Churches go virtual again

COVID-19 SURGE prompts leaders to rethink in-person assemblies.

BY BOBBY ROSS JR. | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

Amid a nationwide surge in COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths, many Churches of Christ that had resumed in-person assemblies have moved worship back online, a Christian Chronicle survey found.

It’s the latest twist in congregations’ nine-month battle to curtail the spread of a virus that at press time had infected more than 15.7 million and caused nearly 300,000 deaths in the United States, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

“We have stopped meeting, started back, stopped again, started back and now will stop once more probably at least until the first of the year, depending on how the COVID-19 numbers look,” said Bill Denton, preaching minister for the Rodenberg Church of Christ in Biloxi, Miss. He cited a record number of cases in that Southern state.

Similarly, the Childress Church of Christ — a thriving congregation in a Texas cattle and cotton-farming hub, halfway between Amarillo and Wichita Falls — has gone virtual again.

“The COVID numbers in our area have spiked,” minister Trey Morgan said. “Our little rural hospital is struggling to keep up.”

According to The Associated Press, U.S. coronavirus deaths soared to more than 2,200 per day in December, matching the peak reached in April. Cases per day eclipsed more than 200,000 on average for the first time, with the crisis expected to persist.

See VIRTUAL, Page 11

Lauren Akins values family over fame

Though Lauren Akins, wife of country superstar Thomas Rhett, has walked many red carpets, she feels most comfortable surrounded by the people who know her best. That includes her daughters: Willa Gray, 5; Ada James, 3; and Lennon Love, 11 months. “God knew I’d need those people who don’t care about the fame or the money or the followers,” Akins said. In an interview with The Christian Chronicle, she opened up about life in the spotlight, her Church of Christ roots and what’s in store for the family’s future.

RELATED STORY, Page 17

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY LAUREN AKINS AND THOMAS RHETT
ONLINE
JANUARY 21-23, 2021

Each year, SIBI strives to be a source of encouragement to the brotherhood. This coming year will be a challenge and an opportunity to spread the Gospel. Make plans now to attend online the Sunset Vision Workshop. Let us explore together what Preach the Word Every Way means to us now and for the upcoming year.

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For some reason, journalists like myself have a reputation for procrastination. I’m not sure exactly why that is. I contemplate that question as I hurriedly type this column at 6:30 a.m. on the morning before The Christian Chronicle’s press day. For those not familiar with newspaper terminology, press day is our monthly deadline to finish all our writing, editing and design and send our finished pages to the printer.

In the old days (and I’m old enough to remember them), that work involved a lot of chemicals, hot wax and X-Acto knives. We cut up typeset story copy and headlines and pasted the slick strips on pages. I spent most of my college years at Oklahoma Christian University with scraps from that process stuck to the bottom of my shoes.

These days, we do all our work via computer and push a button to send our completed set of PDFs to the printing company when we’re finished.

Before the pandemic, Erik Tryggestad, the Chronicle’s president and CEO, and I often traveled on assignment during the month. Since March, though, we and the rest of our staff have done most of our reporting via email, telephone and technology helps us fulfill mission during pandemic

Inside Story

Bobby Ross Jr.

Markus Paul served as the strength and conditioning coordinator for the Dallas Cowboys.

Markus Paul lived his faith

FELLOW CHRISTIANS mourn death of Markus Paul, who was part of five Super Bowl championships.

By Cheryl Mann Bacon | The Christian Chronicle

Markus Paul was in his final season as an NFL player in 1993 when a friend invited him to speak to the youth group at the Highland Avenue Church of Christ in Tampa, Fla. He stayed to attend worship, and two weeks later, he was baptized.

Paul, 54, collapsed Nov. 24 inside the Dallas Cowboys’ training facility in Frisco, Texas, where he was the team’s strength and conditioning coordinator. He died the next day at a local hospital. The Cowboys did not release a cause of death, but the Paul family told Syracuse.com he experienced a cardiac arrest.

The Florida native and all-state quarterback was a four-year starter at Syracuse University, where he played safety and still holds the school record with 19 interceptions. After college, he

‘The Lord is definitely not done with Mitch’

AFTER 48 DAYS in the hospital, Oklahoma minister is recovering from COVID-19.

By CheLLie Ison | The Christian Chronicle

As Shannon Wilburn sat next to her critically ill husband’s bed, she didn’t think too much when one of his many alarms started beeping. The sound had become common.

Mitch Wilburn, 52, minister for The Park Church of Christ in Tulsa, Okla., had been in the hospital for 29 days. He was sedated and on a ventilator for the second time as he battled COVID-19.

But as Shannon and a nearby nurse looked up to check the alarm, his wife’s heart sank.

“It was like 49, 45, 42, 37, 23,” Shannon said, tears filling her eyes. “In a matter of three or four seconds, it said a big, red zero and a flat line behind it. And I’m like, ‘My husband is dying.’”

The next few minutes were a blur. The nurse started calling his name and hitting his chest. She then pushed the code blue button on the wall.

Shannon left the room as medical professionals raced in. She waited anxiously in the hall with the chaplain and a pharmacist, who happens to be a member of their church. Within minutes, Mitch was back. “They didn’t have to do any intervention,” she said. “He came back on his own.”

It’s still tough for Shannon to look back on those moments, even though she knows the outcome. “I know he’s alive,” she said. “I know he’s alive.”

Fellow Christians mourn death of Markus Paul, who was part of five Super Bowl championships.

By Cheryl Mann Bacon | The Christian Chronicle

Willie Williams Jr. baptizes Heidi Paul, the coach’s wife, at the North Colony Church of Christ in 2019.

See DEADLINE, Page 4

See MARKUS PAUL, Page 24

See WILBURNS, Page 12
Although I miss going places and interviewing people face to face, I thank God for the blessing of technology that allows us to keep fulfilling the Chronicle’s mission.

Some press cycles are more stressful than others, although we — somehow — have managed to make deadline every single month during my 15 years with the Chronicle.

In my role, I do a mix of reporting and writing my own stories and assigning and editing other people’s stories. I’m particularly proud of some of the excellent work of our editors and correspondents this month.

Laura Akins, who studied journalism at Abilene Christian University in Texas, joined our staff this past March as reviews editor and has excelled in that role. Starting with this issue, we have changed her title to features editor. She’ll keep writing a reviews-type column most months while pursuing more trend stories and profiles.

Laura’s interview this month with Lauren Akins (no relation, but that’s a fun part of the story) is exceptional. The fact that the wife of country superstar Thomas Rhett agreed to a 20-minute interview with Laura and ended up talking to her for about 75 minutes says a lot about both of these Christian women who share a last name.

Digital news editor Chellie Ison is the veteran journalist who manages the Chronicle’s strong presence on the internet and social media. Chellie, a former reporter, anchor and producer for Oklahoma City’s NBC affiliate, has served in that role since 2016.

Her narrative on Oklahoma minister Mitch Wilburn’s near-death experience with COVID-19 is a must-read. It’s filled with so many compelling details — a testament both to Chellie’s writing ability and the amazing faith of Wilburn and his wife, Shannon.

Another important member of our team is Cheryl Mann Bacon, who served for 20 years as chair of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at ACU. In retirement, she has become one of our most prolific correspondents (and I don’t say that just because she has a little trouble fitting her stories into our requested word counts).

This month, Cheryl offers a heartwarming portrait of Markus Paul, a faithful Christian who served as the Dallas Cowboys’ strength and conditioning coach. Members of Churches of Christ in several NFL cities have fond memories of the 54-year-old Paul, who died Nov. 25.

Also in this issue: Cheryl’s superb profile of Terry and Marty Groves, parents of seven and members of the Monterey Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas. Cheryl highlights the Groveses’ ministry to help feed hungry schoolchildren during the pandemic.

Not to give away either of our ages, but Terry was my youth minister at the old Midtown Church of Christ in Fort Worth, Texas, in the mid-1980s.

Our correspondent Hamil R. Harris, a Maryland preacher and longtime journalist who spent 20-plus years with the Washington Post, is another valued member of the Chronicle’s news team.

Hamil does not have a byline in this issue, but look for a story from him in our next edition. Every time I talk to Hamil, he makes sure to pray for me and the Chronicle before we end the call. We appreciate his prayers, and yours, so much.

A final note: We welcome opportunities to help train the next generation of journalists. We were pleased last month to publish a story by Natalie Corbelli, a sophomore majoring in photography and digital media writing at Freed-Hardeman University in Henderson, Tenn., on her university’s experience with COVID-19.

We plan to hire a paid news intern next summer. The right candidate will be a university student majoring in journalism and a member of a Church of Christ. Please email me for details.

Bobby Ross Jr. is editor-in-chief of The Christian Chronicle. Contact bobby.ross@christianchronicle.org. Follow him on Twitter at @bobbyross.
2020 in quotes: Pain and joy

FROM A PANDEMIC to a space mission, the year brought unpredictable and unforgettable news.


These were among the top stories in The Christian Chronicle during 2020.

In their own words, Christians describe the heartbeat, hope and even humor that characterized the past 12 months:

“There is evil in this world, and evil took two of my dear friends. Not a bullet from a gun — evil. Not ideology — evil.” — minister Britt Farmer, at a prayer service for his grieving church after a gunman killed two beloved members. (Page 1, February)

“He knew heaven was where he was going to go. Even though we didn’t plan for it to happen this way, he died in the house of the Lord, serving.” — Sarah Wallace, speaking about her father, Anton Lamont “Tony” Wallace, who died in the church shooting. (Page 12, February)

“Before we knew Jesus was going to hold her that night, she did. We do not believe the Lord took our girl to hold her that night, she did. We believe he is holding our girl for us. And Hattie loves to be from us. We believe he is holding.” — Sarah Wallace, after the death of her 4-year-old daughter, Hattie Jo, in a Tennessee tornado. (Page 1, April)

“Someone looked at the house and said, ‘It’s unbelievable what a tornado can do.’ And I told them, ‘No, it’s unbelievable what a bunch of loving Christians can do.’ ... Their power is a lot stronger than a tornado.” — Gary Flatt, voicing appreciation for fellow believers who rushed to help after a funnel cloud flattened his home. (Page 1, April)

“Astronaut Victor Glover, a Church of Christ member, is pictured inside the cupola, the International Space Station’s “window to the world,” as the orbiting lab flies 263 miles above France. Read more at christianchronicle.org/asteronaut.”

“Astronaut Victor Glover, a Church of Christ member, is pictured inside the cupola, the International Space Station’s “window to the world,” as the orbiting lab flies 263 miles above France. Read more at christianchronicle.org/asteronaut.

