph.net/periodicals>

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to
Forward in Christ, c/o NPH, 1250 N 113 St,
Milwaukee WI 53226-3284.

©2003 by Forward in Christ.
Printed in the USA.



Cover illustration by Renate Lohmann

Before Mary was even pregnant, God had given out the baby's gender, name, occupation, and how long he would live.

8

bits & pieces



Merry Christmas! Our Christmas articles are wrapped in different ways, but they all contain the same message—Christ is born today.

- Have you ever visited a new mom and her baby at the hospital? Steve Geiger reminds us that a cute baby boy was born on Christmas night. But this wasn't a normal birth, and Jesus wasn't a normal baby. He was true God and true man. Don't miss "It's a boy!" (p. 8).

- Is getting the perfect Christmas tree important to you? Linette Scharlemann shares a lesson she learned about the dangers of artificiality in "An artificial Christmas" (p. 18).

- Have you received "looks" for singing loudly in church? One of our authors has, and she's proud of it. In "Never too loudly" (back page), Deborah Koestler-Kuck reminds us to share our joy loudly this Christmas.

- Do you know what "*chikondi chodabwitsa*" means? You may remember from our October issue that it is Chewa (African) for "amazing grace." President Karl Gurgel wonders if it could also be a new way to say "Merry Christmas" (p. 31).

- Do you feel conflicted at Christmas? FIC editor Gary Baumler shares his thoughts on why this may happen and what the cure is in "Conflicted at Christmas" (p. 34).



Our Interactive Bible study this year taught us about God's story—the Bible. We thank Randy Hunter for helping us know God better through a study of the Old Testament. His final article is on p. 21.



You may think that our index of articles and authors for 2003 is missing. It's not. It's just not printed in the magazine. You can find everything we printed this year and in years past (through 1981) on our on-line index <www.wels.net/nlarch/search.pl>.

features

CHRISTMAS

8 **It's a boy!**

Was Jesus' birth less exciting because it wasn't a surprise?

Stephen H. Geiger

WORSHIP

10 **Let worship work**

We sometimes introduce the idols named "I" and "OK" into worship, thereby hiding the gospel.

James P. Tiefel

CHRISTIAN SERVICE

12 **How to find volunteers**

Recruiting and retaining volunteers—it's a struggle for most churches. Find out here what works.

Sue Fink

INSIGHTS

14 **A quiet blessing**

A Christian guide to meditation.

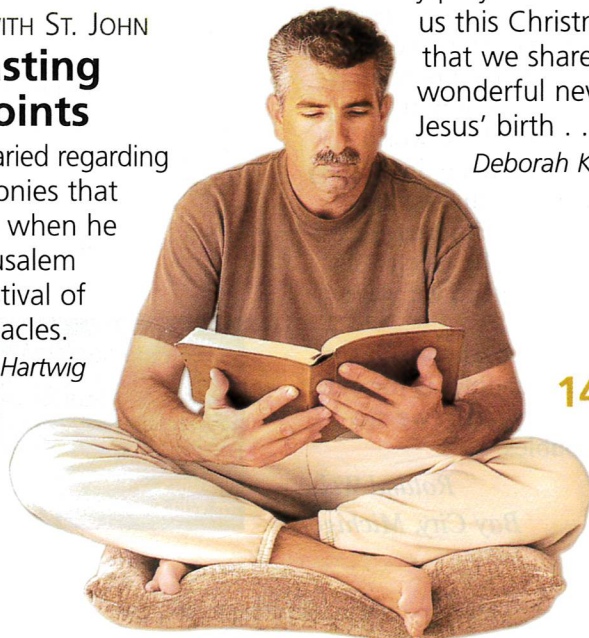
Peter J. Leyrer

WALKING WITH ST. JOHN

16 **Contrasting viewpoints**

Opinions varied regarding the testimonies that Jesus gave when he visited Jerusalem for the Festival of the Tabernacles.

Theodore J. Hartwig



14

CHRISTMAS

18 **An artificial Christmas**

An eight-foot Christmas tree, a muddy van, and a frustrated husband taught me a lesson about the dangers of artificiality.

Linette Scharlemann

WHATEVER

20 **The barrier**

Love is needed to break down the barriers of racism that mankind has built up.

Rachel Dahm

PERSON TO PERSON

31 **Amazing grace**

Chikondi chodabwitsa, amazing grace. Whether in Africa or America, to rich or poor, to black or white, for young or old, a Savior is given.

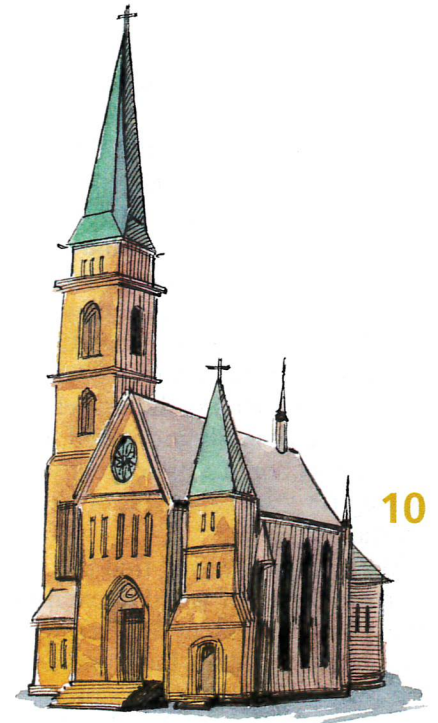
Karl R. Gurgel

CHRISTMAS

36 **Never too loudly**

My prayer for each of us this Christmas is that we share the wonderful news of Jesus' birth . . . loudly.

Deborah Koestler-Kuck



10

departments


- 3 THOUGHT FOR TODAY
Only __ days remaining until salvation
- 6 READERS FORUM
- 7 EDITORIAL COMMENT
Trust not in princes
- 21 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDY
- 22 NEWS
- 29 BULLETIN BOARD
- 30 BIBLE STUDY
Life in the Sonlight: signed, sealed, and delivered
- 32 IN THE CROSS HAIRS
Decision theology
- 33 POTLUCK
- 34 EDITOR'S PEN
Conflicted at Christmas

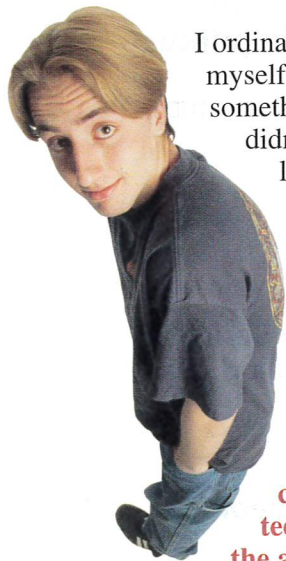


How can a worshiper come before God with the “right attitude” and still be bored as Phil Wagie suggests [“Readers forum,” Oct.]?

Reverence and awe are missing ingredients in the worship life of many as we, the totally unworthy, come into the presence of the most worthy. Consider, for example, the attitude of the Israelites as they stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai for the giving of the Law (Exodus 20). One wonders whether worshipers who claim to be properly motivated, but nonetheless bored, are not really looking for the excitement of being entertained.

Although some may find the alternate forms of worship exciting, others may find them distracting because they disturb their preparation for coming into God’s presence through hearing his Word. Worshipers assume active worship roles as they sing the *Magnificat* or the *Gloria*, but the alternate forms often cast them in a more passive role as they respond to a leader or leaders. Alternate worship forms therefore require judicious use.

 *Howard Rauch
Manitowoc, Wis.*



I ordinarily don’t find myself writing about something I liked or didn’t like in a publication I read. I react and then often forget. However, this time is different. **I was reading *Forward in Christ* [Oct.] and stumbled across the article geared for teens, “My friend, the atheist.” The reference to C. S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* was fantastic.**

I have found myself in countless situations where my faith is dis-

cussed—mostly people wondering how I could believe this stuff. See, I hang around with an intelligent crowd. I love them dearly except when their intelligence seems to be a stumbling block for them—in this case rationalizing themselves out of needing a Savior. So, I read C. S. Lewis’s book and found it to be amazing! It gave me confidence to talk about my faith more openly. That and Proverbs 1:7: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.” Great passage.

I currently run my congregation’s youth program. I encourage my teens (ha ha—I’m only 21) to read C. S. Lewis and found it quite nice to see that other young Christians received similar encouragement from it.

 *Jude Kirstein*

Re: God’s plan [Oct.] Having quoted one of Scripture’s great statements on the comforting doctrine of election, “ ‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’ ” (Jeremiah 29:11), Thomas Westra fails to apply the doctrine in its primary sense. He seems to equate God’s gracious act of election with the divine attribute of omniscience. These are not the same thing.

Indeed, “God knew from eternity precisely when and where you would be born,” but when Paul proclaims that God “chose us in him [Christ] before the creation of the world,” he teaches us that already in eternity God “foreknew” us, that is, knew us intimately as his children. In unfathomable grace he elected us. This he did long before we were brought to faith.

This clear Bible truth, which surpasses all understanding, is for our comfort, especially when we are assailed by troubles.

*Roland Welch
Bay City, Michigan*

Thomas Westra responds: *Thank you for the reminder that the doctrine of election involves far more than God’s omniscience.*


To your concern that I equated the two, I would point out that:

1. *The main thrust of the devotion was that God has a wise and loving plan for each of our lives. The Ephesians passage was quoted to show that the plan goes back before the creation of the world.*

2. *The idea that God chose us in love before the creation of the world to be adopted as his children is something that the passage states quite clearly. I didn’t think that it needed a lot of additional commentary.*

3. *In the paragraph that followed the quotation of that passage, the devotion states quite clearly that God’s plan included our salvation through the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit—something that God did for us in love. He had in mind to do all these things for us when he chose us before the creation of the world.*

In “When does life end?” [Nov.], Prof. John Schuetze states Solomon as the author of Ecclesiastes without any reservation. This is frequently done in our circles. I believe this is saying more than Scripture itself says. **While Solomon is the most natural choice and probably no one fits better, to say without any qualification that Solomon is the teacher to whom Ecclesiastes refers, says more than Scripture says.** We would be better to follow the practice of Prof. Eickman, who always referred to the author as “The Teacher” and left it at that.

 *Nathan Strutz
Galesville, Wisconsin*

Send your letters to Readers forum, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398; FAX, 414/256-3862; <fic@sab.wels.net>. Include full name, address, and daytime phone number. Letters are edited for clarity, conciseness, and relevance. Writers’ views are not necessarily those of WELS or *Forward in Christ* magazine.

Trust not in princes

Armin J. Panning

The world we live in has become a scary place. A major contributing factor is the feeling that we don't know whom we can trust. There is always the specter of foreign terrorists striking again. We have instituted a Department of Homeland Security, but can we trust it to protect us?

It is, however, not just outsiders whom we fear and distrust. We have misgivings about our own government and our elected political leaders. Recall fever is in the air, fueled by massive distrust of politicians. In times past in the field of business there were "captains of industry" whose companies brought national prosperity, but currently many of those companies are run by CEOs who seem more interested in lining their own pockets than serving the general good. In the financial world, the huge mutual fund industry, largely scandal-free in the past, is reeling from charges of improper trading practices. Can we rely on those to whom we have entrusted much of our money? Can we trust anyone?

Sounding a note of caution regarding the role of leaders, particularly political leaders, is not something new. In a familiar hymn ("Praise the Almighty; My Soul Adore Him," *Christian Worship* 235), the poet Johann Herrnschmidt in 1714 wrote: "Trust not in princes, they are but mortal; earth-born they are and soon decay" (stanza 3).

That thought, of course, is not original with him. It is a reflection of Psalm 146: "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing" (3,4).

Leaders in government have been fallible and mortal, ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin. Their judgment is

occasionally beclouded, their motives tend to be impure, and their tenures often short. Yet, with all their weaknesses, they have one overarching quality: they are God's representatives through whom he wishes to bless us.

In writing to the Romans, Paul says, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (Romans 13:1,2). Two verses later Paul continues: "... he (the person in authority) is God's servant to do you good." And let's not forget that when Paul wrote this to the Romans, Nero was their emperor. Hardly a model leader!

Obviously individual leaders, operating with their own abilities, are not "princes" in whom we can safely put our trust. But under the hand of our all-powerful Savior God, even flawed administrations serve his good and gracious purpose. Once more the psalmist steers us in the right direction. After warning against trusting in princes, he continues, "Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—the Lord, who remains faithful forever. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry" (146:5-7). Again the hymnwriter catches it well: "Since then no one can help afford, Trust only Christ, our God and Lord."

Trust only Christ, our God and Lord. Therein lies the assurance that daily sustains us in what would otherwise be a very scary world indeed.

Armin Panning, a member at St. Matthew, Port Washington, Wisconsin, is a professor emeritus at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin.

Under the hand of our all-powerful Savior God, even flawed administrations serve his good and gracious purpose.

IT'S A BOY!

Was Jesus' birth less exciting because it wasn't a surprise?

Stephen H. Geiger

Something is inside.

Of that there is no doubt. The mother knows first. The father finds out. As time passes, wise and curious eyes discover the secret.

Something is inside that womb. A tiny human. But what is it? Is it a girl or is it a boy?

In years past this mystery remained a mystery. For nine months suggestions would fly from women experienced to that mother brand new: guesses about how you can tell whether aunts should buy pink or whether aunts should buy blue.