“We lose connection with the heart of God, and we stop screaming at the stuff God screams at, and that’s a problem. We are not screaming when God is screaming.” — minister Rigel J. Dawson, discussing racial justice after Floyd’s death (Page 21, July)

“First, snow cones are a lot cheaper than tear gas. And second, they seem to be a lot more effective.” — Danny Baker, a Christian and Arkansas police chief who sent a snow cone truck to serve a crowd of protesters. (Page 8, August)

“All of those deaths were real people. They were all someone’s loved one.” — Eric Beasley, a Christian who survived a brutal battle with COVID-19 while dozens of fellow patients admitted the same day did not. (Page 1, August)

“Faith is the anchor that’s going to help us in every other aspect of our life. So we must put God first, and we must become familiar with the Bible.” — Lindy McDaniel, a preacher, elder and retired major-league pitcher, in an interview months before dying of COVID-19 at age 84. (Page 3, August)

“I’ve had some people say, ‘Well, you just got lucky; the nurses were right there with you when you coded.’ They can call it luck if they want to, but these people were there ... because God had them there.” — minister Marty Neal, who survived COVID-19 after flattening at the hospital. (Page 1, September)

“The thing that is striking is how everyone around the world, regardless of social status, is facing the...
**Quotes: From COVID-19 to space mission**

*From Page 5*

**same situation right now.** — Kemmel Dunham, a Central American missions director, on the global impact of COVID-19. (Page 1, September)

“Jesus knocked at the door, and I opened it. My faith is tied to history, a moment in time when I decided to follow Jesus. For us to interpret God’s word within the context of its revelation, we have to study its history.” — Steven Ortiz, cofounder of the new Lanier Center for Archaeology at Lipscomb University (Page 3, September)

“The first thing I thought of was that I could feel God on the bottom of the pool with me: ‘I’m going to be OK.’” — Brooklyn Boyer, on surviving a swimming pool accident that left the teen in a wheelchair. (Page 19, September)

“He laid down his life for a lot of people that day. I don’t want people to forget that.” — Glenda White, on her late husband, Rich, who died when a gunman opened fire at their church. (Page 17, October)

“God is in the details of all of this. Each day brings a new challenge, and each day, God says, ‘I’ve got this, Susan.’” — Susan Johnston, on the furniture ministry that she leads. (Page 24, October)

“‘We got the memo a long time ago. You hate us. You think you’re better. You don’t want us here. I want you to get our memo. We love you despite your hatred towards us.’” — minister Nick Glenn, in a Facebook post after racist trolls attacked his congregation’s online service. (Page 1, November)

“I don’t know how anyone who doesn’t have faith gets through something like this. If it weren’t for my faith, I probably would have folded up my tent and gone home.” — David Stewart, a Christian senior living center CEO, on the pandemic’s toll on elderly residents. (Page 1, November)

“I actually sent up communion cups and a Bible, and we have really good internet connectivity.” — NASA astronaut Victor Glover, on his plans for worship during a six-month mission to the International Space Station. (Page 1, December)

“COVID has revealed, to some degree, issues within the church. We already have overworked ministers. This pandemic has magnified that.” — Celeste Smith, a youth minister’s wife, on the stress caused by the pandemic. (Page 3, December)

“‘She’s 96 years old and reminds me of the Energizer bunny — nothing seems to stop her or slow her down. She’s got a big heart. She does things for people. She makes pies for people at church — she’s famous for her pies.’” — Larry Wallace, on his mother, Irene, who celebrated 75 years of marriage to Larry’s father, Gordon, on the day after Christmas. (Page 24, December)
Feeding the 350

WHEN SCHOOL CAFETERIAS CLOSE, Texas Christians rework their ministry plan to ensure children have food.

BY CHERYL MANN BACON | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

Seven children were not enough. And for Terry and Marty Groves, 350 isn’t too many.

When the pandemic forced a public school transition to online learning this past spring, the Lubbock, Texas, couple knew kids would be hungry. The Monterey Church of Christ members have learned a lot by raising their own large family and spending the last 20-plus years ministering to local schoolchildren.

So in March, the Groveses shelved their own plan for God’s and figured out how to get healthy snacks to the kids they wouldn’t be seeing in the classroom, even though they “don’t usually do food,” Marty said.

A quarter-century ago, six of the Groveses’ seven children — four sons and three daughters now ages 29 to 42 — were still at home when the couple transitioned from youth ministry to the nonprofit world.

In 1995, Terry and Marty co-founded the National Center for Parenthood Enrichment with Marty’s father, Skipper Shipp, and two others. Three years later, supported by a state grant, the center launched the Lubbock Youth Leadership Academy. In the course of a regular school year, Terry and Marty speak, conduct workshops, lead summer camps and write curriculum, working closely with school staff and volunteers.

The center was begun on a shoestring. And faith. Marty remembers the first time she and Terry entered a school in 1998 to conduct a workshop in one of Lubbock’s impoverished neighborhoods.

“The kids walked in and asked, ‘What’s there to eat? Where’s breakfast?’” she said. “We didn’t realize how hungry these kids were, not just for leadership, but for physical food.”

“The minute we knew the pandemic was up, we called the food bank,” Terry said. Initially, personnel with Lubbock’s South Plains Food Bank said no and argued that the schools would still have a food program.

The couple knew that would not be enough and that these kids did not live in homes where the pantry had extras for snacks or missed meals.

“We don’t want to hear a no,” Terry said.

Marty said persuading the food bank took “an act of Congress and God’s blessing,” but the nonprofit made a one-month commitment to supply enough food for 115 sacks per week, each containing 14 to 17 snacks, that would be assembled and delivered by volunteers.

Over time the list of children needing food assistance grew to 350, and except for a lapse in late summer, the food bank’s commitment kept pace. So have the Groveses. Terry even delivered a carload on his birthday in November.

The couple’s team of volunteers includes Christians from Monterey and other area churches as well as friends and volunteers from local businesses.

Trey Laverty, director of sales development for Slate Group, didn’t know Terry or Marty or anything about their program when he called the Volunteer Center of Lubbock.

“Our business was slowing down,” Laverty said of the national printing company. But he wanted to keep employees on the payroll and give them a chance to help in the

See FEEDING, Page 8
FROM PAGE 7

community.

Laverty, who attends the
First Baptist Church in nearby
Shallowater, Texas, is the son and
grandson of
Baptist preachers.
He has come
to know the
Groveses and
described them
as hardworking
people with hearts
of gold.

“They want to
help out. They’re
very unselfish,” he
said, adding that
he was impressed
when he went
to help load bags of
food for distribution
and saw the
couple — both
in their 60s —
working alongside
his employees.

“The bags we
were packing up
— they’re not
light,” the busi-
nessman recalled. “They’re heavy,
and there were a lot of them, and we
loaded them in the back of personal
trucks, and it’s tiring, and they
were right there helping unload.”

Parents with seven kids have
experience hauling groceries.

Leslie Moss, a retired volunteer
and member of the First United
Methodist Church of Lubbock, has
known Marty since their sons were
in first grade. The moms still laugh
about Kirk Moss coming home
after spending the night with Jacob
Groves for the first time, telling her,
“Mom! You won’t believe the amount
of cereal at the Groves house!”

When the food bank ran out of
food in the summer and called Marty
to say it had nothing left for snack
packs, Marty said her longtime friend
knew there was a problem,” Marty
said. “We prayed that morning about
104 snacks we needed by noon.”
She went to Moss’ house, and the
first thing her friend asked was, “Is
there any way you might need more
snacks for today?” Moss’ church
had 125 snacks left over from a
project, and she wondered if Marty
could use them.

“I said, ‘I don’t
believe this is
happening, but I
do believe it. I’m
picking them up
at 11 a.m.,’” Marty
said. “And I told
her the story. It
was such a direct
answer to prayer.”

By that evening,
Moss had called
several friends
and raised $1,500
for more food
to help get the
project through
the remaining
summer weeks.
Soon, the rooms
and hallways of
the Groves home
were stacked high
with boxes of
crackers, Goldfish
and Slim Jims.

By fall, the food bank was restocked
and supporting the project again.

Kris Rendon was only 3 years old
when the leadership program began
in 1998, and she tagged along with
her sisters and brothers. Rendon,
also from a family of seven kids, is
now a single mom, and when Terry
delivered a snack pack to her son,
she asked if she could help by deliv-
ering in her neighborhood.

“There’s a story every day,” Terry
said of the volunteers.

Diane Fincher and her husband,
Cecil, a Lubbock physician, worship
at Monterey. Diane has volunteered
in the past with elementary lead-
ership programs. Now, she dons
a mask and gloves to leave sacks
of food on recipients’ porches.
The couple met the Groves family
through their children, who all were
in the youth group together.

“I was impressed
they had so
many children, I wanted to get to
know them,” Diane Fincher said.
She came to admire Terry and
Marty for connecting with neigh-
brorhoods with real needs.

Sarah Pena also attends Monterey
but didn’t know the Groves family
until she got a call after signing a
volunteer list.

Pena, a nurse who now works in
purchasing for University Medical
Center in Lubbock, enlisted her own
children — ages 14, 11 and 7 — to
help with deliveries.

“This has taught my kids so much
— it’s given them servant attitudes,”
Pena said.

Marty and Terry remind her, she
said, of the story of Esther and being
called “for such a time as this.”

“God placed them where they
needed to be. It’s evident in every-
thing they do.”
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Ed Nill, in his new book “Why I Believe What I Believe,” writes as if he is having coffee with the reader. The topics in 17 chapters are discussed in turn. His primary audience is the person searching and asking questions about Christianity. Scriptures clearly related to the topics are given along with detailed historical information as to when certain religious practices began. Table of contents reveals topics such as: saved by grace; what is baptism and when; sinner’s prayer(?); works; what is worship, etc. In Part II, topics are: how to answer a skeptic; basics of Islam; rapture(?), etc. Book contains sufficient detail to be suitable for life-long church members.

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Ed Nill, in his new book “Why I Believe What I Believe,” writes as if he is having coffee with the reader. The topics in 17 chapters are discussed in turn. His primary audience is the person searching and asking questions about Christianity. Scriptures clearly related to the topics are given along with detailed historical information as to when certain religious practices began. Table of contents reveals topics such as: saved by grace; what is baptism and when; sinner’s prayer(?); works; what is worship, etc. In Part II, topics are: how to answer a skeptic; basics of Islam; rapture(?), etc. Book contains sufficient detail to be suitable for life-long church members.

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VIRTUAL: Virus surge sparks return to online worship

FROM PAGE 1

to worsen as a result of large gatherings at Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s, AP reported.

Rising numbers of infections and concerns that some members would travel during the holidays swayed the Northeast Side Church of Christ in Bartlett, Tenn.

“We have a health ministry team in the congregation consisting of healthcare workers,” said Matt Carter, a member of the Memphis-area church’s media team. “The leadership team made the decision to go back to online only in consultation with the health ministry team.”

‘THE MOST PRUDENT DECISION’

In southern Indiana, the Newburgh Church of Christ’s in-person Sunday attendance had returned to about 80 percent of its pre-pandemic level, and leaders were contemplating whether to restart Wednesday night Bible study. But then a member tested positive for COVID-19 on a Monday after attending worship that Sunday, elder Tracy Hayford said.

“There was a surge in cases about that same time, and our area has been ‘orange’ ever since,” Hayford said, referring to Indiana’s designation for the second-highest level of virus spread. “My wife works in healthcare for a local hospital, and they are experiencing their highest rates of hospitalization since this started.”

The church determined that stopping in-person assemblies was “the most prudent decision that will protect our members and reduce the possible spread of the virus.”

The local hospital filling up with COVID-19 patients was the trigger, too, for the Downtown Church of Christ in Midland, Texas, moving its worship back to Zoom.

“Midland Memorial Hospital has opened up a whole previously unused floor solely for virus patients, has a tent set up, yet still may have to send patients to other places in Texas if hospitalization rates do not decline,” minister Greg Fleming said.