Finally, the moment of truth. The mystery emerges—sharp pains but lasting joy—and the doctor shouts out, “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!”

Then came ultrasound.

Women enter clinics for periodic checks and mysteriously, almost magically, the secret can slip. Ultrasound, so that the words, “It’s a boy!” may no longer be a surprise.

Some preserve the surprise. They look away from the monitor. In their minds, the excitement of a birth increases all the more when all the mysteries are uncovered at once.

Does that mean that the birth of baby Jesus wasn't quite as exciting as it could have been?

For Mary and Joseph, there was no surprise.

But it wasn't because they had peeked over the shoulder of the ultrasound technician. Mary and Joseph didn't have ultrasound. Yet what normally would have been a mystery had been known for over nine months. God told Mary, “You will be with child and give birth to a son” (Luke 1:31). While Joseph was sharing with innkeepers the news of a pregnant wife and her need for a room, he could have added with a grin, “It’s going to be a boy.”

The gender of the child wasn't the only secret God let slip. Before Mary was even pregnant, God had given out the baby's name, the baby's occupation, how long the child would live. Mary could have sent out birth announcements months in advance with more information than most mothers can send out months after the fact. Had that hap-

Mary could have sent out birth announcements months in advance with more

pened, one wonders what the proud father could have added in the customary post-birth phone calls. Maybe height. Maybe weight. But the good stuff was already out there.

For those who enjoy a bit of mystery or surprise, this birth seemed to possess little if any of the normal suspense.

And little if any of the normal reaction from the maternity ward visitors. It's not strange for family and friends to peek through the glass at that collection of cribs, wondering which little face is theirs. When they finally arrive at the room of the resting mother, what giggles and smiles if the child is already with her, in her arms. How cute. He looks just like you. Look at those cheeks. What thick, dark hair. Fingernails perfect. Skin soft. He's beautiful.

Yet nothing of that do we hear from the shepherds as they stepped their way into a straw-filled nursery. When their eyes finally focused and saw that young child, their words spoke not of fingernails and skin but of words that had been told them by an angel: "Good news, he said! Great joy for everyone. Today a Savior has been born. This is the Savior."

How the shepherds needed a Savior. Imagine the fears of men who had sinned. Selfishness, jealousy toward wealthier sheep watchers, wicked thoughts in lonely moments, frustration and anger when sheep misbehaved. Consciences accusing. Guilt troubling. Eternal death waiting.

When a holy, heavenly being appeared, they were terrified.

But the voice: "Do not be afraid!"

This was their joy when eyes fell on the child. Sure, it was a boy. Yes, he may have been cute. But this child was the reason they didn't need to fear. "Mary and Joseph, God is not out to hurt us. He has come

down to help us. Though sinners, we are at peace. We have a Savior. This is Messiah, promised for ages to prophets and kings. Promised to Abraham, Adam, and Eve."

Words of the shepherds continued cascading. "Mary and Joseph, you'd never believe—even more angels! 'Glory to God,' they joyfully sang. 'Peace on the earth,' their clear voices rang."

Peace. There is peace, though disappointments may still haunt. With life eternal in hand, what more would we want.

All was well, and the maternity ward audience was in awe. The words overflowing from lips of those men left Mary and Joseph amazed.

What brings such awe to your Christmas? What makes this day a most wonderful one of the year? Is it special because of a baby, so cute, on display? Is there excitement because of a truth unknown then suddenly shared: "It's a boy"? Are the feelings of Christmas little different from the joys of any maternity ward?

Surely there is joy in those hospital rooms, but find this Christmas a joy far beyond.

While shepherds no doubt observed the beauty of a baby, the awe they repeated came not from Jesus' age. Their feet did hurry and their hearts did sing because God had come to save. God had torn apart the heavens and come to earth to help. God had witnessed a creation condemning itself and chose to love.

God saw men and women, boys and girls, who think first so easily of their own needs and look forward first to earthly presents and even at Christmas focus first on parties and family and wrapping and things—things all temporary with joys never lasting. God could have left us to ourselves, to discover that mere earthly

gains are followed by eternal pains. Yet when God saw people who naturally love first not him, God came down to earth to help.

God saw men and women, boys and girls, who already were feeling the pains of a sin-affected world. He saw those who have lost loved ones and feel dearly life's futility. He saw those sick and troubled, who have faced disappointment and failure, whose shoulders sag under guilt and shame. God saw and came down.

But not to torment even further. He could have sent angels but not with good news. That God's patience was finished. That life's pains would never end. Today is born an avenger.

But this is not what happened. God came down to help you. Angels announced neither abandonment nor judgment. The angel rejoiced, "Today is born in the city of David a Savior; he is Christ the Lord."

At Christmas God came down to save.

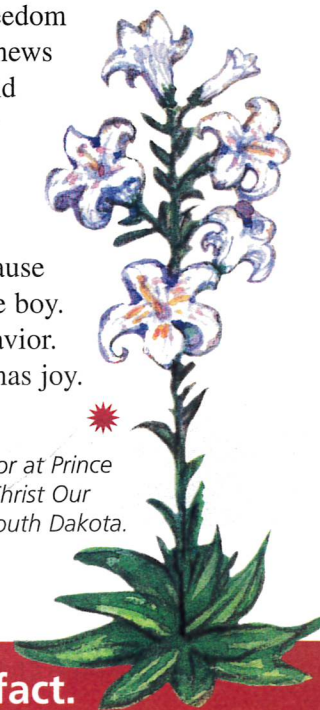
This is what was lying in the manger. Yes, it was a little boy. Yes, he may have been cute. But this was God, and also a man, who came to steal from us our sin and give to us something far better in return: peace of conscience, freedom from guilt, good news of forgiveness, and great joy for now and for forever.

Smiles in that maternity ward. And not just because it was a cute little boy.

This is your Savior.

This is Christmas joy.

Steve Geiger is pastor at Prince of Peace, Yankton/Christ Our Savior, Vermillion, South Dakota.



LET WORSHIP WORK

We sometimes introduce the idols named “I” and “OK” into worship, thereby hiding the gospel. We need to tear those idols down and let the Spirit do his work.

James P. Tiefel

Christians gather for worship to proclaim in speech, song, and symbol the good news that God saves sinners. Through this gospel the Holy Spirit creates, strengthens, and preserves faith in Christ. When the gospel dominates worship, worship always works in the Holy Spirit’s economy. Without the gospel, worship can’t work as the Spirit wills.

Satan knows the value of public worship that proclaims the gospel and has used human weaknesses to obscure and even overthrow the gospel. Like Solomon did in the Old Testament, believers today sometimes introduce idols into the worship of God. When they do, the devil can hide the gospel. Without the gospel, the Spirit cannot create and strengthen faith.

The idol named “I”

“I don’t like the new order of service.”

“I like the old songs better.”

“I can’t stand organ music.”

“The liturgy bores me.”

There has never been a time in the long story of the Church when the idol

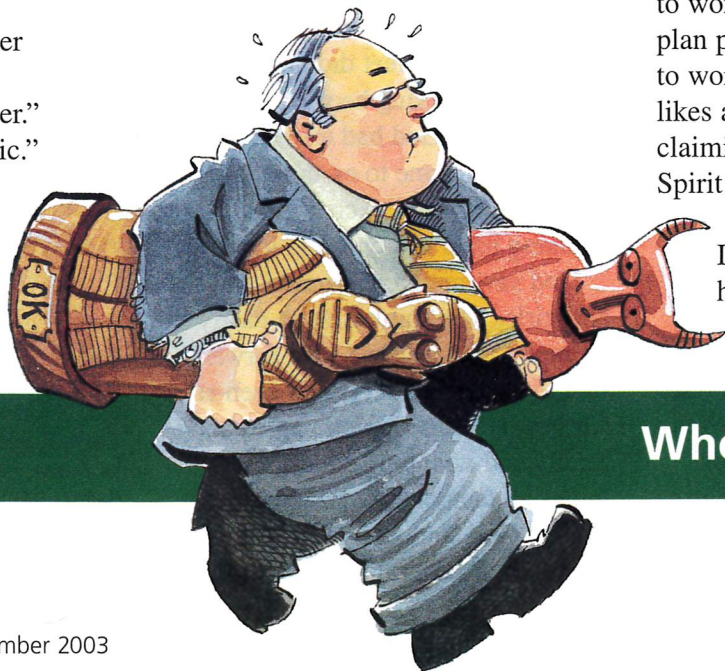
named “I” hasn’t caused trouble and confusion in public worship. The congregation in Corinth was filled with talented people, but they all wanted to do their own thing when they gathered for worship. In chapter 14 of his first letter, Paul urged the Corinthians to think of others before they thought of themselves. “Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts,” he told them, “try to excel in gifts that build up the church” (12). They needed to place parameters around their personal preferences: “You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified” (17). Worshipers could have their favorites, Paul wanted to say, but “these must be done for the strengthening of the church” (21).

If our goal at worship is to proclaim the good news about Jesus, we need to be more interested in

what people around us need than what we may like or dislike. The new order of service that I don’t like may provide a fresh setting for the gospel that other worshipers are longing for. My favorite old songs may not communicate the gospel clearly to new members, young adults, or people from other cultures. The organ that sounds so bad to me may be the only instrument capable of leading several hundred worshipers in hymns that proclaim the gospel. The liturgy that bores me may repeat the gospel in such a way that people can remember it and have it close to their hearts.

Personal preferences don’t always obscure the gospel; what Christians like at worship often enhances the proclamation of the good news. As long as Christians have a sinful nature, however, congregations have to work through this issue as they plan public worship. When it comes to worship, individual likes and dislikes are never as important as proclaiming the gospel to people. The Spirit is at our worship and is ready to create and nourish faith.

If the idol named “I” stands in his way by hiding the gospel,



When the idol named

we need to tear the idol down and let worship work as the Spirit wills.

The idol named "OK"

"It's good enough" is usually not good advice. It implies that doing something well isn't important. "OK" is never the same as "well done."

Sometimes Christians set up the idol named "OK" in their public worship. Their eyes droop as they listen to the sermon. They mumble through the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. They sing the hymns with half a heart. But it's OK, we say. The piano hasn't been tuned, the organ wheezes, and the building's acoustics muffle the music. But it's OK. When dozens of mistakes emerge as the lessons are read and the hymns are played, it's obvious somebody didn't practice. But it's OK.

The devil delights in OK, for worship that is only good enough always draws attention away from the gospel. Our words may proclaim that a Savior gave his best to save the world, but less-than-our-best efforts say something very different. Penny-pinching may save the congregation money, but it may also lead worshipers to wonder if we really believe that Jesus became poor that we might become rich. People are willing to accept mistakes, but not when mistakes signal a lack of preparation. At that point mistakes attract the attention, not the gospel.

It is true that the Holy Spirit compensates for our weaknesses as we proclaim the message of the

Savior. It is also true, however, that God never promises to bless unfaithful stewards. When the idol named "OK" leads us to give less than our best as we speak and sing the good news, we hide the gospel. More than that, we insult the Spirit and test his patience. We need to demolish OK and let the Spirit do his work.

Paul urged the members in Corinth to give their best by pointing them to Jesus. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Thus, the same gospel we proclaim at worship works on us and empowers us to bring down the idol that can compromise our gospel proclamation.

Many WELS congregations are taking a serious look at public worship these days, for they recognize the impact that worship has on members and non-members alike. Making decisions about worship is often difficult and sometimes painful. But the experience will serve the Savior's kingdom and be a blessing to our churches as believers keep both the gospel and people in clear focus.

More than anything else, people need what Jesus gives. When we gather for worship, therefore, we can do nothing better than repeat the Savior's story. With that gospel in our hearts and on our lips, we will

do our best to proclaim the story to all those for whom he died.



James Tiefel is a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin.

If you missed the first article in this series, go to our magazine's on-line archive at <www.wels.net/nlarch/search.pl> and search the Nov. 2003 issue for "Worship that works." Don't miss Prof. Tiefel's final article in this series in the January issue.



"OK" leads us to give less than our best . . . we hide the gospel.

How to find volunteers

Sue Fink



**Recruiting and retaining volunteers—
it's a struggle for most churches.
Find out here what works.**

With two-income families and overly busy schedules, volunteers are endangered entities. How can your church get and keep volunteers?

Using volunteers

Is recruiting, training, and retaining volunteers worth the effort it takes? Why not just assign the duties to paid staff or do it all yourself?

By offering volunteer opportunities, members share the joy of Christian service. Christ's commission to his followers (that's everyone in the pew) is not a choice but a command that promises blessings. Even the tasks one might consider small are needed to support the more obvious mission opportunities. God's Word tells us to "serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13) and "encourage one another daily" (Hebrews 3:13). Paul calms our fears about doing so by reminding us, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13). Whether it's wiping noses in preschool or assisting at

the Lord's Supper, all are important tasks that can give glory to God.

With the Holy Spirit's guidance, volunteers enable congregations to do their work. Their involvement provides a sense of togetherness. New friendships are formed, and relationships grow deeper as individuals work toward a common goal.

Personal development is another byproduct of service. As gifts are used for God's purposes, faith is nourished. Giving as much attention to spiritual needs as to physical ones is a necessary balancing act for all-around health. Out of our gratefulness for God's grace, volunteering reminds us that we are "saved to serve."

Recruiting volunteers

If putting a "help needed" blurb in the worship folder causes a crowd to sign up in your congregation, count your blessings. Typically, however, people want to know

1. exactly what the job entails and why it is necessary,
2. what the time commitment is, and
3. if they have the skills/knowledge/confidence to do it.

Recruiters need to have a succinct job description to share before asking for help. Personalize your plea. Use or update a talent and interests survey to help make the connections between needs and prospects. A church volunteer coordinator or an assimilation committee can be the matchmaker.

Timing is also important. When people express a desire to share their gifts "some time," follow up on that offer soon, before their enthusiasm wanes. If no obvious job is already in place, create one. When you have those talented individuals doing and enjoying service projects, convince others to "job shadow," so they might glean the same skills, joy, and confidence. This is an especially good way to encourage young people. It lets them know they are a valuable resource, needed in kingdom work.

Keeping a good thing going and growing

As in any productive setting, two-way communication lines are required—between committee members, chairpersons, church leaders, staff, volunteers, and

(when needed) all members. Good communication will help avoid misunderstandings and help you reach your goals on time. Reports, e-mail, and informal discussion all promote good communication. You just need to figure out what will work best in your situation.

It's a good idea to include volunteers in evaluations of the service they provide. An informal coffee klatch encourages their input, suggestions, and comments. Use their feedback to improve either the volunteer tasks or the service provided. The more a person's constructive advice is used, the more he will take ownership of a project. Then, with God's blessing, you are working with people who are hooked for further involvement, and they become your best recruiters.

Be open to change—can the same goals be met, but in a way that better fits a person's schedule and skills? Make sure to ask volunteers if they would like to continue in the project or get involved with something else.

As your congregation recruits and uses volunteers, remember that a "thank you" means a lot. Share an e-card from <www.wels.net>, a small gift ("You're a life-saver!" on a piece of candy, for example), or a sincere hand-hug to express appreciation. As we work to establish kingdom-growing volunteer opportunities, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24). In this world, there's nothing better to do!



Sue Fink, a member at St. John, Manitowoc, Wisconsin, is a volunteer coordinator at a local hospice.

Solutions to volunteers' OBJECTIONS



Objection: "I don't have the confidence to try it."

Solution: Offer a positive job shadowing experience and ask for feedback. Encourage the individual to count on God's promises of help and encouragement.



Objection: "I don't understand what is needed" or "I don't think that job is necessary."

Solution: Supply prospects with specific, readable job descriptions.



Objection: "I don't think I can fit any more into my hectic schedule."

Solution: Create episodic (one-time) opportunities or spell out the limited time needed (a half hour a week for one month, etc.) Make sure to respect their time constraints—don't let a project drag on too long.

Young people can ask schools for release time or to use the volunteer experience to count as an assignment or extra credit. Teachers could incorporate volunteer work in the classroom or provide hands-on mission experiences such as Youth In Service projects through WELS Kingdom Workers. Young students can fold and stamp prospect newsletters. Older students can make church library displays. Teens can promote youth group activities to other teens, and members of any age can visit or write to shut-ins.



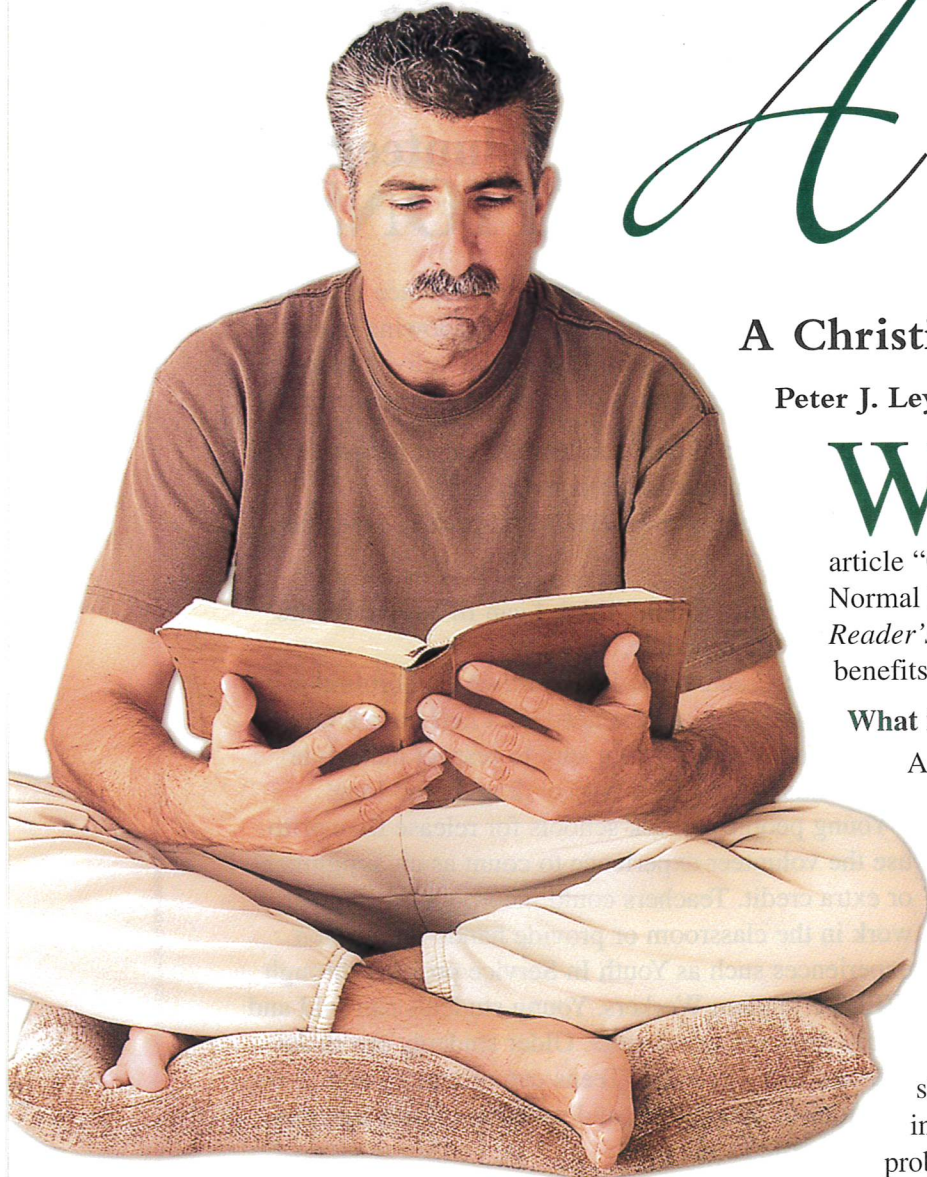
Objection: "I don't know anyone (and I'm too shy to come alone)."

Solution: Invite them to bring a friend. Have experienced, friendly people walk a new person through the opportunity.



Objection: "I don't spend enough time with my family the way it is."

Solution: Design family volunteer work that provides meaningful time together; strengthens relationships; and teaches kindness, empathy, respect, and the joyful habit of serving Christ's church.



A quiet

A Christian guide to meditation.

Peter J. Leyrer

Would you like to decrease stress, lower your blood pressure, and enjoy the benefits of health that would follow? According to the article "Give Peace a Chance: Meditation for Busy, Normal People" by Carol Krucoff in the October 2002 *Reader's Digest*, more and more Americans find those benefits in the ancient practice of meditation.

What is meditation?

According to the article, meditation means a sort of "time out" from a busy day, a little time to sit quietly and do nothing. The article recommends that during meditation one should focus on breathing or perhaps a simple object such as a candle flame. We're told that some people increase meditation's benefits when they chant a simple syllable or phrase during meditation.

The health benefits of this kind of meditation shouldn't surprise us. The stress of life in most industrialized nations leads to a number of physical problems. Medical science and common sense both recognize the benefits of a short break in a busy schedule.

The article doesn't mention any religion, but people familiar with Buddhism will recognize the ideas. A Buddhist Web

Many times as I have considered the different facets of God's Word, the Holy Spirit has led me to a sudden and deeper understanding of God's truth.

site promises the same health benefits, and more, through meditation. Buddhism also teaches that

only beginners need a focus during meditation. Instead, during meditation we should try to empty ourselves and allow thoughts to come and go freely without examining or stopping them.

"Very dangerous!" concludes a Taiwanese Christian evangelist with whom I recently spoke. Evil spirits can

blessing

and do take up residence in this kind of “empty mind.” Jesus himself said that demons prefer a “house” that is “unoccupied, swept clean, and put in order” (Matthew 12:44). That kind of house sounds almost like it belongs in a Buddhist textbook describing the goal of meditation. Even in the West we say, “An idle mind is the devil’s workshop.”

How do Christians meditate?

Is there a Christian way to meditate? Certainly! Throughout the Old Testament we are told to “meditate.” Unlike Buddhist meditation, this kind has a focus. Christians meditate upon God’s Word or upon all of God’s “wonderful works” (Psalm 145:5). Since God records his “wonderful works” in Scripture, I’m not sure there’s much difference between these two focal points for our meditation. On the other hand, a Christian will probably often want to remember and draw comfort from God’s “wonderful works” in his own life, e.g., the way that God led him to faith or provided some help in time of need. This kind of reminiscence might also be part of the Christian’s meditation.

Our English Bibles use “meditate” to translate two Hebrew words. The first of them (you can find an example in Joshua 1:8) suggests reading God’s Word out loud in a soft, “murmuring” voice. I find eastern Christians much

more accepting of and comfortable with this practice than their brothers and sisters in the United States. I also find that this kind of meditation helps me focus on the meaning of the words as I read them. So, if you haven’t tried this kind of meditation, I suggest that you find a quiet, private space and meditate. Give it a little time; you’ll need to overcome some discomfort over a new way of doing things. But do try it. God is waiting to bless you through it.

The second Hebrew word that we translate “meditate” (for an example, look at Psalm 119:27) means more like “think about” or “consider.” Christian meditation includes using our minds to “turn over” God’s Word and think about its meaning. Think of examining a beautiful jewel: as we look at its different facets, we discover new depths of beauty. Many times as I have considered the different facets of God’s Word, the Holy Spirit has led me to a sudden and deeper understanding of God’s truth. We call this work of the Holy Spirit “enlightenment,” and the Spirit uses God’s Word to accomplish it. Believers of many religions consider life a search for enlightenment. We need search no further than the Scriptures.

Many Christians use the phrase “prayer and meditation” as if the two mean the same thing. They don’t, but they do belong together.

Unlike Buddhist meditation that seeks to create in the mind an open landing strip for whatever spirit may be out there, Christians pray that the Holy Spirit will guide them in their spiritual journey.

Unlike Buddhist teaching that every thought should be allowed to come and go as it pleases, Christians recognize that Satan and his demons will try to intrude upon our quiet times with God. Every thought must be examined. “We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Philippians 4:8).

Can we promise improved health for those who meditate upon Scripture? I think that my blood pressure may have actually gone up a few times when God’s law revealed a sin in my life for which I need to repent. But keep turning to the Scriptures. There’s also forgiveness there, and it belongs to me and you and all who come to the Father through Jesus. Keep your focus on him and let your soul rest.



Peter Leyrer is a WELS missionary in Taiwan.



WALKING WITH ST. JOHN

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5



CONTRASTING VIEWPOINTS

Opinions varied regarding the lifesaving testimonies that Jesus gave when he visited Jerusalem for the Festival of the Tabernacles.

Theodore J. Hartwig

The events in this unit of John's Gospel cluster around Jesus' visit to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Tabernacles, celebrated eight days to commemorate Israel's deliverance from Egypt. The visit is noteworthy for displaying the sharp differences of opinion among those who heard Jesus: the uncommitted views of the bleacher sitters; the honest appraisals of the courageous; and the know-it-all, know-nothing cocksureness of the authorities.

No one ever spoke the way this man does (7:1-52)

In urging Jesus to attend the festival to flaunt his miracles, the brothers of Jesus exhibit what most people, now as then, expect of religion: glory instead of cross, a savior of dazzling display rather than a savior from sin.

When Jesus does appear at the festival, the crowds express amazement at his unaccredited learning. Though all the disagreement over his identity offered an ideal moment to arrest him, the effort fails. It is another example of man's time not harmonizing with God's time.

A further attempt by the Jewish leaders, now with help from the temple guards, not only misfires, but draws from those guards a stunning testimony to the wonder of Jesus' words.

Neither do I condemn you (7:53-8:11)

The story of the woman taken in adultery seems to have become separated from the author's original manuscript. It may have been inserted at this place because, shortly after, Jesus declares: "I pass judgment on no one" (8:15). Casual reading of

the story could miss the fact that only the woman was arraigned, the man allowed to go free. It may be another example of not uncommon ancient and wrongheaded attitudes that, for the sin at hand, women were more culpable than men.

My testimony is valid (8:12-59)

The continuing controversies over his identity now bring into the open four stupendous testimonies by Jesus. He declares: "I am the light of the world." He challenges his accusers to find him guilty of sin. He promises eternal life to all who cherish his Word. Finally, he speaks of himself as "I Am." His first claim reveals the worldwide extent of his mission. The second affirms a personal life without blemish. The third exalts his teaching as the way to heaven. The fourth declares his eternal



existence with God: he is of one being with the Father.