The pandemic’s frightening turn came as religious leaders in some states — including New York and California — fought government restrictions on worship gatherings and received support from the U.S. Supreme Court.

“It is time — past time — to make plain that, while the pandemic poses many grave challenges, there is no world in which the Constitution tolerates color-coded executive edicts that reopen liquor stores and bike shops but shutter churches, synagogues, and mosques,” Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote in a 5-4 decision in late November that blocked New York from imposing strict attendance limits on religious services.

But despite the protests, Dr. Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, urged churches to keep their worship spaces closed, NPR noted.

“The virus is having a wonderful time right now, taking advantage of circumstances where people have let their guard go down,” Collins said at an event in early December. “Churches gathering in person is a source of considerable concern and has certainly been an instance where super-spreading has happened and could happen again.”

Caleb Borchers, a church planter in Rhode Island’s capital of Providence, said his 40-member congregation “returned to online only because the governor asked faith communities to maximize online and minimize in-person.

“As a minister, it has greatly challenged how I evaluate the fruit of my labors,” said Borchers, lead minister for The Feast: a church of Christ. “There is so little feedback. You don’t get the usual conversations after worship. You don’t have meaningful attendance numbers. You’re not even sure exactly who is watching.”

SAFETY VS. FEAR

Christopher Gallagher serves as minister for the Gadsden Church of Christ in Alabama.

That congregation, about 60 miles northeast of Birmingham, had resumed a full schedule of in-person Sunday morning worship and Bible study, Sunday night worship and Wednesday night worship.

But in November, the church again hit the pause button on in-person gatherings.

“I have struggled with not meeting but still understanding the need for safety,” Gallagher said. “While we learn more each week regarding the virus, we also see some who have let fears conquer their faith.

“Theyir fear in meeting as a church is inconsistent with their trips to Walmart and other places,” he added. “While some avoid church meetings because of the virus, they are still electing to continue their normal life in other areas.”

Still, he said, the church’s virtual presence has expanded its reach to include non-Christian viewers.

“It has strengthened my resolve to find ways to take advantage of the current situation to build community outside of the building,” Gallagher said.

A small number of members of the Eastview Church of Christ in Tucson, Ariz., were meeting at the building while others watched on Zoom, member Johanna Turner said.

However, a surge in area COVID-19 cases recently prompted the church to scrap the in-person assemblies.

“It’d say it has challenged my faith,” Turner said. “I know I don’t spend time in the Word like I should.”

But the pandemic has taught her, she said, “to appreciate each day and each breath we have because we are not guaranteed more days.”

While many Churches of Christ returned to meeting inside their buildings in the summer — typically with precautions such as masks, distancing and individual communion packets — some have met only online or outdoors since mid-March.

“We don’t plan to meet in person until the vaccine proves effective,” said Steve Puckett, senior minister for the Melbourne Church of Christ, a Florida congregation that has lost two members to COVID-19.

Others have taken a more creative approach.

Since early May, Christopher Wiles has preached each Sunday from the rooftop of the Central Church of Christ in Sparta, Tenn., about 90 miles east of Nashville.

Members park and tune in to the sermon on their car radios.

“We’ve had wind, dazzling sun and ice,” Wiles said. “Yet it has never rained one single time during the message. Every Sunday, God has given us enough of a break in bad weather to preach a visible and accessible sermon to our parking lot and livestream.”

FIND EXPANDED COVERAGE of the coronavirus pandemic at christianchronicle.org/coronavirus.
In fact, Mitch is now home.
But it took 48 days from when he was first admitted — nearly seven weeks that are a blur to him.
“It’s like putting a puzzle together,” Mitch said. “You have to meet with loved ones after to put the pieces together.”
Now knowing some of what happened, he considers the lack of memory a blessing.
“It’s sobering,” he said. “It’s not fear that enters, because I know I made it through it, but someone had to tell me I flatlined. That’s just a sobering prospect of the brevity of life.”

A DRAMATIC TURN
That brush with death came just days after The Christian Chronicle first spoke with Shannon.
During that first interview, she had gotten the call that Mitch was extubated, taken off of the ventilator for the first time.
Then two days later, Mitch was moved out of the COVID-19 unit and onto a floor where he could have visitors.
At that point, they had not seen each other in 26 days.
“He looked sick … and he was just skinny,” Shannon said. “I cried all over his chest for just getting to see him. It was just overwhelming.”
Mitch had come so far, but within days his condition took a dramatic turn. He was put back on a ventilator. What Shannon didn’t know at the time was his body was going into septic shock. It was just hours later when that alarm went off, and Mitch flatlined.
He was fully sedated. Doctors put an external pacemaker on him, hoping to prevent another scare.
They then determined that one of his autoimmune disorders, myasthenia gravis, was flaring. So, they began treating that with an IV medication. Shannon believes that was a major turning point.
His breathing began to improve. One by one, the many doctors assigned to his case began signing off. The pacemaker was removed. He was again extubated and fully awake.
From there he was moved to the hospital’s rehabilitation wing. Six days later, he headed home.

A SELFLESS ACT
The Wilburns are especially grateful for the doctors, nurses and other hospital employees who are working long hours during this pandemic.
“They work so hard,” Shannon said. “There is no way they have time to sit down.”
Mitch does recall one tech who, in his first few days in the hospital, showed him true compassion at 3 in the morning. At the time, Mitch was unable to move due to the tubes keeping him alive.
“He would say, ‘Can I do anything for you?’ The second night I asked if he would wipe my head with a cold rag, and he did,” Mitch said. “He didn’t have to do that.”
Other nurses and techs, he said, would hold his hands. Gestures that meant so much when he was in isolation.
After his release, a nurse who helped Mitch in the early days shared how he had encouraged her on a day when one of her other patients was near death.
“I felt defeated, scared, unsure of how to care for Mitch’s neighbor,” the nurse, Maddison Walker, said on social media. “I had popped into (Mitch’s) room to check on him ...
Mitch asked me what he could pray for, for me. I stopped, in awe, not knowing what to say.”

“Then, when I left his room, I literally wanted to break down right there and cry,” Walker said. “This man, who was so sick, was wanting to pray for ME. … What a selfless act, an act that God would do as well.”

TRUSTING GOD
Mitch still has a ways to go before he will be back in the pulpit, preaching. His doctors say he needs to stay away from others for several more weeks to give his body time to heal and regain strength.

However, Mitch trusts God to keep healing and guiding him forward.

“In the book of Hebrews, it says Christ was perfected through suffering,” Mitch said. “If we’re fixing our eyes on a suffering Savior, what part of our walk in Christ do we believe is not going to join him in that suffering?”

Processing the memories of the last several weeks will take time for Shannon. The experience has been traumatic, but she, too, trusts God.

“I’ve had nightmares every night since we’ve been home, just medical stuff,” she said. “It’s traumatic to go through, but I know the Lord can redeem that, too.”

The one thing she knows for sure is “the Lord is definitely not done with Mitch.”

Chris Seidman, lead minister for The Branch Church in Farmers Branch, Texas, prays with Mitch Wilburn, his brother-in-law, during the Oklahoma preacher’s time in the hospital.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY SHANNON WILBURN

Chris Seidman, lead minister for The Branch Church in Farmers Branch, Texas, prays with Mitch Wilburn, his brother-in-law, during the Oklahoma preacher’s time in the hospital.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY SHANNON WILBURN

PHOTO PROVIDED BY SHANNON WILBURN

PHOTO PROVIDED BY SHANNON WILBURN

The Wilburns smile for a picture after finding out Mitch could go home.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY SHANNON WILBURN

PHOTO PROVIDED BY SHANNON WILBURN

Summer News Intern Search

The Christian Chronicle seeks a news intern for the summer of 2021.

The position will be paid and will last about eight weeks. A remote working arrangement will be considered. The intern will gain valuable journalistic experience with an award-winning international newspaper honored frequently by secular and religious journalism organizations. Applicants must be a faithful member of the Churches of Christ and a university student majoring in journalism or a related field.

To apply, send the following to Editor-in-Chief Bobby Ross Jr. at:

bobby.ross@christianchronicle.org

• A letter of interest explaining why you want to intern for the Chronicle
• A resume outlining your work and educational experience
• Name, title, and contact information for three references
• Three to five samples of your writing and journalistic work

Apply before January 15
GUATEMALA
CHICHICASTENANGO — The people of this Central American nation are getting used to the new normal “poco a poco” (little by little), said medical missionary Kemmel Dunham. He works for Health Talents International, a ministry supported by Churches of Christ, with his wife, Dr. Lisa Dunham.

Instead of walking in for appointments, patients must call Health Talents’ clinics first, and capacity is limited. The Dunhams hope to resume mobile medical clinics soon.

“Several of our chronic illness patients (epileptics, diabetics and hypertensives) have commented how grateful they are for our services — especially after having to purchase their medications at local pharmacies,” Kemmel Dunham said. “Our staff have been getting lots of gifts of fresh picked apples, soft drinks and corn on the cob lately in appreciation. We are loved well here.”

NIGERIA
UGBOGBO — “Market evangelism” is paying dividends for a Church of Christ in this West African town.

Women who sell peanuts, yams and other produce in open-air markets distribute tracts provided by the church and invite their customers and fellow “hawkers” to worship, said evangelist Sylvester Imogoh.

“More women are getting involved in the market evangelism strategy,” Imogoh said. “Now some who are students and teachers are coming up with a school evangelism (program) so that they can take tracts and books to schools for staff and students.”

Almost every week new souls, mostly women, are baptized, the minister said, adding that “the number of women in the church continues to grow above the men.”

African hospitals receive a much-needed gift: bleach

LILONGWE, Malawi — Wearing masks and maintaining social distance, high-ranking medical personnel in this southern African county gathered with representatives of Churches of Christ and the Malawi Project, a church-supported nonprofit, to celebrate the gift of 72 55-gallon drums of bleach for the nation’s hospitals.

“In light of the current pandemic, the need for cleaning supplies has become even more acute,” said Suzi Stephens of the Malawi Project. The gift will supply 400 liters of cleaner to every regional hospital in the nation, with the remainder going to the country’s five largest, or tier-one, hospitals. World Emergency Relief made the donation possible.

Attending the ceremony were Chester Kabinda-Mbewe, Chester Kabinda-Mbewe addresses health officials.

Women visit after worshiping with the Ugbohogo Church of Christ.
Some congregations have been online-only since March. Others meet with limited numbers and masks. A few are back together without restrictions. Regardless, Christians say that COVID-19 has challenged them to rethink what it means to be the church.

Pandemic reveals a global fellowship

BY ERIK TRYGGESTAD | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

In Canada, where a new wave of COVID-19 is straining hospital capacity, Christians still meet for worship online — as they have since March.

In New Zealand, where strict quarantine measures have drastically reduced case numbers, church members are meeting in person again — and even hugging.

Regardless of their status, Christians around the globe say that the microscopic virus has caused tectonic shifts in how they meet, how they minister and how they see the world.

“Rich or poor, every person, family, community and nation was at a standstill,” said Gigie Carranza, who worships with a small Church of Christ south of the Philippines’ capital, Manila.

Her biggest takeaway from 2020: “No matter how grand my plans are — for myself or for my so-called ministry — it is always up to the Lord.”