These testimonies confront all people with a choice. Was Jesus only a great moral teacher, or was he also true God? On this question, a prominent defender of Christianity in the 1900s wrote: "Anyone who was only a man and said the things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would be either a lunatic or else the very devil of hell. You must make a choice. Either the man is the Son of God or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, kill him as a demon, or fall at his feet and call him Lord and God" (*Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis) There is no middle ground. In Jesus' own declaration: "He who is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30, Luke 11:23).

The chapter's most familiar passage radiates at its center. There Jesus promises that all who hold to

his teaching are his disciples indeed, who as his disciples will know the truth, and this truth will set them free (8:31,32). Holding to his teaching means making it one's natural element as water is the natural element for fish. Then, by living in Jesus and clinging to his Word, the big questions of life are resolved: who are we, why are we here, why the passage of time, and where is it going? The truth about these questions is found in Jesus, and possession of this truth brings freedom from doubt and slavish fear, the freedom of a good conscience, of loving obedience, of joy, peace, and security.

For judgment I have come into this world (9:1-41)

By design rather than coincidence, the blind man's healing follows Jesus' testimony that he is the light of the world. The occasion and manner of healing are again

noteworthy. It happens on a Sabbath, and Jesus does tradition-prohibited work. He makes mud plasters to accompany the healing.

The rest of the story is another study in contrasts. First comes the courageous testimony of the healed man growing slowly wise. Then, the parents play it safe by not taking sides. Finally, the Pharisees, presumptive experts on fine points of the law and Sabbath rest, by their resistance to Jesus, grow slowly more blind.

Thus the words and works of Jesus constantly challenge people to see him as he is. With Jesus, the man healed of blindness comes to the light. Opposed to Jesus, the healed man's accusers sink more deeply into darkness.



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

WANT TO READ MORE ABOUT THE GOSPEL OF JOHN?

Check out these resources from Northwestern Publishing House:

- *The Gospels* (#15N0363) by Joh. Ylvisaker. A synoptic presentation of the text in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
- *John* (#15N0659) by FIC editor, Gary Baumler. From the People's Bible series.

- *Jesus' I Am statements* (#22N0890) by John Vieths. A Bible study kit that examines the "I Am" statements used by Jesus in the Gospel of John.

To order, call Northwestern Publishing House, 800-662-6022 (Milwaukee area, 414/475-6600). Or order on-line at <www.nph.net>.

An eight-foot Christmas tree, a muddy van, and a frustrated husband taught me a lesson about the dangers of artificiality.



An artificial Christmas

Linette Scharlemann

I've always thought of myself as a real person, down to earth, what you see is what you get. I'm definitely turned off by artificiality. No silk flowers or plastic fruit for me. And I would never have considered putting up an artificial Christmas tree—at least not until five years ago.

What happened that December is not something I'm proud of. What should have been a simple trip to pick up the Christmas tree turned into a much-needed reality check.

It all began in August 1998 when my husband, our four kids, and I moved from a run-down starter home to a large, modern home on the other side of town.

As we proudly showed off our new house, the question often came up: "Where are you going to put your Christmas tree?"

The previous owners, who happen to be close friends of ours, had the most awesome Christmas tree. Each year a specially ordered 10-foot fir

was delivered to their home. It was so tall it had to be anchored with fishing line from the second story balcony.

"I'm thinking of putting ours there," I'd reply, pointing to the other side of the room. "In front of the window."

Yes. I had thought about it. I had thought about it a lot. We would get a Scotch Pine, not a spindly fir, a true green tree. We'd fill it with colored lights and put it right up to the window for all the neighbors to see. It wouldn't be just like our

friends' old Christmas tree. It would be better!

Finally, December arrived. I chose a warm and sunny Saturday for the task. My husband, being the neat freak he is, insisted I bring along some old blankets to lay in the back of the van. He also helped remove the back seat, before warning the kids one last time not to step in any mud puddles.

The trip out to our local tree farm was as pleasant as always. We sang Christmas carols and enjoyed the scenery as we drove along. As soon as we stepped out of the van we were greeted by the unmistakable smell of pine. "Come on, kids!" I called. "Let's go pick a tree."

I must have looked at every tree they had, both in the warehouse and out in the fields, before I found the one I wanted. It was an eight-foot Scotch pine, perfectly shaped, and fuller than any other Christmas tree I had ever seen. It stood out in the middle of a field of pines, where it had grown, year after year, just waiting for me to come along and call it my own. I knelt down on the soggy ground and began sawing with great enthusiasm.

That lasted about one minute.

It wasn't until I had already cut into the bark that I noticed the incredible width of the trunk. This was going to take a while.

Meanwhile, the kids wandered here and there, their shoes getting more and more caked with mud. When my oldest boy asked if he could give it a try, I was only too happy to take a break. As I watched my son struggle with the chore, I realized it was time to seek help. I went to the office and returned with a large man carrying a heavy chain saw. Now we'd get moving!

One yank on the starter chain and a swipe later, my beautiful tree fell to

the ground. "Don't let it get muddy," I cried, picturing my husband's face when he saw what I intended to bring into our living room.

I'm not sure how the enormous tree and my four kids all fit into the van, but they did. As we made our way home I tried to focus on the positive. "Didn't we get a nice tree?" I said cheerfully.

"I'm smooshed," my daughter whined.

"We'll be home in five minutes," I told her, but I was feeling a little uncomfortable myself. I couldn't help but wonder what my husband would say when we got home. I soon found out.

He took one look at our mud-caked shoes, another at the soiled interior of the van, and announced, "We're not putting up that tree until I get this mess cleaned up."

For the next five hours my husband only glared at me, as he scrubbed every inch of our vehicle with frightening resolve. It was dark before he got out the tree stand and called me into the garage.

By this time I had gone through every emotion, from frustration to anger to shame. I comforted myself with the belief that once he saw that beautiful tree standing in the front window he would appreciate, or at least tolerate, all the fuss and bother I had caused.

My husband took the tree by the limbs and told me to grab the trunk. I couldn't believe the size of it. Together we lugged the monster around to the front door. Then the worst thing happened. We lifted the tree up the front steps into the doorway, where it became jammed. It didn't fit.

I was about ready to cry. My husband grabbed the top of the tree and

yanked it back outside. Needles flew everywhere. A minute later I heard the anguished sound of a saw coming from the garage. There went my beautiful Christmas tree.

It took several trimmings before the tree was small enough to get through the door and the trunk was narrow enough to fit into our tree stand. At least half of the tree ended up on the garage floor.

That evening as I hung the lights on our pretty four-and-a-half-foot tree I realized how artificial I had been. I didn't pick this tree to celebrate our Savior's birth. I picked it to show off. I wanted to impress our friends and neighbors with the perfect Christmas tree.

But, the real truth is, it was our imperfection that caused God the Father to send us his Son. It is his perfection I should have been focusing on: the perfect love God displayed in giving us his Son to be our Savior from sin.

The following year we decided to buy an artificial tree. It has the words "Made in China" on the box. Assembly is quite simple. It involves matching the color-coded branches to their appropriate slots.

It has taken me a while, but I can honestly say I love our funny-looking plastic tree. It's not much of a status symbol, but it never should have been in the first place. I now see our Christmas tree as both a reminder of the dangers of artificiality and also as a symbol of God's love: perfect, beautiful, and totally real.



Linette Scharlemann is a member at St. John, Sleepy Eye, Minnesota.

WHATEVER

The barrier

Love is needed to break down the barriers of racism that mankind has built up.

Rachel Dahm

It was a cold, rainy night. I was with my three best friends underneath the ceiling of the plaza, having the time of my life. We were laughing, talking, and just being goofy. I never realized that something so seemingly harmless could bring so much pain. We weren't breaking any laws. We weren't disturbing anyone. But we had made someone suspicious.

There we were, two girls and two guys sitting on a bench with nothing to do. A lady walked by us in her security guard uniform and glanced our way. I thought nothing of it. Two minutes later, she was back. This time she looked at us with concern in her eyes.

I realized something was wrong. I began to worry until I saw my friends' smiling faces. I relaxed, but the image of her face continued to crawl through my mind. The four of us acted as if nothing had happened, and we continued talking.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw her coming. She was strolling nonchalantly, but her piercing eyes were fixed on our group. This time she stopped. She looked straight at the other girl and me. She asked us if we were all right and if we needed any help. Then she shifted her gaze toward the guys.

To my friend and me, these two boys were nothing but loving and caring friends. To this woman, they appeared threatening and dangerous. My friend and I exchanged a frantic glance and then turned back to the woman. We assured her that we were fine and that there was nothing to worry about. She stared back with a doubtful expression and then walked away.

We waited until she was far enough away and then began to cry. The secret was in the two boys. They were black. Not only that, but they were with two white girls. At that moment, I realized what it felt like to be discriminated against because of my color. She had no

right to judge us because we were white and they were black. As the tears rolled down my face, the only question I could ask was, "Why?" Why was it so wrong to be with people of another race? Aren't all beings the same no matter what race they are?

In my naive mind, I believed that racism no longer existed. I believed that the public would be fine with white and black people intermixing. I thought that our land of freedoms and choices had abolished slavery, integrated schools, and given equal rights to all nationalities. Since this is all true, why is it so wrong? God created humans equal to each other. He never said we should be separate because of the color of our skin.

One of the boys told us not to cry. He knew how it felt because it happened to him all the time. He said that he had grown used to it, and now it didn't bother him. But it only made me angry to hear that they had to live with this in their normal lives. The sad thing was that it bothered me more than him because he was accustomed to this treatment.

Through this experience, I have learned that racism lives everywhere—even though I would like to ignore that it does. The people I so readily accept into my heart do not always receive the same welcome. God created us to be equal, but as sinners we cannot perfectly treat each other this way. I have found that love is needed to break down the barriers of racism that mankind has built up. I love and treasure these two friends more than ever. I will never forget the lessons I learned because of them.

Rachel Dahm, a member at Word of Life, Appleton, Wisconsin, is a freshman at the University of Wisconsin—La Crosse.



Getting to know God's story

Randy K. Hunter

When you attend a stage play and the curtain comes down between scenes, you remain in your seat. You know something is happening, even if you can't see it. Stagehands shuffle furniture, set new backdrops, and position props while actors change costumes. It doesn't take long; the activities are carefully planned. When the time is right, the director gives the cue and the curtain is raised. Show time!

Four hundred years had passed since the Lord had promised through the last Old Testament prophet, "Surely the day is coming . . . I will send you the prophet Elijah

before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes" (Malachi 4:1-5). For four centuries the Lord had been getting things ready: political things, cultural things, spiritual things. Then an angel came to Mary and Joseph and announced, "Show time!" The curtain was raised, and God revealed more about his love than ever before.

Although Scripture is silent during those four centuries, God was neither silent nor inactive. We can see his work in the faithfulness of the people and the setting of the world stage.

- Alexander the Great is, arguably, the most famous secular figure in history. Three centuries before the birth of Jesus, he unified the world in a way no one else ever had. He did it by forcing Greek culture, language, and gods on the world. At the same time, there was a rise in interest in astrology. The Roman dynasty followed and added roads and a forced "peace" around the world. Explain how each of these circumstances helped set the stage for the birth of Jesus and the spread of the gospel.
- List the things you learn about Greek culture in Jesus' day from the following passages: Acts 17:22,23 (Paul in Athens); Acts 19:17-20 (Paul in Ephesus); 1 Corinthians 1:22 (Paul in Corinth); 1 Corinthians 5:1,2 (Paul in Corinth). Compare their culture to our own.
- As many as 18 books called the Apocrypha were written during the 400 years between Malachi and Christ. The Jews never considered them part of the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus never quoted them or recognized them. The early Christian church never considered them part of their Bible. In addition, some of them contradicted what God has clearly inspired in the books of the Bible. Evaluate this quote from one of the apocryphal books: 2 Maccabees 12:43-45—"He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin."
- Agree on a list of the top 10 miracles in the Bible. Try to have five from the Old Testament and five from the New Testament. Now rank your "top ten" list (Letterman style). Be able to defend your order.

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

Find this article and possible answers on-line. Go to <www.wels.net/sab/frm-nl.html> and click on "current issue." Then click on "Getting to know God's story." Answers will be available after Dec. 5.

Creation &
promise

Patriarchs

Freedom
from
captivity

Wandering

Promised
Land

Kings

Major
prophets 1

Major
prophets 2

Minor
prophets

Returning
home

Wisdom
books

Preparation
for the
coming
Messiah

Church flooded by record-breaking rainfall

The two pastors and many members from Divine Savior, Indianapolis, Ind., came home from the church's Labor Day retreat to a surprise—their recently-renovated church sanctuary, fellowship hall, seven classrooms, and other meetings rooms were flooded by 10 inches of water.

A sewer system near the church was not able to handle the over 7.2 inches of rain that had fallen in Indianapolis, causing water to back up and flood the church and school. A house that the church provides for its principal also was flooded.

"It was unbelievable," says James Schulz, one of Divine Savior's pastors. "It was like walking the hallways of a sinking ship. Water was knee-deep where people usually pray."

But members didn't forget what they had learned at the retreat. Wading through the sometimes waist-deep water in the parking lot, they changed

the church sign to reflect the retreat's theme: "Rejoice in the Lord always."