The Christian Chronicle asked members of Churches of Christ worldwide about the impact of COVID-19 on their worship services and spiritual lives. Respondents shared stories of lockdowns and loss, but also of innovation and unintended blessings amid the trials of 2020.

PHILIPPINES: Serving typhoon victims in the midst of lockdown

A day before the Manila metro announced a strict lockdown, Carranza was preparing to travel to Finland to visit her brother. That didn’t happen.

Months later, after a massive typhoon battered the Philippines, Carranza and her coworkers with the MARCH for Christ relief mission had to reinvent their method for helping storm victims. Instead of sending a team to survey damage, “we had to depend on the church family nearest the area to do that for us,” she said. “We had to rely on technology — online purchases, money transfer, Zoom meetings.”

As they worship online, members of the Twinville Church of Christ in Manila also are doing what they can to serve victims through Metro Manila Ministries, said Danni de Vera, the ministry’s coordinator and minister for the church.

“The brethren have become more prayerful and watchful on the word of God,” de Vera said. “Coronavirus will not stop us in serving the Lord.”

WESTERN EUROPE: Pandemic renews believers’ faith in God, not in his followers

In France, where lockdowns were initiated in spring, eased in summer and reinstated as cases rose in autumn, the pandemic “has been a reminder of the importance of faith and relying on God,” said minister Robert Limb.

But “my faith in people, including Christians, has been severely challenged,” said Limb, who preaches for the Moulin-Vert Church of Christ in Paris. Although his congregation “has been of one mind” on masks and social distancing, Limb expressed disbelief, even disgust, at those who have claimed that mask-wearing shows a “lack of faith or that the whole thing is a hoax.”

In the Netherlands, “we have struggled to be unified … to keep people safe versus unwanted restrictions,” said Lucinda Vrieze, a member of the Church of Christ in Eindhoven. For worship “we have about 15 people in the building and maybe five to 10 online. It has split the church.

“My faith in God is stronger,” Vrieze said. “I have hope that God is working through these difficult times to strengthen our church family.”

Changing regulations and uncertainty have made it hard to plan church activities, said Scott Raab, evangelist for the Maastricht Church of Christ in the Netherlands. As churches have moved their activities online, however, several have reconnected with former members who have moved — some to locales as far away as Iran.

“The reality that has become apparent, of how worldwide the church truly is, … has been very encouraging,” Raab said.

Yet he longs for believers to be allowed to gather — and sing — in large groups again. After the pandemic, “take every opportunity to be together,” he said. “Take nothing in the Lord for granted.”

UNITED KINGDOM: Online classes bring new faces, new opportunities

In the London metro, the Wembley Church of Christ has met online since March. The government recently advised that groups of up to 30 could worship in the church’s building, but many members do not feel ready for that, said member Bethan Mentore.

“The pandemic has given our congregation opportunities to help the local community through providing food parcels for families in need,” she said. Another big help has been online classes provided by the British Bible School. COVID-19 “has also enabled opportunities to invite people to worship who may not feel comfortable going into a church building.”

CENTRAL EUROPE: A mix of models

A Church of Christ in Belgrade, Serbia, has resumed in-person services, said preacher Drasko Djenovic. During the country’s lockdown, church members stayed in touch by phone, but some members have not returned to worship.

“I pray for God’s protection,” Djenovic said, “and wisdom to witness to those with fear.”

In Bucharest, Romania, the usually packed and polluted streets are peaceful and quiet, said church member Lavinia Cook. The Church of Christ uses a hybrid in-person and online model.

See GLOBAL, Page 16
GLOBAL: ‘People are watching how Christians respond to a crisis’

FROM PAGE 15

Describing her own faith journey during 2020, Cook said, “It seemed like I was more under Satan’s attack. I feel like I had to rely on God more. I pray for an end to this pandemic, but I also pray that we will remember the lessons we’ve learned.”

AFRICA: Lives, jobs and ministry training schools at risk

The nations of Africa haven’t reported the case numbers seen on other continents, though church members there report increasing hospitalizations and deaths.

In the country with the most cases, South Africa, “I have lost five people whom I know to COVID, one of them a cousin,” said Keith Johnson. “It’s getting to a point where I don’t want to check my messages.”

Johnson, a native of South Africa’s Eastern Cape province, lives in Arkansas and serves as Africa regional coordinator for World Bible Institute. He described Christians there as “devastated and discouraged.” Via Zoom, Johnson recently coordinated a series of Bible classes with speakers from around the world.

In Kenya, minister Charles Ngoje said he’s battling the virus and that the “prayers of the believers are great.” Lockdowns have taken away many church members’ livelihoods, and ministry training schools are struggling to survive, Ngoje said.

In Uganda, some lockdowns have been lifted, and churches are able to meet for in-person worship, albeit with masks, social distancing and little interaction, said Bosco Mukholi, evangelist for the Lwanda Church of Christ.

“We believe God is going to heal this land,” he said, referencing the words of 2 Chronicles 7:14. “We pray that God will bring a solution to COVID, as many people are losing their lives.”

INDIA: In person, with precautions

India had the second-highest number of cases in the world, behind the U.S., at press time, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. Many congregations continue to meet in person, with precautions, including the Ganti Church of Christ in central India’s Andhra Pradesh state.

Minister Joseph Gootam said he prays for healing — and that churches will be “watchful and strengthen the things that remain.”

LATIN AMERICA: Lockdowns lead to an increased sense of connection

In Panama, where strict measures have limited in-person gatherings, the El Valle Church of Christ has not met in person since March, said missionary Lisa Carter. The church conducts Sunday worship, Bible classes and even times of singing via Zoom, Carter said.

In Costa Rica, the Heredia Church of Christ recently returned to in-person meetings. About 50 souls gather on Sundays, said minister Carlos Ulate. About 100 more join via social media — exceeding the average number of worshipers pre-pandemic.

In the early days of the pandemic, 10 church leaders committed to regularly check on 14 church members each by phone. The goal, Ulate said, was to assess the members’ needs for benevolent work.

“However, it also afforded the opportunity to get to know them better,” the minister said, “as calling some of them ended up in conversations in which some emotional needs were met.”

Before the pandemic, some members were merely attending services on Sundays and living like the rest of the world during the week and “not really following Jesus,” Ulate said. During the lockdown, he conducted one-on-one Bible studies with several members. At least one “has returned and has asked me to help him truly find the Lord.”

SOUTH PACIFIC: Restrictions eased as islands report low or no cases

After enduring a strict, months-long lockdown, Christians in New Zealand are back to in-person worship services, said Johnathon Atchley, a deacon of the Otumoetai Church of Christ in Tauranga. Even hugs are permitted.

During the lockdown, the church pre-recorded its worship services and had viewers from countries including Australia, Fiji, the U.S. and Chile.

Atchley, who teaches at South Pacific Bible College, said he remembers pre-pandemic discussions “about whether it was possible to join a worship service if you’re “just” online,” he said. “Well, it seems that the question has been answered.”

Farther north in the South Pacific, the virus has not yet reached the tiny islands of American Samoa, a U.S. territory. Churches closed as a precaution but reopened in May, said David Willis, minister for the Lupelele Church of Christ.

“The pandemic has strengthened the resolve of most of the members to live faithfully day by day,” Willis said. “We have actually added three new families to our membership and a men’s Bible study due to people realizing that God should be more at the forefront of our lives.

“People are watching how Christians respond to a crisis.”

CANADA: Video services yield increased participation

As provinces across Canada report spikes in COVID-19 cases, many congregations continue to meet online exclusively.

“The changes have been challenging in some sense,” said Travis Hutchinson, lead minister for the Shelbourne Street Church of Christ in Victoria, British Columbia, “but we have also noticed an upswing in members being willing to contribute in prayer, blessing, communion thoughts and daily devotions. Many folks who were nervous about getting up in front of the congregation are not as nervous being able to record and edit something.”

Meaningful, in-person interactions are “a large portion of why I love ministry,” Hutchinson said. Adjusting has been tough, he added, and the pandemic has challenged him “to let go of some of my presumptions about what church looks like.”

“As I allow the Holy Spirit to work in me, he reminds me that he is wind, water and fire,” the minister said. “These elements do not pound and rage against obstacles they encounter. Instead, they move, adapt and find new paths.”

FIND EXPANDED COVERAGE of the coronavirus pandemic at christianchronicle.org/coronavirus.
Lauren Akins does not want to be called Laura.

If you search for her on Instagram and mistakenly type Laura Akins, you’ll find me. And many have.

In the fall of 2015, I saw a spike in friend requests from strangers. This was unusual for me, so I did a bit of sleuthing.

I realized these strangers weren’t looking for me but for Lauren Akins, wife of country music singer-songwriter Thomas Rhett. I assume that when I denied their requests, they eventually found her page, along with 2.4 million other followers.

But before that surge, the fame stopped with her husband.

In 2013, the newly wed and newly famous Thomas Rhett Akins Jr. began releasing music videos for his chart-topping songs with one rule: He would not touch any other girl or let them touch him.

In his video “It Goes Like This,” it appears that Thomas Rhett is holding the hand of the video’s love interest. In reality, the actress is holding the director’s hand.

While many thought he was being overly dramatic about hand-holding, Thomas Rhett stuck to his rules to keep his marriage sacred.

So when it was time to make a music video for “Die a Happy Man,” his 2015 hit written about Lauren, Thomas Rhett said there was no way he would sing it to anyone other than her.

But there was a problem: She did not want to be in the spotlight — and still doesn’t. Spoiler: Thomas Rhett eventually persuaded her, and they filmed the video with a small, three-person crew.

A few months later, Lauren left for a medical mission trip to Haiti while her husband toured the circuit — “Good Morning America,” “Jimmy Kimmel Live!,” “The Ellen DeGeneres Show” — to promote his music. That same week, he released their intimate “Die a Happy Man” video. And overnight, everyone was searching for her on social media.

And thus began the Lauren-Laura intersection — at least for me. I’ve kept up with her through the years and was thrilled in August when she released her memoir, “Live in Love: Growing Together Through Life’s Changes.”

Her book is simple and honest. She shares the best parts of her life and doesn’t shy away from the darkest, loneliest parts. She talks about the spotlight, her roots in Churches of Christ and her humanitarian work.

I’ll be honest, when I read that her parents met at my alma mater, Abilene Christian University in Texas, it was decided.

I just had to talk to her.

CONTINUED

Lauren Akins, wife of country superstar Thomas Rhett, reflects on faith, family and fame.

‘Live in Love’

Lauren Akins, with husband Thomas Rhett and their three daughters, celebrates the release of her book “Live in Love.”
Thomas Rhett and Lauren hit it off at Valley View Camp.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY JIM GASH

This couple poses after Thomas Rhett won CMT Artist of the Year in 2019 and then led a prayer.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY JIM GASH

Thomas Rhett, wearing No. 84, looks on alongside Lauren, a part of the home-court coming out their senior year.

Lauren's parents, Steve and Lisa Gregory, bring Willa Gray home from Uganda the day she was drawn to Lisa and determined to take her on a date. Soon after, they were inseparable. When Steve moved home to Nashville the following year, Lisa followed and finished for degree in social work at Lipscomb University. Thomas Rhett's mother, Dana, grew up in the Church and attended services every Sunday and Wednesday. "We didn't miss unless we had a fever," she said.