They also met the following Sunday—in the church sanctuary—to rejoice.

"We really are blessed," says Bryan Schwarz, Divine Savior's other pastor. "God in his grace will help us restore what we lost. People are stepping up and helping out."

Restoration work moved quickly after the flooding and is now nearly complete. Not only did the congregation soon begin worshiping in the sanctuary, but elementary school classes resumed within two weeks after the flood.

None of the damage is covered by the church's insurance policy because the church does not qualify for flood insurance. Cost of restoration totals



A rainstorm caused severe flooding at Divine Savior, Indianapolis, Ind.

more than \$120,000. The WELS Committee on Relief has given \$70,000 in aid to the congregation.

Donations to aid this or other disasters can be sent to WELS Committee on Relief, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222.

Slowly but surely

"Slowly, slowly, the world turns."

Sometimes things must move slowly to fully develop and to be truly effective, according to this Swahilian saying. Jason Paltzer is learning that lesson as he works in Zambia as the Health Education and Outreach Coordinator for the Central Africa Medical Mission (CAMM), a non-budgetary humanitarian effort under the Board for World Missions. Paltzer, a layman with a Master's in Public Health degree in community health education, arrived in Zambia in July.

The goal of the Health Education and Outreach program, which was developed in 1998, is to help train members from each congregation of the Lutheran Church of Central Africa to be health educators so they can spread the word about disease prevention. Paltzer, the first male and non-nurse worker for CAMM, is expanding the program into more congregations so he can help a wider range of children and adults.

Progress is slow for this CAMM program. Says Paltzer, "It is difficult to establish credibility with a group when all you do is educate about prevention. Just like back in the States, people here like to get a simple pill or two and be fixed. Prevention is not a glorious thing." Yet it is a necessary thing, especially when 20 to 25 percent of Zambians between the ages of 13 and 55 are HIV-positive.

While this program seems to stress helping with physical needs, the underlying goal is to help keep Zambians close to their Savior. "Many of the ailments and sufferings that are happening here are because of a lifestyle that is out of sync with the one God has created us to live," says Paltzer. "Thus first and foremost is always having the ultimate goal of instilling a God-fearing faith in our friend and Savior, Jesus."

Paltzer himself is growing in his faith. "In the bush, poverty is



Jason Paltzer (right) visiting the Makindu Children's Center. As part of his Master's project, Paltzer volunteered for three months in 2002 at this community-based center. This helped prepare him for his present work with the Central Africa Medical Mission.

poverty," he says. "Living in such a place helps you realize what true contentment is, what it means to appreciate the day for what it is, and what it means to be able to wake up and breathe each morning. It teaches a person how to rely on God and his love."

From Japan to the United States— and back

One Saturday in November 2000, Teruo Tomizawa stopped at the church office to ask about the time of Sunday worship. After he left I thought to myself, “I’ll never see this man again; he will find where Japanese Christians are worshipping and take his family there.”

The next day, Mr. Tomizawa (Tomi); his wife, Yukiko; and two sons, Hikaru and Makoto, worshiped with me at Atonement, Plano, Texas. They returned the next Sunday. . . and the next!

Texas Instruments, Asia, brought the Tomizawa family to the United States to work. The Lord brought them to Atonement to worship. But that’s only the beginning of the story.

The Tomizawas were disappointed that their boys were not learning to speak English. So in March 2001, Yukiko joined the crew of carpooling moms who made the daily 40-mile round trip journey to our sister church’s school in Dallas. Hikaru (6th grade) and Makoto (4th grade) spoke only Japanese but were allowed to audit classes for the rest of the school year to be immersed in English. It didn’t

take long before they were correcting their parents’ English grammar. By the time the 2001-‘02 school year rolled around, they were full-time, English-speaking students.

At the same time, Tomi and Yukiko were taking the Bible Information Class, and the boys were taking catechism class. On Sundays the entire family attended worship and Bible class.

The Tomizawas had hoped to spend the rest of their lives in the United States. But in summer 2002, Tomi’s job required that he return to his homeland. The Lord had other plans for the Tomizawas—in Japan.

Hikaru and Makoto were able to attend Nozomi Lutheran School in Tsuchiura City, the school for children of our Japan missionaries who are taught by a WELS teacher. The church in Tsuchiura City is now the spiritual home of the Tomizawas. But in order to have the boys in school there, Tomi rides the train for two hours, one way, every day, to his job in Tokyo.

And there’s more to this story. Summer 2003 saw the Tomizawas back in the United States—to enroll Hikaru at Luther Preparatory School in Watertown, Wis., to begin preparing for the preaching ministry.

Only the Lord in his wisdom could have written a story like this. Only the Lord in his compassion for a sinful world could have written the story of salvation through the unconditional love and perfect life of Jesus, Savior of “. . . every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9).

William Gabb

Adventures of a church secretary

What is it like to be a church secretary? Virginia Florey, secretary to Michigan District President John Seifert and Pastor Thomas Ehnert at Good Shepherd, Midland, Mich., explains.

What does a church secretary do all day? Everything! Keeping up with 372 members in the church, 41 children in our elementary school, and 18 children in our preschool, I manage to fill my time quite nicely, thank you.

Having a growing school and preschool adds to the phone calls and paperwork. Buses have to be cancelled. Medicine given at certain times. Field trips taken. The cradle roll kept up to date. Assorted bumps and bruises bandaged. But the children survive, and so do I.

Then there are the things that are actual “church” duties. The bulletin, the monthly newsletter, letters to members who have fallen away, welcoming new members, weddings, funerals, meetings, and Bible class. Making things seem effortless takes a lot of work.

And then there are the unexpected moments in a day’s work, like when five-year-old Liam Pretzer missed his ride and had to wait in the office for his dad to pick him up. It was a particularly busy time, and papers and reports were everywhere, including the only chair in the room for Liam to sit in.

As I removed the huge pile of papers from the chair, he asked what they were. I said they were Pastor Seifert’s papers. He asked why there were so many, and I said, “Because Pastor is the president.” Liam looked at me for about 10 seconds and then very seriously asked, “When did George Washington die?”

One never knows when a college education is going to come in handy as a church secretary!



(From left) Teruo, Hikaru, and Yukiko Tomizawa traveled from Tsuchiura City, Japan, to Watertown, Wis., this fall to enroll Hikaru in Luther Preparatory School’s pastoral track.

WELS news briefs

These updates are from the office of the synod administration building. You can contact these offices and administrators at 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398.

Commission on Parish Schools 414/256-3220

SKool-Aid, a school administration software designed for WELS schools by principals and lay leaders in the South Central District, is now available. This software has three modules for recording and tracking information: administration, finance, and gradebook. For more information, go to <www.wels.net>, jump word "skoolaid." To order, go to <www.shopwels.net> or call 1-800-662-6022.

Commission on Youth Discipleship 414/256-3224

LivingBold, a teen Web site with the goal of helping teens grow in their relationship with Jesus and each other, has a new look. Check

it out at <www.livingbold.net>. Many of the new features were the result of input from WELS teens.

Board for Ministerial Education 414/256-3236

Enrollments for our four ministerial education schools are in. The four ministerial education schools include Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis., and Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich. (high schools that prepare students for full-time church work); Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. (college that trains teachers and prepares men for the seminary); and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon (seminary that trains pastors).

	2003-04	2002-03	2001-02
WLS	185	182	165
MLC	1,031*	1,054	1,044
LPS	482	525	561
MLS	315	345	355
Total	2,013	2,106	2,125

*231 in pastor track

Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., is now offering on-line the six religion courses required for WELS teachers seeking synodical certification. Two of these semester-long classes will be offered starting Jan. 6; four more will be offered on-line over the next year and a half. The remaining courses needed for certification must be taken on campus or in other face-to-face settings.

"These on-line courses will offer students a new dimension of interactivity both with the professor and other students," says Prof. John Paulsen, director of Special Services. This will be accomplished through on-line discussion boards. Eventually these on-line courses will replace the correspondence courses.

The Tel/Tech Task Force II and MLC provided funding for course development and instructor training. For more information, go to <www.mlc-wels.edu/specialservices>.

Children bringing hope to the captive

*To whom it may concern:
When I received this lesson in the mail, I received an unexpected blessing. Along with the lesson was a handmade card from a child named Rachel. It was a beautiful card that warmed and filled my heart with joy. . . .*

—Tim, an inmate

For the past two years, WELS children have shared their faith in a unique way—through WELS prison ministry.

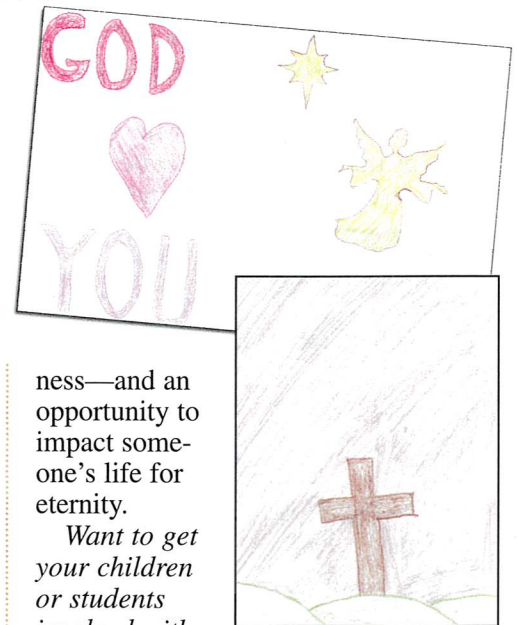
According to prison ministry administrator David Nack, up to 700 inmates from institutions throughout the country request Bibles or Bible studies every week. When responding to the requests, ministry volunteers often include children's cards or bookmarks in the packages—cards with news of God's love for us.

Inmates frequently send artwork or letters of thanks in response to the children's messages. One pris-

oner writes, "Please tell Melissa I said thank you. I will treasure this bookmark for the rest of my life." Another notes, "I hung both the bookmark and card on my cell wall. I feel so blessed. What joy you brought to me!"

The program is beneficial to not only the inmates, but also to the children who participate. Marlene Hopmann, first grade teacher at St. Paul, New Ulm, Minn., remarks, "The kids were very excited and wanted to do more. It helped them to realize that simple things can help spread God's Word."

Over 1,500 volunteers make WELS prison ministry a success—from children who create cards to adults who correct tests and write letters. Nack strongly encourages "schools, Sunday schools, vacation Bible schools, anybody to make cards and bookmarks." It's an easy way for children to wit-



ness—and an opportunity to impact someone's life for eternity.

Want to get your children or students involved with WELS prison ministry? Contact David Nack at 507/354-3130 or e-mail <welspm@newulmtel.net>.

Elizabeth Hudock

On July 12, the *Post-Crescent* of Appleton, Wis., reported that 22-year-old **Casey Holtz** rescued a drowning boy who had been swept off a sandbar and captured in a strong undertow. Holtz, a 1999 graduate of Fox Valley Lutheran High School, Appleton, struggled to reach the shore, but “I asked the Lord to give me one more step so we both could get to shore safely,” says Holtz. “The Lord was there. He gave me strength.”

Mikkel Broas, a member at Bethany, Gibsonia, Penn., made the news and received a distinguished community service award after trying to stop a shoplifter at a K-Mart on Aug. 10. The *Post-Gazette* of Pittsburgh, Penn., reported that 30-year-old Broas noticed the suspect getting into his car, so he “opened the passenger-side door and started to pull out some of the stolen merchandise. The suspect took off, dragging Broas and causing abrasions to his left arm and leg.”

A Sept. 23 *Washington Post* article on school vouchers, “For Vouchers, a Mixed Report Card,” featured the success story of **St. Marcus Lutheran School, Milwaukee**. Over the past two years, St. Marcus has expanded from 110 to 250 students, mostly because of the school voucher system in place in Milwaukee.



“Many parents say [St. Marcus] is safer and more disciplined than the local public schools, and offers a more rigorous education,” reported *Washington Post* staff writer Michael Dobbs. As shown here, students at St. Marcus Lutheran School, Milwaukee, are required to wear a uniform of blue pants or skirt, blue blazer, white shirt, and tie.

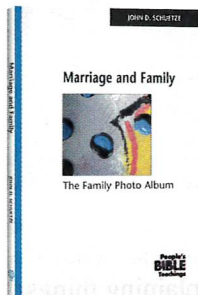


Booknook

A look at new books published by Northwestern Publishing House. For more information, visit <www.nph.net> or call 1-800-662-6022.



Family life today



\$12.99

For many of us, our family is the topic of the day, every day! Relationships make up a major part of our life, and it only makes sense to turn to God for the answers to our difficult family questions. John Schuetz

helps us do just that in *Marriage and Family—The Family Photo Album*.

Schuetz provides a good review of what is covered in catechism class about being single, what it means to be engaged, and what blessings God gives us in his institution of marriage. This is a nice refresher for those of us who sometimes forget that the kids who keep us up at night and destroy

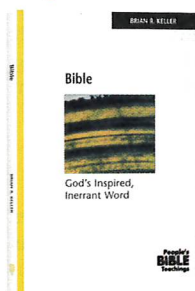
our houses during the day are indeed a blessing!

The strongest section of this book is its coverage of difficult relational topics: divorce, split family arrangements, and remarriage. Schuetz does an excellent job using Scripture to reveal what God says about these situations. Whether you are involved in such circumstances or providing Christian advice, this book will be helpful.

Schuetz also addresses what is wrong with the modern-day “alternative” lifestyles, such as living together and homosexual relations. His ability to show how to use the gospel to lead people away from these sins, modeled after methods used by Jesus, is enlightening and powerful.

Nathan Torgerson
Holy Trinity, New Hope, Minnesota

A passion for Scripture



\$13.99

Brian Keller weaves the information one might expect in a reference handbook into a narrative laced with his passion for Scripture in *Bible* from the People's Bible Teachings series.

Keller begins with what the Bible says about itself. He contrasts that internal testimony with modern errors about the Bible.

A chapter on why God gave us the Bible lets Keller expound on a recurring theme—that the Scriptures are all about Jesus and our salvation. Keller wears his heart on his pen as he offers a frequent admonition: “There is no substitute for knowing the truth from the Bible for yourself! So read the Bible. Learn the Bible. Study the Bible.”

Thumbnail sketches of all the books of the Bible and a chronology of when they were written lead into a section on how these books came to be recognized as the single book that is God's Word, as well as how God preserved that Word through the centuries.

A chapter on translations offers guidance through the treacherous jungle of English versions available. The book ends with sound advice on how to read and understand the Bible, capped with excerpts from Psalm 119.

It's hardly possible for a book to cover “all about the Bible,” yet Keller wedges a large amount of information into 200 pages. He saturates the book with Scripture, including quotes or references from 60 of the 66 books of the Bible in 11 succinct chapters. His enthusiasm for his subject marks every page.

Jon Eiche
St. Paul, Muskego, Wisconsin

Discovering the eternal love of Christ

Fun and friendship. That's all Tonya Filz and Jeff Miles thought about when they met as seventh-graders at Madison Middle School in Appleton, Wis. However, as their friendship grew stronger, their discussions also turned to deeper things—spiritual matters.

When Filz discovered that Miles belonged to a family of non-practicing Catholics and he rarely went to church, she invited him to services at her congregation, Eternal Love, Appleton. Miles was a bit apprehensive at first. It took a couple of months for Filz to convince him to attend, but then the friendly and welcoming atmosphere at Eternal Love and the simplistic truths of God's Word left him hungering for more.



Jeff Miles was baptized in March after Tonya Filz shared her faith with him.

"Pastor Balza and Vicar Pfeifer are great teachers," says Miles. "They do an exquisite job of explaining things."

Miles was baptized in March 2003, a few weeks after he began attending church with the Filz family. He also

became a regular attendee of Sunday school and confirmation classes. Now a freshman in high school, he hopes to be confirmed in the spring of 2004.

The Filz family has "spiritually adopted" Miles, according to Pastor Robert Balza. They pick him up on Sundays for church and deliver him to catechism class every Wednesday. Miles ushers alongside father Tom Filz, and mother Lori listens to him recite memory work. "She's a great church mom!" Miles declares.

Tonya is delighted that her invitation led to Miles learning more about his Savior. "I felt like I really had a purpose," she says. "I was here for a reason—to help save his soul."

Elizabeth Hudock

District news

California

Members of Beautiful Saviour, Carlsbad, Calif., celebrated the 100th birthday of long-time member **Emma Betz** on Sept. 28. Fellow member Ray Miller wrote, "Emma's acts of service, atten-

dance in worship, attentive listening, active mind, and precious smile have been cherished by her congregation for 32 years."

Nebraska

Good Shepherd, Cheyenne, Wyo., opened the first WELS school in Wyoming this fall. **Little Lambs Child Development Center** has preschool for three- and four-year-olds and kindergarten. Current enrollment is 25.

North Atlantic

Eighteen students and five chaperones from **New England congregations** traveled to Apacheland in Bylas, Ariz., in July to help Pastor Dave Malchow and his staff provide vacation Bible school for area children.

The 32nd annual **North Atlantic Labor Day Retreat** was held at Camp Taconic in the Berkshire Mountains. One hundred seventy-nine members met for a weekend of fun, fellowship, worship, and learning, including 51 members from Sure Foundation in Queens, N.Y.

Our Savior, Springville, N.Y., began a new childhood ministry called "Hidden Treasures." This is a twice-a-month program for children ages one through four to attend with a caregiver. It includes age-appropriate Bible stories, crafts, coordinated play, and large

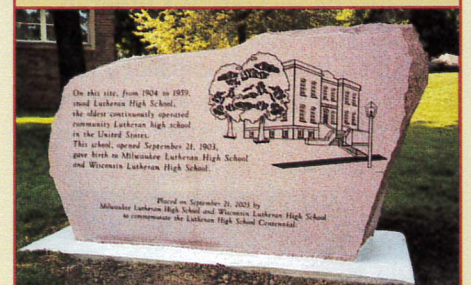
motor skill activities. Hidden Treasures is a complement to Our Savior's summer, Christmas, and Easter vacation Bible schools.

Western Wisconsin



Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills, Wis., dedicated its new addition/renovation project on Sept. 21. Seven of Lakeside's principals attended (from left): Timothy Matthies (2002-2003), Philip Strom (1970-1990), Robert Krueger (1967-1969), Jeffrey Davis (1995-2002), David Kuske (1969-1970), Lloyd Huebner (1958-1967), and James Grasby (2003).

Southeastern Wisconsin



Sept. 21 marked the culmination of a year-long celebration of the centennial year of Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee. A centennial band concert, open house, and banquet were held throughout the anniversary year. On Sept. 21, the city of Milwaukee placed a historical marker (pictured above) at the site of the original school. Eight hundred people then attended the anniversary worship service at the high school.

Reaching people where they're at



On-line communities are growing at breakneck speeds. From on-line dating to parenting chat groups, many people view the Internet as vital to life as their morning cup of coffee. So, it's no wonder that a growing number of people are turning to the Internet to receive religious information. In fact, more than 60,000 turn to the WELS Web site, <www.wels.net>, every month.

Those who now visit wels.net are seeing a different site than they had for the past couple of years. A major site redesign debuted on Sept. 15. More than just a redesign, though, the WELS Web staff also increased the site's functionality and reorganized the

site's content so that a casual browser can use the site much more easily.

Content is now organized into one of five categories—Faith, Community, FYI, Extras, and Shop. Each category includes drop-down menus with an array of choices. Looking for a devotion? Click into “Faith” and choose from one of six categories of devotions. Want to send a Christian e-card? Go to “Extras” and choose from over 100 designs that can be personalized in a variety of ways.

News groups, discussion groups, and on-line chats are available for those who want to go beyond receiving information and become part of the WELS Web site's community. Some groups require that you be a registered user

before you can access the information. To register, scroll to the bottom of <www.wels.net>, click on “Register,” and fill out the form that appears.

The WELS Web site also offers free e-mail accounts and a helpdesk for those who have questions as they navigate the site.

In September, 69,765 unique visitors entered the WELS Web site. Some clicked in and out. But others stayed and perused the Christian content or joined in a discussion or chat. With numbers like that, WELS is proving that Web surfers are interested in Bible-based content and that the WELS Web site is an important outreach tool for reaching people where they're at—on-line.

On Nov. 1, the **Hudson-Delaware Circuit** held its Reformation Festival Service.

Northern Wisconsin

On Nov. 2, **Winnebago Lutheran Academy, Fond du Lac, Wis.**, hosted an area Reformation service that included the dedication of the school's 2003 building project.

South Atlantic

Southern Lutheran Academy, Lakeland, Fla., voted to purchase Spurgeon Baptist Bible College's land, buildings, and furnishings for the school it plans to open in fall 2005. The WELS Church Extension Fund approved a loan to the academy to help pay for the purchase.

Southeastern Wisconsin

Johnny and Shirley Johnson are donating 61 acres of land near Columbus, Wis., to **Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service (WLCFS)** to build Oakbrook Meadows, a retreat and conference center. The site will primarily be used to host Christian leadership training and adult education programs offered by WLCFS. The focal point of the program will be strengthening people spiritually, socially, emotionally, mentally, and physically.

On Sept. 20, **St. Marcus Lutheran School, Milwaukee**, dedicated its new school building, followed by an open house with school tours, music, and entertainment. Principal Kole Kneuppel says, “The kids are thrilled to be in this

new, state-of-the-art facility. We look forward to the growth and learning that will be taking place inside these walls.”

Happy Anniversary!

NA—Divine Word, Nepean, Ontario, Canada, celebrated its 25th anniversary on Oct. 19.

NE—On Sept. 21, Immanuel, Hadar, Neb., celebrated its 120th anniversary. At the same time, Immanuel's school celebrated the 40th anniversary of its dedication.

Beautiful Savior, O'Neill, Neb., celebrated its 25th anniversary on Aug. 24.

MN—Nov. 6 was the 105th anniversary of the founding of **The Lutheran Home Association, Belle Plaine, Minn.**

On Sept. 19-21, **Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School, New Ulm, Minn.**, celebrated its 25th anniversary with sports activities, a banquet, and a special worship service.

SEW—On Oct. 26, St. James, Milwaukee, honored **Ralph Muenkel** for the 50 years he has served as organist and **Peter Kassulke** for the 25 years he has been in the pastoral ministry.

These pastors are the reporters for the districts featured this month: CA—Hermann John; MN—Jeffrey Bovee; NA—Harland Goetzinger; NE—Donald Wichmann; NW—Joel Lillo; SA—Chris Kruschel; SEW—Scott Oelhafen; WW—Martin Baur.

Northern Wisconsin

In 1995, Zion, Kiel, Wis., began having an annual German Christmas service. Laymember Ernst Gutschow helps write the German introduction and conclusion and selects the liturgy, readings, and hymns. The small, white, country church is holding its German service this year on Dec. 13. On display will be this banner, reading “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus” (Matthew 1:21).



Obituaries

Magdalene A. Pabst 1934-2003

Maggie Pabst was born Oct. 5, 1934, in Fond du Lac, Wis. She died Sept. 10, 2003, in Fond du Lac.

A graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she served at Trinity, Belle Plaine, Minn.; St. Paul, Fort Atkinson, Wis.; Siloah, Milwaukee, Wis.; Martin Luther, Neenah, Wis.; Trinity, Watertown, Wis.; and Redeemer, Fond du Lac, Wis.

She is survived by one aunt and several cousins.

Donald W. Grummert 1918-2003

Donald Grummert was born Oct. 11, 1918. He died Aug. 31, 2003, in St. Paul, Minn.

A 1943 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he served at St. Paul, Batesland, S.D.; Grace, Geneva, Neb.; Grace, Sioux City, Neb.; and St. John, Minneapolis, Minn.

He is survived by his wife, Norma; two children; three grandchildren; one brother; and one sister.



THROUGH MY BIBLE IN 3 YEARS

JANUARY 2004

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1. 1 John 1:1-2:2 | 17. Is. 51:17-52:12 |
| 2. 1 Jn. 2:3-27 | 18. Is. 52:13-53:12 |
| 3. 1 Jn. 2:28-3:10 | 19. Is. 54 |
| 4. 1 Jn. 3:11-4:6 | 20. Is. 55 |
| 5. 1 Jn. 4:7-5:3 | 21. Is. 56, 57 |
| 6. 1 Jn. 5:4-21 | 22. Is. 58 |
| 7. John 2 & 3 | 23. Is. 59 |
| 8. Isaiah 40 | 24. Is. 60 |
| 9. Is. 41 | 25. Is. 61:1-63:6 |
| 10. Is. 42:1-43:13 | 26. Is. 63:7-64:12 |
| 11. Is. 43:14-44:23 | 27. Is. 65 |
| 12. Is. 44:24-45:25 | 28. Is. 66 |
| 13. Is. 46, 47 | 29. Matthew 1 |
| 14. Is. 48 | 30. Matt. 2 |
| 15. Is. 49:1-50:3 | 31. Matt. 3 |
| 16. Is. 50:4-51:16 | |

World news

Lutheran churches, by the numbers—Both the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) reported a decline in membership in 2002.

The ELCA lost 61,871 members last year, leaving it with a total membership of 5,038,006. Fewer new members, people taken off membership rolls, and congregations that were disbanded or left the denomination caused the decrease.

The LCMS reported a total baptized membership of 2,512,714 in 2002, 27,331 fewer than in 2001. That decline is almost twice as much as the decline reported for 2001.

According to WELS 2002 *Statistical Report*, WELS has 403,345 baptized members, down 879 from 2001.

In short—

- Pope John Paul II marked the 25th anniversary of his election as bishop of Rome in October.

- The Episcopal Church, after much debate, recently approved its first openly gay bishop and recognized that some of its bishops permit same-sex blessings. Conservatives of this church body denounced this decision and asked leaders of the Anglican Communion—of which the Episcopal Church is the U.S. branch—to inter-vene. The Anglican Communion—which opposes gay ordination and same-sex blessing—did not discipline the Episcopal Church, but warned that these policies “threatened the unity of our own Communion.”

- The Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America decided at its biennial meeting in August to stick with its time line for considering sexuality matters, meaning the denomination will consider whether to bless same-sex unions when it meets in 2005. The assembly also defeated a resolution to suspend the denomination’s full communion relationship with the

Episcopal Church until after the decisions concerning sexuality are made.

Poll: People in their 20s less likely to attend church—Americans in their 20s are less likely to attend church or read the Bible than any other age group, according to a recent study by Barna Research Group.