"I reed a young Thomas Rhett and Lauren hang out at Chil's.

"He didn't particularly want to be a country music star. But Thomas Rhett was heavily involved with his youth group at Madison School in Madison, Tenn. (They still correspondence with Churches of Christ.)" They also both attended the Madison Church of Christ, but they didn't really become close until the summer before sixth grade when their friendship ignited at a Christmas service. They became inseparable and went on to dually date briefly when they were 15. They also chose ways in every possible way.

"So everyone and his mother's dismay, Thomas Rhett decided to drop out midway through college to pursue a music career full time. "He sat me down, as a junior at Lipscomb, and said, 'Mom, I'm going to Lipscomb.' I cried and tried to talk him out of it.' I cried and tried to talk him out of it. "He didn't particularly want to be a country music star. But Thomas Rhett was heavily involved with his youth group at Madison School in Madison, Tenn. (They still correspondence with Churches of Christ.)" They also both attended the Madison Church of Christ, but they didn't really become close until the summer before sixth grade when their friendship ignited at a Christmas service. They became inseparable and went on to dually date briefly when they were 15. They also chose ways in every possible way.
fun life following him and walking through those doors, no matter how scary.”

One of those scary doors was adopting their oldest daughter through Lauren’s medical mission work with Love One International, originally co-founded by Suzanne Mayernick in 2009 as 147 Million Orphans. While using her medical training in Uganda, Lauren walked right past an infant covered in red dirt, lying on the cement. That baby was Willa Gray, whom the Akins brought home in May 2017 when Lauren was seven months pregnant with their second daughter, Ada James.

Another hard “yes” was changing churches. Thomas Rhett and Lauren sought a “more modern, spirit-led” church early in their marriage. They settled at a Nashville church that doesn’t label itself a Church of Christ but is founded on those values (and Lauren admits her dad is not a huge fan of the move).

Despite the friction, they say the church is their safe place in Nashville. “We are known there for who we are and not what we do,” she said. “We are Lauren and Thomas Rhett Akins and not the Akinse who are famous.”

Although he’s only hinted about releasing a new record, Lauren confirmed that he’s got one coming soon. Her favorite song on it is “Ya Heard,” in which he sings about the prayers God has answered in his life.

As for Lauren, she has enjoyed promoting her book, but she's excited to slow down and get back to her dream job — being a mom.

Laura Akins, left, interviews Paige Lankford, Thomas Rhett’s mom, via video.

CONTINUED

‘Saying ‘yes’ to Jesus has been the greatest decision of my life. We aren’t perfect, but it’s a fun life following him and walking through those doors, no matter how scary.’

Lauren Akins on faith and her husband’s music career

brought them to church at the next appointed worship time. I, too, connected with my now-husband, Travis Akins, at church camp. I, too, get annoyed when people say “Adkins” or “Atkins.”

But we never would have gotten the chance to connect if it weren’t for our names.

“It’s a running joke in our family: We call Lauren ‘Laura’ all the time, and it just drives her crazy,” Lankford said. “So when I got a message from you, I was like, ‘Oh, who is this, thinking she’s Lauren?’”

Thankfully, my name was just similar enough to pique her interest and grant me an interview. And she’s not the only family member I confused. Lauren’s mom said now that I’m in her phone, I can expect the occasional accidental text from her. I’m looking forward to it. And I’m also looking forward to new Thomas Rhett music in 2021. The country star spent his unexpected year at home writing songs and posting them — upside-down — on his social media accounts. (He’s not too proud to admit he can’t figure out how to post video images the right way.)

And although he’s only hinted about releasing a new record, Lauren confirmed that he’s got one coming soon. Her favorite song on it is “Ya Heard,” in which he sings about the prayers God has answered in his life.

As for Lauren, she has enjoyed promoting her book, but she’s excited to slow down and get back to her dream job — being a mom.

SEE VIDEOS with footage of the interviews with the mothers of Lauren Akins and Thomas Rhett at christianchronicle.org/liveinlove.
ACU alums help build Guatemalan hospital

BY LYNN McMILLON | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

John Epperly and Shea Freeland fell in love putting in long hours in Abilene Christian University’s Brown Library, where they’d meet to study for the Medical College Admission Test, known as the MCAT. They could not have envisioned then how those hours and their story would come to bless people in rural Iowa, an underserved clinic in Colorado and, most especially, the people of Canillá, Guatemala.

John, from Wichita, Kan., and Shea, from Tucson, Ariz., went on to medical school together at University of Arizona and graduated in 2006. During a residency in Wichita, they met future medical partners Jack Kline and Paul and April McQuillen at Via Christi Family Medicine Residency. Via Christi specializes in training Christian family physicians who want to serve in rural and underserved areas.

After the residency, the Epperlys, McQuillens, Kline (and wife Ashley) and several others created the International Family Medicine Fellowship to prepare for work in resource-limited settings. Later, the families felt called to keep working together both stateside and abroad. After a 22-state search, the team settled in New Hampton, the county seat of a rural farming community in northeast Iowa.

For several years, each family served New Hampton nine months a year and rotated overseas the other three months, caring for the Quiché people in Canillá, Guatemala. Together they began a nonprofit called DOCs For Hope, which allowed them to open a hospital in partnership with Adonai International Ministries.

In 2020, team members reconsidered the demands of rotations, rural healthcare and on-call duties on their young families. The Epperlys and their four young children moved to Peyton, Colo., where John accepted a faculty position and Shea works in an underserved clinic with Spanish-speaking patients. Two of the team couples remain in Iowa, and one has moved full time to Guatemala.

The couple responded to questions via email.

Describe the people and culture of the region of Canillá where you serve.

Canillá is primarily a small Latino farming community surrounded by mountains.

The mountains in and around Canillá are home to thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of indigenous Mayan Indian descendants.

This particular area was a focal point in the civil war that ended just over 20 years ago. The war essentially was fought between the indigenous Mayan and the Latino people. With this in mind, there still remain unspoken tensions and racism between the people groups.

The majority of the Latino people have a religious background in Catholicism, while most of the indigenous have a background of animism/mysticism and aspects of Catholicism.

What are the predominant illnesses and conditions that you see in Guatemala?

We treat a variety of tropical medicine illnesses as well as routine diseases such as skin infection, diabetes, hypertension, etc. The main focus of our group is maternal-child care. We feel that if excellent care is given to pregnant mothers, then healthcare is elevated for the entire family.

Currently, our region of Guatemala has one of the highest rates of maternal-child death in the world. This is directly attributed to the significant number of mothers who have home deliveries with unskilled birth attendants.

Therefore, our main focus in Guatemala is having a great facility for laboring mothers as we work to decrease the number of unnecessary deaths.

Do you receive help from other medical practitioners?

We have received help from a variety of other medical practitioners from the U.S. and around the world. The most exciting help has come in the form of good friends of ours from Zimbabwe. Prosper and Miriam Musipa are Zimbabwean nationals whom Shea and I worked with at Karanda Mission Hospital.

Prosper is an operating room nurse, and Miriam is a midwife. Prosper came to know the Lord at Karanda Mission Hospital where he was raised by his mother, who is one of the hospital chaplains. Later he met Miriam, a nurse at the same mission hospital. The Musipas ultimately turned down a great opportunity to work and live in the U.K. and instead decided to join us in Canillá as full-time missionaries.

How is COVID-19 impacting your work in Guatemala?

With the pandemic, we were unable to travel to Guatemala in 2020.

Unfortunately, many other short-term visitors and medical professionals who had planned to go to Hospital Adonai were also unable to travel during those times.

Our current full-time missionary teammates have tried to continue work as usual, but Guatemala imposed strict isolation rules, and many of our local nurses were unable to come to work for an extended period of time. This has significantly limited day-to-day operations, but we hope to have things open back up more in the coming months.

What are the greatest needs of the hospital in Guatemala?

We need physicians, nurses and anesthesia providers.

The fundraising and work to build the hospital was no small miracle. Finding the right people continues to be a challenge.

Thankfully, through God’s provision, we are slowly building a medical team made up of local Guatemalans along with missionaries who serve with us. We also continue to ask for prayers and financial support for local nurses’ salaries.
Youth Minister Search - Panama City, Florida

Jenks Avenue Church of Christ is a family-oriented, stable, balanced congregation with an active membership. Our ministry staff serves alongside six elders, 24 deacons, and a diverse range of families (age and racial mix). We are blessed with a healthy family blend. Boasting some of the world’s most beautiful beaches, a state college, lots of outdoor activities and a good southern atmosphere, Panama City, Bay County, Florida, is a wonderful place to do ministry and raise a family. We are looking for a minister who is committed to God’s mission to make and develop disciples. Our youth ministry is primarily focused on encouraging the spiritual formation of our young people and helping them integrate with the body of Christ. We offer a competitive salary and benefits package which includes relocation expenses. If interested, contact:

Todd Thompson (toddjenks.64@gmail.com) and Chris Donlan (chris@jenshurchofchrist.com)

Pulpit Minister Search

The elders of the Park Forest Church of Christ are looking for a pulpit minister with family to come work with us. Minister responsibilities include preaching and teaching and participating in the life of our church family. We are an established and diverse congregation. The ideal candidate would be bilingual or willing to learn Spanish and able to minister to our diverse family and large concentration of Spanish speaking in the area. The ideal minister would be able to minister to our seasoned saints as well as the younger generation. You can also visit our website for a more detailed description: www.achurchofchrist.org

Park Forest Church of Christ, Attn: the elders
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Youth Minister Search - Panama City, Florida

Jenks Avenue Church of Christ

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12760 Livingston Road, Naples, Florida 34105

Seeking Full-Time Minister - Cortez, Colorado

The Cortez church of Christ is located in the beautiful Four Corners area of Colorado. We are a loving congregation of 80+ members who want to grow. We are involved in community service, mission work, Leadership Training for Christ, and a local youth camp. We provide a competitive salary and a nice, four-bedroom home.

If interested, send a detailed resume including references and information about yourself and your family to: cortezcofc@live.com.

The Cortez area is home to scenic mountains, deserts, mesas, rivers, lakes, farmland and Mesa Verde National Park. Locals enjoy skiing, hiking, fishing, hunting, camping, boating, mountain biking and golfing.

Pulpit Minister Search

The West Broward Church of Christ in Plantation, Florida (Fort Lauderdale), is seeking an additional minister to work alongside our current minister. The ideal candidate: man with a family, he and family personable and outgoing, at least 5 years full-time ministry experience, an education in Bible, effective at public speaking (fill-in for pulpit minister, capable of assuming that position when necessary). Please send a resume, link to re-cent video (or a DVD), references and philosophy of ministry and doctrine to:

West Broward Church of Christ, Attn: Elders
12550 West Broward, Blvd.
Plantation, Florida 33325

Full-time Minister Position

The Northern Frontier Mission Field of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan is in search of a full-time minister. The Escanaba congregation of 50 is looking for someone to work with all ages. Preaching, teaching, community involvement, and television/internet ministry. We have produced LET THE BIBLE SPEAK TV program for 44 years. Interested parties should send resume and video lessons to:

David Grant
DGR296@gmail.com
PO Box 751, Escanaba, MI 49829

Youth & Family Minister

Dynamic Atlanta Church of Christ
300+ member growing congregation

Camp Creek Church of Christ is searching for a Youth & Family Minister to build young disciples for Christ by developing and implementing a comprehensive approach to youth ministry across all age groups while serving as a spiritual leader and role model. An influential Youth & Family Minister will provide leadership and oversight for all aspects of the ministry while building an inclusive spiritual culture where youth and families can know and follow Jesus Christ. Our loving congregation is a community of active believers whose faith is “Christ” centered. We consistently seek to bring glory to God as we serve one another and our community. Atlanta, the “Capital of the American South” is a contemporary city that is the ideal place to raise a family. If interested, please send resumes to campcreekinfo@gmail.com

Associate Minister for Family Spiritual Life - N.C.