Thirty-one percent of twentysomethings attend worship in a typical week, compared to 42 percent of those in their 30s and 49 percent of adults ages 40 and older. Church attendance bottoms out during the late 20s, when only 22 percent of those 25 to 29 attend.

Those in their 20s are also less likely to read their Bible. Only 30 percent of twentysomethings read the Bible in the past week, compared to 37 percent of those in their 30s, 44 percent of those in their 40s, 47 percent of those in their 50s, and 55 percent of those age 60 or over.

According to the study, however, those in their 20s are still spiritual. Eighty percent said that their religious faith is very important in their life, 57 percent claimed to have made a personal commitment to Jesus that is still important in their life, and 75 percent said they had prayed to God in the past week.

Data is based on nationwide telephone interviews of 14,091 adults conducted from January 2000 through May 2003, with a sampling error of plus or minus one percentage point at the 95 percent confidence level. A total of 2,660 adults ages 20 to 29 were interviewed, with a sampling error of plus or minus two percentage points.

[From “Twentysomethings Struggle to Find Their Place in Christian Churches,” Barna Research Group, Ltd., Ventura, Calif. <www.barna.org>; Sept. 24, 2003.]

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* magazine.

**CHANGES IN MINISTRY****Pastors**

Cole, Daniel L., to Immanuel & St. John, Neillsville, Wis.

Henrich, Mark W., to Atonement, Milwaukee

The synod administration building will be closed: Dec. 24 & 25 & Jan. 1, 2004. Callers may leave voice mail messages, 414/256-3888.

NOMINATIONS**President of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary**

The following have been nominated for the position of president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS), Mequon, Wis.:

- Forrest L. Bivens, Mequon, Wis.
- John A. Braun, Watertown, Wis.
- John M. Brenner, Mequon, Wis.
- John F. Brug, Mequon, Wis.
- Steven C. Degner, Santa Maria, Calif.
- Douglas J. Engelbrecht, Neenah, Wis.
- Richard L. Gurgel, Mequon, Wis.
- John P. Hartwig, Mequon, Wis.
- Roy G. Hoenecke, Wausau, Wis.
- Randy K. Hunter, Middleton, Wis.
- Paul E. Kelm, Brookfield, Wis.
- James F. Korthals, Mequon, Wis.
- John C. Lawrenz, Mequon, Wis.
- Paul N. Lemke, Ocala, Fla.
- Mark J. Lenz, New Ulm, Minn.
- Daniel P. Leyrer, Mequon, Wis.
- Oliver H. Lindholm, McFarland, Wis.
- James A. Mattek, Watertown, Wis.
- Wayne D. Mueller, Oconomowoc, Wis.
- Paul S. Naumann, Benton Harbor, Mich.
- James F. Pope, New Ulm, Minn.
- Mark G. Schroeder, Watertown, Wis.
- John D. Schuetze, Mequon, Wis.
- Glenn L. Schwanke, Houghton, Mich.
- Martin P. Spaude, Chandler, Ariz.
- James P. Tiefel, Mequon, Wis.
- Douglas P. Weiser, Bellevue, Wash.
- Paul O. Wendland, Mequon, Wis.
- James J. Westendorf, Mequon, Wis.
- Arno J. Wolfgramm, Milwaukee, Wis.
- Mark G. Zaring, Mequon, Wis.
- Paul E. Zell, Mequon, Wis.

The president serves as the chief executive officer of WLS. As such, he sets the tone for the institution. The seminary's governing board looks to the president to further the seminary's objective of preparing thoroughly trained candidates for the ministerium of WELS, graduates who are confessional in stance; evangelical in approach; mission-minded in spirit; culturally sensitive; appropriately flexible; and zealous both to nurture and to equip the saints. The board looks to the president to represent the seminary before the WELS constituency. Historically, the seminary president has taught a class or classes. The board desires that the new president do the same.

Those desiring to offer comments pertaining to any of the nominees are invited to submit them by no later than Dec. 31, 2003, to Pastor James Mattek, Trinity Lutheran Church, 604 S 5 St, Watertown WI 53094-4611; <trinitypastor@charter.net>. The call will be extended in the course of the board's Jan. 26-28, 2004, meeting.

COLLOQUY NOTICE

Donald J. Bren, Lewistown, Mont., formerly a pastor in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, has requested a colloquy for the purpose of serving in WELS' pastoral ministry. Correspondence related to this request should be addressed to Pastor Peter J. Naumann, President, Dakota-Montana District—WELS, 620 W 9 St, Mobridge, SD 57601-1622.

NOTICE FOR CONGREGATION TREASURERS

The cutoff date for Congregation Mission Offering (CMO) receipts in the synod's post office lock box is the last business day of each month. December 2003 offerings sent to our lock box will be credited as 2003 receipts through Friday, Jan. 9, 2004, 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.

Mark Meissner, director of finance

ANNIVERSARIES

Grant Park, Ill.—Our Redeemer (40). Dec. 7. Service time to be determined. Potluck to follow. Christopher Pratt, 815/465-6906.

COMING EVENTS**Christmas concerts—**

- Lutheran Chorale, Nov. 30, 3 & 7 PM. Atonement, Milwaukee. Mary Prange, 414/873-9105.
- Lakeshore Lutheran Chorale, Dec. 6, 7:30 PM. Grace, Manitowoc, Wis. Dec. 7, 4 & 7 PM. St. John, Two Rivers, Wis. M. Manthe, 920/684-7448.
- Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. Dec. 14, 3 PM.
- Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis. Dec. 14, 3 PM & Dec. 19, 10 AM.
- Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. Dec. 14, 3 & 7 PM.
- Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich. Dec. 19, 7 PM.

Living Nativity—St. Paul, Howards Grove, Wis. Dec. 5-7, 6-9 PM., every 20 minutes. 441 Millersville Ave. 920/565-3780.

Mid-year graduation—Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. Dec. 17, 9:30 AM.

WELS/ELS Ladies Retreat—Jan. 9-11, 2004. Montverde, Fla. Judy Becker, 941/355-6591.

WELS Seniors Rally—Michigan District. Jan. 16-17, 2004. Best Western Executive Plaza, Ann Arbor, Mich. Jerome Spaude, 989/799-3202.

School/gym dedication—Jan. 18, 2004. St. Paul, Beverly Hills, Fla. Service, 3 PM. Meal & program to follow. RSVP by Jan. 10, Shelia Poole, 352/489-3027.

Special Ministries in Lutheran Education Conference (SMILE III)—July 16-18, 2004. Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee. Bruce Cuppan, 920/922-8672.

AVAILABLE

Lowrery organ—Celebration model. Free for the cost of shipping or pick up from St. Paul, Howards Grove, Wis. Shirley Ausovich, 920/467-6609.

White metal sign—approximately five feet tall with metal letters and numbers. Free for the cost of pick up from St. Marcus, Milwaukee. 414/562-3369.

NEEDED

RV couple—for Camp Shiloh, Pittsburg, Texas. Twenty hours per week of light housekeeping and maintenance work. RV site provided. Dan Schmeling, 903/855-1800.

Artwork—Concordia teaching pictures. Old Testament sets 1 & 2 and New Testament set 2. Christopher Doerr, 920/324-8898.

Seminary pictures—in observance of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary's 75th anniversary. Pictures of seminary life will be used in an anniversary publication. Identify people and dates. Include your name and address with the pictures. Donated pictures will not be returned but placed in the archives. Pictures will be accepted until Feb. 15, 2004. Send to Leah Leyrer, 11831 N Seminary Dr, Mequon WI 53092.

SERVICE TIMES

Honolulu, Hawaii—Community, 4429 Malaai St. Sunday service, 10 AM. Charles Gumm, 808/422-2933.

Maui, Hawaii area—Hawaiian Canoe Club. Sunday service, 5:30 PM. Charles Gumm, 808/422-2933.

Columbia, Mo.—Grace, 4540 N Oakland Gravel Rd. Sunday service, 9:30 AM. Micah Ernst, 573/474-8755.

NAMES WANTED

Maui, Hawaii—Charles Gumm, 808/422-2933.

Sonora/Angels Camp/Copperopolis, Calif.—John W. Berg, 510/793-8628.

Columbia, Mo.—Micah Ernst, 573/489-0746.

Lake of the Ozarks/Osage Beach, Mo.—Micah Ernst, 573/498-3547.

To place an announcement, call
414/256-3210; FAX, 414/256-3862;

<BulletinBoard@sab.wels.net>. Deadline
is eight weeks before publication date.

**Don't save this magazine.
SHARE IT.**

Leave your copy of *Forward in Christ* magazine:

- In the gym
- At your doctor's office
- At the mall

Or leave your copy with a friend or neighbor. Better yet, get them a gift subscription so they can feed their souls every month.

Call Northwestern Publishing House today: 1-800-662-6093, ext. 8. Milwaukee, 414/615-5785. Order on-line <www.nph.net/periodicals>. Charge it—Discover, MasterCard, or Visa—or bill it.

LIFE IN THE SONLIGHT: signed, sealed, and delivered

“For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. . . . He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”

Jon D. Buchholz

Dad promised to take the kids to the park, but a last-minute phone call got in the way. Promise broken!

The couple promised to be faithful for a lifetime, but things just didn't work out. Promise broken!

The confirmand promised to suffer anything, even death, rather than fall away from Jesus, but devotion to Christ took a back seat to worldly concerns. Promise broken!

That's the story of the human tragedy: Shattered promises, failed commitments, downright dishonest dealings, or just good intentions gone bad—it makes no difference. It's still a false hope. It makes you wonder what a promise is worth. On sinful lips, a promise might not mean much at all.

God always keeps his promises

It's a good thing that God doesn't take his promises to us so lightly.

“I the LORD do not change,” God tells us (Malachi 3:6). “It is impossible for God to lie” (Hebrews 6:18), Scripture promises us. When God makes a covenant, it is a done deal. When God makes a promise, it is as good as complete.

God has made some wonderful promises to you, promises that will never change. He says to you, his

dear child, “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3). “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1).

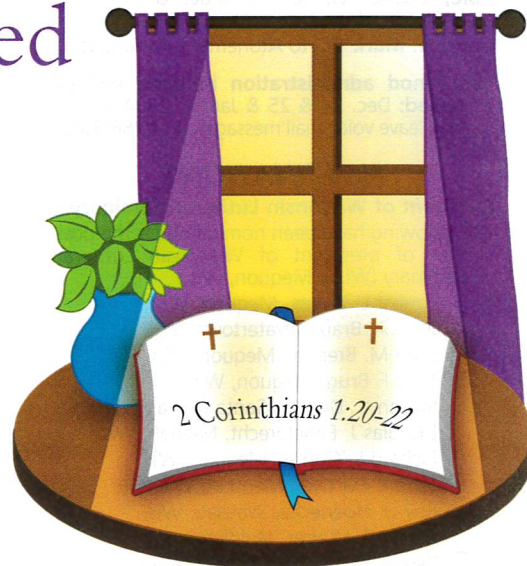
He promises you with unfailing certainty, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). The gentle Shepherd's voice stills our doubts, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28).

In the toughest, darkest times of our lives, our Redeemer's promise abides unchanging: “Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38,39).

His promises are signed in blood and sealed with the Spirit

But how can we be sure? What makes these promises any different from the useless words and empty promises that swirl around us every day? How do we know we're not being sold a flawed bill of goods?

The answer is simple. These promises are signed in blood and sealed with the Spirit.



These promises are signed in the blood of the Lamb, the blood of the eternal covenant. It's the blood of God's own Son, spilled from the cross for sinners. It's the blood that has already been shed, the price that has already been paid, the salvation that has already been secured, the heaven that has already been opened. “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ.”

These promises are sealed to us with a special gift: God's own Spirit, given to us as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. It's the Holy Spirit who convinces us of God's forgiveness and gives us the certainty of salvation. When you were baptized and God's Spirit brought you from death to life, God not only whispered his love in your ear and took you up in his arms. He did much more. He gave you of himself, his own Spirit to cherish and keep you.

God's love in Christ: signed, sealed, and delivered. That's life in the Sonlight!

Jon Buchholz is pastor at Holy Trinity, Des Moines, Washington.

Amazing grace

Fifty years ago, as an 11-year-old boy, I was amazed that we, as members of WELS, would soon have the privilege to proclaim God's grace thousands of miles away in Central Africa.

At the time my father was chairman of the General Board for Missions of the Wisconsin Synod. There was no distinction then between world and home missions. The records of all the synodical mission work we were doing filled one large drawer of my father's office desk.

It seems amazing now when we are privileged to do so much more. But to a boy of 11, it seemed amazing then that we would be doing mission work on our own in Central Africa. But parked in our driveway was tangible proof of it—a Chevrolet Suburban purchased from Schroeder Motors in Caledonia, Minn., where my father was pastor. Before it was shipped to Africa, my brothers and I would have a ride in it. Amazing to think that the next people to ride in it would be African missionaries and the people they would be serving.

Today one Chevrolet Suburban isn't going to do it. More than 50,000 people are in the Lutheran Church of Central Africa. But why should it seem amazing that the seed of the Word, like a mustard seed planted with the Spirit's blessing in African soil, should have grown to be such a large plant? Didn't we expect it? Don't we believe there's power, the Spirit's power, in the Word? Why should it seem amazing grace that now more than 50,000 souls are in our mission churches in Malawi and Zambia?