The Hendersonville Church of Christ is seeking a full-time Associate Minister for Family Spiritual Life to help us in our goal of encouraging faith development and spiritual growth in our young families and families with children/teens. We have several young families and would like to attract more. We are a church with an average attendance of 125 members just south of the city of Asheville. A successful candidate will possess a bachelor’s degree, although commensurate experience would also be considered. Please visit our website for job description: hvlcoc.org. Please email resume and references to:

hvlcoc@bellsouth.net
HIGHER EDUCATION

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
ABILENE, Texas — Abilene Christian University’s School of Social Work is partnering with the Community Foundation of Abilene and other organizations to address food insecurity among college students. Conducted through ACU’s Institute for Social and Community Development, the project will benefit students from all of this West Texas city’s colleges and universities by offering a mobile food pantry, organizers said.

“This is what the institute ... is all about: bringing hidden issues to the forefront,” said Malcolm Scott, an assistant professor in the School of Social Work. “Our goal is to face these issues and not shy away.”

This past spring, Shannon Que surveyed ACU undergraduates as part of her master’s thesis and found 27.9 percent of undergraduates reported experiencing food insecurity. Her research defined food insecurity as “the inability to access healthy and nutritious food at all times for all members of your household due to insufficient socioeconomic resources.”

FREED-HARDEMAN UNIVERSITY
HENDERSON, Tenn. — Alumni John W. and Rosemary K. Brown have made another major commitment to Freed-Hardeman University, pledging $15 million over the next five years — the largest gift in the university’s history.

The announcement was made during FHU’s annual benefit dinner, which raised more than $1.5 million for student scholarships. The total exceeded last year’s amount, despite the challenge of hosting the dinner during a pandemic.

Actor and activist Gary Sinise was the featured speaker, but as one might expect in 2020, it was not the usual speaker presentation. Instead of traveling to Henderson as had been planned, Sinise delivered his remarks live but via video.

Among other projects, the Browns’ latest gift will fund an expansion and renovation of Wallace-Gano Dining Hall and provide seed money to establish a scholarship program for minority students.

The revamped Wallace-Gano Dining Hall will get a new name: the Dr. Elizabeth Saunders Center.

The retired professor of education was the first Black student to graduate from Freed-Hardeman as well as the first Black member of the faculty. She taught at the university for 40 years, retiring in 2018.

Nursing students practice on high-tech patients in the Ellis Skills Lab at Oklahoma Christian University.

OKLAHOMA CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
OKLAHOMA CITY — Oklahoma Christian University nursing students are serving at hospitals overrun with COVID-19 patients.

Because of the pandemic, many universities, including Oklahoma Christian, completed the fall semester before Thanksgiving. That early finish coupled with the need at hospitals where bachelor of science nursing students enroll in clinics offered an opportunity for more hands-on experience before graduation.

“We knew that we had to do something to help,” Oklahoma Christian President John deSteiguer said. “Our School of Nursing faculty have been actively collaborating with other leaders ... to pave the way for OC BSN to begin clinicals a few weeks early.”

As a result, clinical groups that normally would have started in mid-January began Dec. 7.

John W. and Rosemary K. Brown have pledged to give $15 million to their alma mater, Freed-Hardeman University.

Application instructions and descriptions of each position are available at oc.edu/hr. Oklahoma Christian University is a private liberal arts university affiliated with the Churches of Christ. The University complies with all employment law regarding race, color, age, sex, national origin, marital status, military service, and disability. As a religious educational institution, the University is permitted by law to consider religious beliefs and practices in making employment decisions, and the University does so to achieve its mission. Such consideration includes preference for qualified candidates who are members of the Church of Christ.
MARKUS PAUL: He ‘believed in doing what was right’

MARKUS PAUL, 54, was a part of five Super Bowl championships, but Christians at his home congregation in the Dallas area knew little about his NFL career.

NEVER SPENT TIME BOASTING

Everywhere Paul worked and worshiped, the route was repeated.

Eric Dishongh, minister for the Hickory Knoll Church of Christ in Harahan, La., just east of New Orleans, was a starstruck intern in 1998. He said everyone was excited when they heard Paul was moving to New Orleans to join Mike Ditka’s staff, but “as an 18-year-old intern who loved the New Orleans Saints, I was absolutely thrilled.”

Primarily Dishongh recalls how humble the coach was. “Humility and kindness were the guy’s defining characteristics,” along with gratitude for learning the Gospel. “When he learned the truth, he wanted to share it with everyone he knew.”

From New Orleans, Paul moved to the New England Patriots, where his family worshiped with the Edgewood Church of Christ in Mansfield, Mass., just one town over from Foxborough where the Patriots play. Ray Davis, then pulpit minister at Edgewood, remembers the first Sunday Paul and his family came to church in 2002. The first thing that stood out about Paul was his smile. “He was very soft spoken,” said Davis, now serving the North Oaks Church of Christ in Santa Clarita, Calif., as family life minister. “You’d never guess he did what he did if you didn’t see him on the sidelines. He never spent time boasting. He was more interested in you.”

Paul moved to New York in 2005 for two years with the Jets then a decade with the Giants. Dean Loughmiller, a longtime member at the Fair Lawn Church of Christ in New Jersey, said Christians there knew him well.

“He did his very best to make it to worship at every opportunity he could, and even when he was with the team at away games he’d seek opportunities in other communities to find brethren there,” Loughmiller said.

Paul’s son, Jairus, and daughter, Tabitha, attended Fair Lawn with him, and Tabitha is still a member. “He was a great father to them. He was a very loving and kind individual.”

Paul is also survived by his wife, Heidi, his father, sister, two brothers, two stepsons and two grandchildren who called him Papa.

John Biskup, a record-setting place kicker on the Syracuse team at away games he’d seek opportunities in other communities to find brethren there,” Loughmiller said.

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John Biskup, a record-setting place kicker on the Syracuse team Paul co-captained with former Dallas Cowboys fullback Daryl Johnston, commented on Paul’s online obituary that the former teammate saved his life.

On the Saturday before Paul died, Biskup had reminisced after coming across his friend’s Giants-era business card.

“He was always smiling, laughing, always a great mentor, leader, friend, just inspiring to be around.” The following Tuesday, Biskup was shocked to hear of Paul’s passing. Then on Wednesday, while moving boxes at his house, he experienced shortness of breath.

“I easily could have dismissed it,” Biskup said, “but something told me this might be a message from Markus,” so he went to the emergency room where a catheterization revealed a 90 percent blockage in the widow-maker artery.

“Markus Paul saved my life.”

Speaking at Paul’s funeral, Johnston said, “God knew as a football player he’d have a small impact but as a coach and mentor he would have a huge impact. Markus Paul was the one person in your life you wanted to be more like. I always wanted to be more like Markus Paul.”

Strived Every Day to Be Like Christ

Minister Williams reprised Johnston’s statement in his remarks:

“Markus Paul strived every day to be like Christ.”

Sharing the story from 1 Samuel about God choosing David to be king of Israel, Williams reminded mourners that David was out with the sheep, not at the head of the line. “God chooses his leaders from the back,” Williams said.

If a visitor or worshiper was looking for Markus Paul, he went on, the minister always pointed to the back of the church where Paul sat or more often stood. A few hours later he’d be on the sidelines, shouting and encouraging on national television.

Amens echoed as Williams reminded them that Paul never sat in the front.

God chooses leaders from the back.
**Evangelist Needed - Kingman, Ariz.**
The Desert Church of Christ is looking for an evangelistic minister who preaches, teaches, and follows truth from God’s Word. We are a congregation of 60 - 70 members, without an eldership, with a desire to grow. The successful candidate will be a “jack of all trades.”

Send resume and salary requirements to:

Desert Church of Christ
Attn: Search Committee
PO Box 3673, Kingman, AZ 86402
(928) 279-2226 (please leave message)

**Full-time Minister - Big Springs, Texas**
Birdwell Lane Church of Christ is seeking a full-time minister to work with us in Big Spring, Texas. We are a small congregation which includes both English and Spanish services each week. We have a full-time Spanish minister and are looking for a full-time English minister to work with us. He should be married, have a school of preaching or college background and some experience. Must be willing to serve in preaching, teaching and outreach. Must have a spirit of evangelism, and be willing to work with all ages. Our mission is to teach sound doctrine – the Good News of Jesus Christ and practice New Testament doctrine.

Send resume and references to David Smith or Ralph Anderson at:

blcofc@att.net or
Birdwell Lane Church of Christ
PO Box 2094
Big Spring, Texas 79720

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**Evangelist Needed **

**The Christian Chronicle**

To be considered for this position, email info to Brent: bziak@mediacombb.net or mail to:

Holly Hill Church of Christ
1725 Ridgewood Ave., Holly Hill, FL 32117
bill@hollyhillchurch.com
hollyhillchurchofchrist.com

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**FULL-TIME PULPIT MINISTER - Paragould, Arkansas**

7th & Mueller is a Christ-centered, Bible-teaching church looking for a Pulpit Minister who will partner with the elders in guiding the church. The Pulpit Minister will work with the elders, deacons, and other ministry teams while serving as a spiritual leader, biblical educator, and mentor of members. Active ministries are Youth and Children, Compassion Outreach, Celebrate Recovery, City Youth Camp, and Foreign Missions.

**QUALIFICATIONS:**

- A man who is called and set apart by God to gospel ministry, biblically grounded and evangelical in theology, and is committed to living and serving in a manner consistent with the standards set forth in scripture.
- A leader of people who has a genuine interest in people and relationships both in and out of the church.
- A strong teacher who engages people to think about and grow in their faith as disciples of Jesus.
- Self-motivated while being a team player.
- Able to handle conflict in a biblical manner and maintain confidentiality.
- Able to attend services and teach various classes.
- Can do hospital visitations, funerals, weddings, and baptisms.
- Actively involved in the local community to connect and share Christ.

7th & Mueller Church of Christ,
1000 S 7th Street
Paragould, AR 72450

Submit resume to: 7thministersearch@gmail.com

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**Full-time Youth Minister**
The Holly Hill Church of Christ is looking for a full-time Youth Minister. The church, located in Holly Hill, Fla. (east coast of central Florida, near Daytona Beach), has 200+ members with an established youth group of about 20 teens. Starting date is flexible. See our website for more info about our congregation. Applicants should send resume to Bill Netterville at:

Holly Hill Church of Christ
1725 Ridgewood Ave., Holly Hill, FL 32117
bill@hollyhillchurch.com
hollyhillchurchofchrist.com

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**Full-time or Part-time Minister Search - Forsyth, Missouri**
The Forsyth Church of Christ is seeking a minister who feels his ministry is preaching, teaching and equipping others to serve with heartfelt enthusiasm. We are a congregation of 40+ members who seek to be like Jesus by loving and serving each other and our community. Our spiritual family has many of the most loving and giving saints in the Lord’s church, and we are seeking a man of God to preach, teach, and work beside us.

The applicant must be solidly grounded and schooled in the scriptures, show passion and enthusiasm for the Lord’s work, have at least five years of pulpit experience within the Churches of Christ, and have evidence of a successful ministry. If you would like to be considered for this ministry, please submit your resume, current video media of two sermons (a link is acceptable) and a concise one-page statement that characterizes your current ministry efforts, style, and goals. Please include a current photo and three contactable references. Pay is negotiable.

To be considered for this position, email info to Brent: bziak@mediacombb.net or mail to:

Holly Hill Church of Christ
1725 Ridgewood Ave., Holly Hill, FL 32117
bill@hollyhillchurch.com
hollyhillchurchofchrist.com

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**Full-time Minister – Howell, Mich.**
The Church of Christ is searching for a minister passionate in his work, in his studies of God’s word for his life, in his love for bringing souls to Christ, and in his preaching and teaching of God’s saving word for a dying world. We are a congregation with 50+ members where over half are 60 and above. We are looking for a person to help us bring in a more youthful population. We have two elders and two deacons to assist with the needs of our body. Housing is provided. Please submit a resume, a sermon, and salary/benefits needed to:

belcher0804@att.net

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**Are you wanting to be of more service to the Lord?**

If so, please consider joining a congregation of the Lord’s Church in central Wisconsin!

Wausau has a small-town atmosphere with all the conveniences of a big city in a scenic setting. Our church family consists of mostly life-long Christians & is fully self-supporting. We invite YOU to join us! Visit our website:

MountainViewCofC.org

and click “Mission Opportunity” for more info.

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**Experienced Preacher Search - Camp Verde, Ariz.**
The Verde Valley Church of Christ is looking for an experienced preacher to preach full-time to a congregation of 40 to 50 saints. Must be well grounded in scripture and willing to teach. Our congregation is made up of the most loving and giving saints in the Lord’s Church. A four bedroom home is included in the salary package. If interested contact Harold Kilby (elder) with bio and resume at:

harold.kilby@yahoo.com
Ray and Kathryn were married in Hillsboro, Texas, on Nov. 5, 1950. Times were pretty hard and having three children in three and a half years made life a special journey for them. They shared bad times with the good, and their precious gift was born 14 years later. They became a family of six, and their older children made great baby sitters. Time marched on, and this special couple made a great Christian example for all four children, relatives and friends. They are a great gift! Happy 70th Anniversary to the most beautiful couple ever!

Memorials

Bencil Smith
1932-2020

The sunrise of Bencil Smith’s life took place on Oct. 9, 1932, in the town of Smithland in the Piney Woods of east Texas. Sunset for Bencil occurred three days shy of his 88th birthday, on Oct. 6, 2020, in Houston, Texas. The son of Riley and Blanche Smith, Bencil starred in basketball in high school and college. Later he became a decorated paratrooper in the U.S. army.

After Bencil married his best friend, Odell Rand, in 1955, the couple moved to Houston, where they would raise their five children: Michael, Vincent, Anthony, Gary, and Regina. The Smith family eventually grew to include eighteen grandchildren and twenty great-grandchildren. Bencil was baptized into Christ in 1968 at the Fifth Ward Church of Christ in Houston, where he eventually served as an elder for forty-one years. In the business world, he served as a popular and admired supervisor for McDonald’s Restaurants for over twenty-five years.

Bencil Smith was memorialized in a two-and-a-half-hour funeral service at Fifth Ward on October 15. He was eulogized by his son Gary, Fifth Ward’s pulpit minister. Multiple speakers paid tribute to Bencil’s kind and humble example, both within the congregation and outside it. Several invoked Bencil’s favorite catch-phrase when leading singing at Fifth Ward or elsewhere: “Somebody oughta say ‘Praise the Lord!’” He will be sorely missed by a multitude of family, friends, fellow Christians, and former co-workers.

James “Dean” Bryce
1949-2020

Dean Bryce was born in Altus, Okla. on July 24, 1949, to Warren A. “Corkey” Bryce and Irma, Jeane Chenault. He was baptized into Christ by Joe Laird in 1962. He married Jeanine Gail Henderson, his endless love, on Dec. 27, 1968. He died Nov. 20, 2020, at home.

At age 15, Dean began preaching in southwest Oklahoma. He served 47 years as a full-time minister in five states. He was known for his excellent, God-focused Bible teaching and beloved for his attentive listening skills and his willingness to help neighbors, family, friends, and strangers.

He was a private pilot, a high school track star, and athespian. He left the farm in Altus to earn a bachelor’s degree in Bible (Oklahoma Christian University, 1970). In 1985, he received a master’s degree in sacred literature (Trinity Theological Seminary). He also did graduate studies at Abilene Christian University.

He was a speaker at university lectureships, active in military outreach and did short term mission work in Greece, Turkey, Germany, England, Scotland, Belgium, Mexico and Ukraine. He facilitated the Denver Lectures and helped begin a weekly Bible television program on a CBS affiliate in Omaha, Neb. In retirement, he was active in the adult education program at the Memorial Road Church of Christ in Edmond, Okla.

His children and grandchildren were his true delight. He was proud of their accomplishments, primarily that they are all followers of Jesus. He was diagnosed with stage IV cancer in March and underwent aggressive treatments. His lifetime walk with Jesus inspired others to follow the God he loved.

He was preceded in death by his father, Corkey Bryce; sister, Janet Lea; grandparents, W.P. Bryce and Willie Watts Bryce, Osie Chenault and Elizabeth Dodson Chenault. He is survived by his wife, Jeanine Bryce, Edmond, Okla.; mother, Irma Bryce, Altus, Okla.; sister, Brenda McDonald, Euless, Texas; son, Brady (Donna) Bryce, Albuquerque, NM; daughter, Kelly Bryce (Michael) Taylor, Forney, Texas; grandchildren, Nathan and Elizabeth Bryce, Taryn and Cameron Taylor; and a brother-in-law, Bruce (Wanetta) Henderson, Carson City, NV.

In lieu of flowers, the family has established a university scholarship fund to advance Christian college opportunities for underserved students.

https://firstabq.churchcenter.com/giving (Dean Bryce Scholarship)

Make checks payable to: “First ABQ” 10101 Montgomery NE Albuquerque, NM 87111 memo “Dean Bryce Scholarship”

(continued on Page 27)
TRANSITION: Jim Shannon, pulpit minister for the Northwest Church of Christ in St. Petersburg, Fla., for nearly 39 years, is retiring. He and his wife, Barbara, have played vital roles in the church’s growth and development since 1982, leaders said. George Welty, the church’s discipleship minister, will succeed Shannon. Joel Harper will serve as connections minister.

NEW CABINET MEMBER: John DeBerry Jr., a longtime Tennessee state representative and minister for the Coleman Avenue Church of Christ in Memphis, has been appointed to Republican Gov. Bill Lee’s cabinet as a senior adviser. Democrats ousted DeBerry from the party because of his conservative positions on issues such as abortion, gay marriage and school choice. Lee described DeBerry as “a respected leader and man of faith who has served our state with integrity for decades as both a legislator and civil rights champion.”

NEW DEAN: Nannette W. Glenn has been appointed as the dean of the College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the Dallas campus of Abilene Christian University. Glenn earned her Ph.D. in general special education and her Master of Education in multicultural special education from the University of Texas at Austin. She also earned a Master of Science in education entrepreneurship from the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education/Wharton School.

BUSINESS GIFT: Lubbock Christian University received $170,000 from Lubbock National Bank for the Digital Media Arts and Applications program, an academic department of the LCU School of Business. The gift will enhance an endowed scholarship for students.

WINGS OF EAGLES VIDEO SERIES

Three new 20-minute videos which can be used to assist in personal evangelism contacts.

Available as a free download.

LESSON TOPICS ARE:

(1) IF GOD? A comparison of atheistic evolution with the reality of a god existing, leading to the conclusion that a god exists.

(2) WHICH GOD? A comparison of the various offerings to be the god, leading to the conclusion that Jehovah and Jesus are God.

(3) WHICH GROUP? A brief history of the world and of Christianity leading to a discussion of how to find Christ’s church.

For more information, contact: info@occg.institute

See website for cell phone shortcut!
Use this unscheduled time to seek, find and share Christ

If you’ve ever said, “If only I had more time this Christmas,” then this message is for you.

Most of us have uttered these words, and many of us whose work isn’t critical to our country’s infrastructure will find ourselves with this wish unexpectedly granted during the last of 2020 and beginning of 2021.

Some of us will be spending the festive season more quietly than ever before as we heed the pleas of our local and state leaders to stay in and do our best to keep COVID-19 at bay.

Others of us may be caring for ourselves, family or friends who have been ill and prayerfully are recovering — or perhaps looking after those who are most at-risk right now, such as the elderly or those who have long-term health issues.

Still more may be grieving this Christmas, desperately missing someone as well as the comfort we normally receive by sharing our loss — simply having someone present on whom we can lean.

Whatever our situation and wherever we find ourselves as this extra time unfolds, we urge you to embrace the moments rather than resent them.

‘Whatever our situation and wherever we find ourselves as this extra time unfolds, we urge you to embrace the moments rather than resent them.’

Take that time, and use it well. Don’t fill it with mindless distractions in an attempt to hasten a return to normalcy. Invest it in areas that will make a meaningful difference in your own life as well as the lives of others.

The holidays often fly past in a blur of commitments, whether related to church, family, work, school or charity. These are worthy of our energy, and we no doubt will miss much of the merriment and good memories this year that typically come from watching children perform in Christmas concerts, hugging our church friends as we ring in the New Year or exchanging gifts with coworkers and enjoying a party where we don’t have to also clean up afterward.

But there is value, too, in the quiet spaces that allow us to listen and hear God: In looking up Scripture that will enlighten and comfort us. In praying for those who are hurting, celebrating or hoping. In following through on the prompting placed on our heart to send a note or make a phone call.

In giving of ourselves and spending time on other people. As we conclude this tumultuous year, our wish is that we all may seek, find and embrace the opportunities to share Christ and give of ourselves more. And may God continue to bless us all.

FROM OUR READERS

Christians and a divided nation

Last month The Christian Chronicle asked readers how people of faith can help heal a badly divided, post-election United States (Page 17, December). Following are two additional responses to our survey:

We need to permit sermons and classes to deal with character and political morality. Sure, this runs the risk of people saying, “The church is getting into politics.” Yet surely there is a way that political character and ethics can be taught in an open and nonpartisan way.

We need to offer directions on how to have civil discourse with one another as Christians and as Christians talking with other citizens who are not part of our faith community.

I think congregations with small-group meetings can study how to talk in a civil manner and how to respect and appreciate people who disagree politically. It might even help to have some lessons on history and on critical thinking with a discussion of fallacies to be avoided when reasoning.

— Perry Cotham, class teacher, Otter Creek Church of Christ, Brentwood, Tenn.

I think we can recognize that there are different points of view and not be personally offended by that. We can focus on how to improve things for everyone and listen to each other to find common desires and ways to work together.