Even though we believe the blessing promised with the preaching of God's Word, it still is *chikondi chodabwitsa*, amazing grace (in the African Chewa language). That grace is nowhere more amazing than when we see it directly in the gift of God's Son at Christmastime.

Amazing could have been the only word for it when the calm Judean evening was interrupted with an awesome, heavenly display. One angel speaking, multitudes of the heavenly host singing: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace" (Luke 2:14). What the many angels celebrated, the one angel confirmed as to how amazing this revelation was: "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

Every birth of a child is amazing. But this is amazing grace: God's Son, come in our flesh and blood, has redeemed lost mankind and bestowed the pardoning grace of God upon us—the unworthy children of men.

Chikondi chodabwitsa, amazing grace. Whether in Africa or America, to rich or poor, to black or white, for young or old, a Savior is given. This one gift of grace just keeps right on granting grace far and wide. Just look at what it has done in the 50 years that we have been in Central Africa. Then be amazed still more that through our lips, just like the angels' lips, God proclaims and provides his amazing grace to others.

Chikondi chodabwitsa—just another way of saying "Merry Christmas."



Karl R. Gurgel is the president of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

**Chikondi
chodabwitsa,
amazing grace.
Whether in
Africa or
America, to
rich or poor,
to black or
white, for
young or
old, a Savior
is given.**

IN THE CROSS HAIRS

Richard L. Gurgel

TOPIC: DECISION THEOLOGY

Question: If a person doesn't "make a decision" to receive Christ, how does he know that he truly has faith?

Answer: Possessing saving faith is certainly important. It's the vital link between Jesus' cross and us. But it's not the strength of my conviction that I am a believer that saves me. Otherwise, "faith" subtly shifts from faith in Christ to faith in faith itself.

One reason decision theology appeals to human reason is that it seems to give me opportunity to be "sure" I'm a Christian. Such teaching reasons, "If I'm able to point to the moment of my decision, surely I must be a Christian."

Yet, in addition to other scriptural problems with decision theology (see "In the cross hairs," April), it fails to solve this difficulty. No matter how sure a Christian may be that in the past he had faith, that certainty can evaporate in a moment's notice.

A wise theologian once remarked, "The hardest thing for a Christian to believe is that he believes." So often when I go looking for my faith, its littleness depresses me—if I think I find it at all! So often my doubts seem ready to overwhelm my faith. It's not surprising that five times in Matthew Jesus speaks words like these in his disciples' presence: "O you of little faith" (Matthew 6:30).

All that is true because my inborn, unbelieving heart still clings to me. This side of heaven, Jeremiah's words remain forever true: "The heart is deceitful above all things. . . . Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

God certainly gives us days of confidence. On those days the spirit he created within us at baptism powerfully gives its assent to the Spirit's testimony in the gospel. That's what Paul describes in Romans 8:16: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

God's saving love knows no measure. That saving love remains constant whether my faith is weak or strong.

Yet have you noticed how rarely Scripture sends us looking for our faith? Far more frequently Scripture sends us looking for our Savior. Hebrew's inspired author was absolutely right when he urged us to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (12:2).

When I look within, I may often despair at the weakness of my faith. The answer isn't to point to some alleged "decision" that I made at some moment of my life. Besides being bad theology about conversion, it still leaves me stranded on the shifting sandbar of my human heart.

But when I look out to the cross, there is certainty. It is the certainty of God's promise that Jesus is not just the atoning sacrifice for a few sins of a few sinners. He is the final answer for all sins of all sinners (1 John 2:2). Whenever I look out to Jesus' cross and empty tomb, the gospel's power is at work. Through that gospel in Word and sacraments, Jesus sends the same Spirit who created our faith to sustain our faith until heaven.

I can drive myself to despair by wondering if I "truly have faith." But then I am acting as if what saves me is faith in my faith. How much better to "fix our eyes on Jesus." There we find that God's saving love knows no measure (Ephesians 3:18). That saving love remains constant whether my faith is weak or strong.

Looking inside for faith often triggers nothing but greater doubts. But a steady surveying of Jesus' wondrous cross quiets our doubts and strengthens our faith.

Richard Gurgel is a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin.

Have a question you want answered? Send it to 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222; <fic@sab.wels.net>. Look on-line at <www.wels.net/sab/qa.html> for more questions and answers.

History of a HYMN

Ever wonder about the people who wrote the words to hymns in *Christian Worship*? Cecil Frances Alexander wrote the words to "Once in Royal David's City," one of my favorite Christmas hymns.

Born in 1819, she excelled in writing verses for children, designing many of her poems and hymns to explain the basic doctrines of Christianity. Why did she design her verses that way? Apparently she overheard her godchildren discussing how dreary the catechism seemed to them. This motivated her to write in a way that made catechism concepts more meaningful and interesting to youth.

Some of her hymns include "All things bright and beautiful" (teaching the concept "I believe in God"), "There is a green hill far away" (teaching "was crucified, died, and was buried), and "Once in royal David's city" (teaching "And in Jesus Christ . . . who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary"). These hymns were all published first in her book *Hymns for Little Children* (1848), which went through 67 editions before the end of the century. In all, Alexander wrote 400 hymns and poems.

[Information taken from *Christian Worship Handbook*, C.F. Aufdemberge, ©1997, Northwestern Publishing House, pp. 70, 632.]

Picture this



For a period of about a month, the ages of the missionary children on the Russian field were: 8,7,6,5,5,4,3,3,2,1,0. Unfortunately, our record of having a child born every year is in danger of being broken.

Top row, left to right: Nicholas Oblender (8), Daniel Ewart (7), Nathan Ewart (5), Zachary Oblender (6), Peter Oblender (2). Bottom row, left to right: Natasha Oblender (5), Christina Wolfgramm (4), Katie Wolfgramm (3), Jonathan Ewart (7 months), Anna Ewart (3), Lara Rohrback (1).

Our motto: "We'll grow the Russian church one way or another."

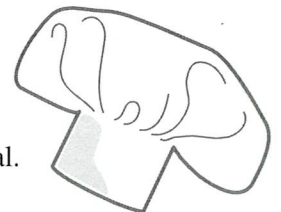
Missionary Michael Ewart
Iskitim, Russia

Send pictures to *Picture this*, Forward in Christ magazine, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398. On a separate sheet, give us information about the photo. Those whose photos are chosen will receive a small gift.

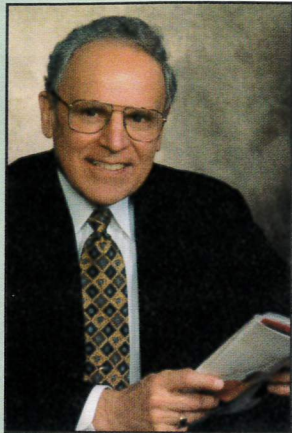
Vacation Bible study ideas

Cross of Christ, Liverpool, N.Y., a congregation of about 50 members without a full-time pastor, came up with some creative ideas for its three-day vacation Bible school (VBS) this past summer:

- The congregation uses *Christ-Light*® for its Sunday school, but can never use all the material. So they decided to use *Christ-Light* manuals as guides for their VBS lessons and activities. They then wrote one Bible study and had each teacher adapt the lesson for different age groups.
- Instead of daily craft projects, students had a daily cooking project. Each day each child received a small pizza box containing a disposable apron, a copy of the day's recipe, a thank-you prayer, a ziplock bag, and the recipe ingredients. Recipes coordinated with the lesson theme for the day (for example s'mores went with the theme "When things get sticky.") Each child was encouraged to take home the treats—and the day's Bible story—to share with their families.



Cross of Christ had 12 children—six of them nonmembers—attend its vacation Bible school.



Gary P. Baumler is editor of *Forward in Christ* magazine and WELS Director of Communications.

Only when
I look at
Christ Jesus
does the
conflict
resolve
itself.

Conflicted at Christmas

“Why,” I ask myself, “am I so conflicted at Christmas?”

Does that question resonate with you too? You know you should feel happy, but your happiness keeps mixing with melancholy. You get excited to see so much of the world come alive with Christmas spirit, but you don't see much evidence of the Holy Spirit. The people cry, “Happy birthday, Jesus!” But they have no room for him in their homes. You hear, “Peace! Let there be peace on earth.” But turmoil titillates and tests you—without and within.

Why so conflicted?

I thought I found the key to the conflict when I paid a visit to the Internet, looking for sites about Christmas. One site, for example, asked the question: “What makes Christmas such a big deal?” The answer: Some 1.8 billion Christians in the world follow Jesus, so his birth means a lot to them. Then, in the 1860s, Macy's in New York City started the trend to capitalize commercially on the celebration. Today many retailers make as much as 70 percent of their revenues in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Many Christians, much commercialism—little Christ!

Looking to other sites, I found Christ, but he was greatly outnumbered and in places completely eclipsed by Santa.

“Aha! There's the answer,” I thought. The people around me are creating the conflict. Their failure to center on Christ and their propensity for popular Christmas platitudes are ruining Christmas. All the glitz and glee gut the season. People that don't really know pretend to say what Christmas means. I'm just glad I'm not like them.

Here I pause, take a deep breath, and reconsider. Not like them? But I am.

Blame them? They can't make me feel conflicted. It's not new that the world does not welcome Christ. No, if I feel conflicted at Christmas, then I need ask only, “What's wrong with me?”

I know the answer to that question. I think that you do too. Not only do I, too, get distracted by many non-spiritual outside attractions at Christmas—I get distracted by me. I struggle with my weaknesses, my sins. My conscience gives me conflict. I worry about my own comforts, so I can barely see the Christ—born in a stable. I recount all my sufferings and cry woe is me—hardly remembering the suffering in store for baby Jesus. I get so busy thinking about what is bad that I forget to think about God. I block out Christ.

I look at me, and I see someone unworthy of Christmas and too often unmindful of its blessings.

Only when I look at Christ Jesus does the conflict resolve itself. The child of the manger is the God of the heavens. The child of the manger came to save me and you. The child of the manger gave up heaven's glory to take away my gloom.

“Come to me,” he says, “and I will give rest to your soul.”

“My peace I give you. Not as the world gives!”

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. . . . I am the way and the truth and the life.”

“Take heart! I have overcome the world.”

“Remain in my love.”

Yes, I can still feel conflicted at Christmas, but not when I look to Jesus.

Gary P. Baumler



WELS Special Ministries

Helping People With Special Needs

- Special Education
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Visually Impaired
- The Aging
- Military Services
- Mental Health Needs
- Care for Called Workers
- Institutional Ministries
(prisons, nursing homes, assisted living residences)

Our Mission:

As a ministry of WELS Parish Services, Special Ministries offers spiritual and practical assistance and training for God's people as we minister to our brothers and sisters with special needs or circumstances.

~ Pastor Carl W. Ziemer, Administrator

Please contact us for more information!

2929 North Mayfair Road, Milwaukee, WI 53222
Phone: (414) 256-3241 Email: esm@sab.wels.net

NEVER TOO LOUDLY



My prayer for each of us this Christmas is that we share the wonderful news of Jesus' birth . . . loudly.

Any of you who know me well know how loudly I can talk, and usually do. I've tried consciously to put an end to it at times, but it never seems to last for more than a few sentences. I've decided that it's just part of who I am. You'll always know that I'm in the room. So be it.

With singing it's usually the same way. Whether it's a hymn in church, something mellow around the house, classic rock in the car . . . I sing loudly.

Singing loudly at church

It wasn't always that way. My first-grade teacher made me stay after school and practice singing. Apparently I sang off key or in somewhat of a monotone. The whole thing made me a little unsure of my singing ability and perhaps a little apprehensive to let it all out.

I got over it eventually . . . with a little help from my dad. When I was a little girl sitting next to Dad in church, he would sing—loudly. I thought,

"Shh, Dad, don't sing so loudly." Don't get me wrong—he has a beautiful bass voice. But he sang so loudly in church that I was embarrassed.

I never understood why he did that, until I became an adult. Life's struggles, disappointments, and pressures get to us all. They are a fact of this sinful world in which we live. But Christ is there for us, day in and day out, always the same—forgiving, strengthening, comforting, and blessing. Nothing works more like salve for what ails us than the reassurance of Christ's love. Whether it's hearing or reading the message, or belting out a hymn in church, nothing can make one feel more wonderful, more comforted, more whole, more at peace.

I finally got it! I finally understood why. And guess what? It wasn't but a few months ago, one of my children leaned over during a church service and said, "Mom, shh . . . don't sing so loudly." I beamed with pride. The passion had been passed down. Hey, cool . . . Jesus at work again.

Loudly proclaiming our Christmas joy

The greatest gift of love was given to us all on Christmas long ago. Baby Jesus was sent to save us all from sin's clutches.

And he did. The angels sang out loudly that first Christmas night. The shepherds proclaimed aloud what they heard and saw. Dad sang loudly to proclaim that joy to me. We all have that same opportunity today.

My prayer for each of us this Christmas? We share that same wonderful news. And loudly! Whether we sing it loudly or speak it loudly, let it be heard. With God's grace, some day our grandchildren will look up at their parents and say, "Shh, Mom . . . Dad . . . not so loudly . . ."

May each of you be blessed with a Christmas that proclaims God's love to you in a strong and passionate way. And yes . . . may it be said ever so loudly!