We are suffering from a lack of trust in media and things we hear. We can try to check what we hear before spreading possibly incorrect information. I think we need to be honest with each other and ourselves in a considerate way. For example, “I don’t like what you are saying, and I haven’t seen that. Can you tell me why you feel that is true?”

I think we can be thoughtful and humble in recognizing we do not have all the answers.

— Paul Sparks, member, Willow Avenue Church of Christ, Cookeville, Tenn.
**In defense of 2020**

HARSHIP AND CHALLENGES defined the year but also gave families some much-needed time together.

In a “normal” year, my husband and I both work full-time, run a ministry at our church and parent our two children, ages 11 and 5.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I often wished I could be with my kids more. I love my career as a journalist, but I cherish time with my family. In fact, a more flexible schedule is a big part of what brought me to The Christian Chronicle.

If one thing has united people this year, it seems to be the idea that 2020 has been rotten. But on the bright side, I have been blessed with an abundance of quality time — and quantity time — with my husband and children.

In March, like seemingly everyone else in the world, we were suddenly home together all day, every day. The future seemed uncertain.

I would be lying if I said it was all perfect and easy. It wasn’t. There were many tears as we grasped the changes happening all around us.

My kids struggled to accept that they wouldn’t be finishing their school year with their teachers and friends in a traditional setting. More tears came as we figured out what living through quarantines and possible exposures meant for those visits with family and the socially distant bike rides we allowed with neighborhood friends.

Then came layoffs at my husband’s company. Twice.

While his job wasn’t cut, the realities of what was happening to friends and coworkers were not lost on us. We realize that for so many life became much more difficult.

Yet technology emerged as an obvious blessing.

The world had shut down, or so it seemed, but we could still worship with our church family online. I made communion bread week after week, thanks to an online recipe and online grocery shopping.

Because of technology, groceries could be delivered to my trunk or even my front porch. I connected with people thousands of miles away for interviews via video calls. I couldn’t help but think how much more challenging life would have been had this pandemic happened even just a decade ago.

Then came the start of a new school year. I transitioned between working mom and home-school mom/teacher each day. I helped my kids through school in the mornings and spent the afternoons at my “office” at the dining room table — refereeing the frequent arguments that erupted in the next room.

While teaching is not a gift of mine, our virtual schooling has been memorable as I sit with each child and figure out how to best help them learn. We’ve done art projects, made (and spilled) a pot of applesauce and navigated our way through dozens of worksheets — at a snail’s pace. ( Seriously, thank a teacher in your life. )

I’ve counted it a blessing that I could actually remember fifth-grade math skills and successfully help my son with fractions and decimal numbers. It’s been fun watching my 5-year-old begin to recognize words and read simple sentences, knowing I actually had a part in that.

Our daily lives have changed. Our pace has slowed. I hope as my children get older, they will remember the good parts of this year, the quality time we’ve had.

There’s no way we could have prepared for this year. But, if anything, 2020 has taught my family that together is a wonderful place to be.

**CHELLIE ISON** is digital news editor for The Christian Chronicle. Contact chellie@christianchronicle.org.

**I hate masks!**

A DIVIDED SPIRIT, even among people of faith, is an unwanted side effect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am tired of facemasks. I hate the way they fog my glasses. I hate how they make it harder to breathe, to speak.

But the thing I hate most is what they are doing to the church.

It may not be an “official” split, but masks have exposed a divided spirit. Some churches now offer “masked” and “non-masked” worship. Christians have moved church membership because the leadership strongly encouraged masks.

We have taken to social media with arguments over the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of masks. We have argued that mandates are an infringement of constitutional rights and an overreach of government. We have collected “likes” to support our resistance to tyranny as we build an army of freedom-loving saints.

I get the arguments, and I share the frustrations. But I do not understand how we allowed masks to eclipse the meaning of the cross.

This is not the first time silly arguments have divided the church. Today it is masks. In first-century Rome and Corinth it was meat.

Members within these churches divided over eating meat sacrificed to an idol. On one side you had young Christians who left their pagan past and genuinely struggled with eating meat from an idolatrous setting. It felt to them as if eating it validated the idolatry. On the other side were Christians with definitive evidence supporting their “right” to eat idolatrous meat: “no idol in the world really exists” and “there is no God but one” (1 Corinthians 8:4).

The fight was on.

I suspect they had separate worship times for the meat-eating Christians and the non-meat-eating Christians. And if you happened to move into a community with only one church of the opposing position, you stood on principle and worshiped at home, alone.

The controversy missed the meaning of the cross, where Jesus gave up his place in heaven to take on the form of a servant and die so that we could be saved (Philippians 2). Imagine that: Jesus gave up what was rightfully his, for our sake.

The solution was for the story of Jesus to become so real as to be lived out in everyday, practical ways.

I get it. Scientists disagree. Politicians are inconsistent and hypocritical. The virus continues to spread. But are we willing to use our influence and credibility to fight against something that many people believe is keeping them safe? Are we willing to divide the church over it?

Our story is better than that. The Kingdom is much bigger than that. To borrow the language of Paul, “the Kingdom of God is not food, and drink, (or masks, let me add), “but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

Perhaps that annoying, glass-fogging and (potentially) life-saving little cloth gives us an opportunity to demonstrate the story of Jesus for a world in desperate need of his grace.

I do not like wearing it, but I will wear it for my brothers, sisters and neighbors who feel safer and protected because of it. I will wear it to show the community that their health and protection matter to me.

I hope one day soon masks will no longer be part of the church’s conversation. When and if that day comes, I hope the church has enough credibility left to show the world what it truly means to “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

**JEREMIE BELLER** is congregational minister for the Wilshire Church of Christ in Oklahoma City. He is an adjunct professor of communication for Oklahoma Christian University.
The Christian Chronicle Crossword

By Myles Mellor | www.ilovecrosswords.com

ACROSS
1. Jesus requested this from John.
5. He anointed Saul and David as kings of Israel.
8. “So the king gave orders for Daniel to be taken and thrown into the ___  filled with lions” (Daniel 6:16, Good News Translation).
10. Isaac’s wife (Genesis 24:67).
12. Responsibility.
13. “May nations be your servants, and may peoples ___ down before you” (Genesis 27:29, GNT).
15. Joseph’s occupation.
18. “‘Do not be worried or ___,’ Jesus told them. ‘Believe in God and believe also in me’” (John 14:1, GNT).
19. ___ Creed: a statement of belief adopted in 325 A.D.
21. The elder in the family, abbr.
23. Christmas songs.
26. Thing referred to.
27. Tel ___, Israeli city.
30. “How long must I ____ in my soul at night and have sorrow in my heart during the day?” (Psalm 13:2, International Standard Version).
31. “For in six days the LORD made ____and earth” (Exodus 31:17, King James Version).
33. “Behold the fowls of the ___: for they sow not, neither do they ___” (Matthew 6:26, KJV).
34. A son of Jacob.
36. “As it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary ___ and the other Mary to see the sepulcher” (Matthew 28:1, KJV).
38. Function.
40. Mourn.

DOWN
1. One of the early disciples who worked with Paul (alternate spelling, same as a community in West Virginia).
2. Small smooth stones.
3. Liquid used for writing.
4. Speed, abbr.
5. “There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to ___ down and unclose” (Mark 1:7, KJV).
6. “Thou hast turned for me my ___ into dancing” (Psalm 30:11, KJV).
7. “For thou shalt eat the ___ of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee” (Psalm 128:2, KJV).
11. Curve of a rainbow.
13. “Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our ___ is green” (Song of Solomon 1:16, KJV).
16. High priest, ___ as.
17. “The name of the Lord is a ___ tower; the righteous run into it and are safe” (Proverbs 18:10, KJV).
20. Abel’s brother.
22. “And he sent forth a ___, which went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up off the earth” (Genesis 8:7, KJV).
24. Isaac’s father.
25. She demanded the head of John the Baptist.
28. Jacob fathered this nation.
29. Celestial being described by Isaiah.
31. Adam and Eve ___ from the Lord in the garden.
32. Opinions.
33. “He removeth away the speech of the trusty, and taketh away the understanding of the ___” (Job 12:20, KJV).
35. Flee.
37. Part of B.C.E.
39. Street, for short.
Word Find: The joys of the season

By Betty Hollister | For The Christian Chronicle

Find the following words that describe the holidays. They can be forward, backward, up, down and diagonal. The unused 25 letters form a sentence. See page 34.

- ADORATION
- ANGELIC
- BIRTHDAY
- CAROLING
- COLORING
- DAYLIGHT
- DECORATIONS
- DELIGHTED
- DELIVERY
- DONATION
- EDUCATION
- ENERGETIC
- ENLIGHTENMENT
- ENVISION
- EXCEPTIONAL
- GATHERING
- GIFTS
- GUESTS
- HAPPINESS
- HEAVENLY
- HOLIDAY
- HUNTING
- INVESTMENTS
- INVITATION
- LAUGHTER
- LOVING
- LUXURY
- NATIVITY
- NATURAL
- NEEDY
- NEIGHBOR
- NORMAL
- NURSING
- ORDERLY
- ORNAMENTS
- PARENTS
- PEACEFUL
- PRESENTATIONS
- RELATIONSHIPS
- RIGHTEOUS
- SANCTUARY
- SELECTIONS
- SENTIMENT
- SHIPMENTS
- SHOEBOXES
- SIGHTS
- SILVER BELLS
- SLEIGHS
- TITLES
- TREATS
- TREES
- TRUSTING
- VERITY
- VICTORIOUS
- YULETIDE

Find the following words that describe the holidays. They can be forward, backward, up, down and diagonal. The unused 25 letters form a sentence. See page 34.

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tonya.patton@christianchronicle.org
Author provides a Clear path to good habits

In 2021, do you want to grow closer to God, get healthy, read your Bible daily, consistently go to bed earlier or wake up early to have quiet time? “Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones” is here to help.

Author James Clear will lead you through a step-by-step plan to build better habits and create healthy behavior changes. Clear acknowledges it’s often difficult to keep good habits going for more than a few days, even with sincere effort and the occasional burst of motivation. His book offers advice rooted in years of data collection — there’s something for everyone.

One of the best ways to build a new habit, he writes, is to identify a current habit you already do each day and then stack your new behavior on top. For example, if you want to read your Bible daily, stack it on top of drinking your morning coffee. When you pair an action you want to do with an action you need to do, it happens more easily.

“Even when you know you should start small, it’s easy to start too big,” Clear writes. “When you dream about making a change, excitement inevitably takes over, and you end up trying to do too much too soon.”

Enter the two-minute rule: When you start a new habit, it should take less than two minutes to do. So, “read before bed each night” becomes “read one page.” Small actions cast votes for the person you want to become. Even if you only read one page a night, you are still a person who reads before bed.


After I drank my coffee in the morning, I slowly walked down my driveway and back. I wanted the coffee, I needed the exercise. For weeks, these daily walks only lasted two minutes. I cast votes for the person I wanted to be, and eventually, Clear’s methods paid off. My lungs grew stronger, and I began to look forward to my walks. Over time, I walked longer and faster. To date, I’ve lost those 15 pounds, and I no longer struggle with my breathing.

“It is so easy to overestimate the importance of one defining moment and underestimate the value of making small improvements on a daily basis,” Clear writes. “Meanwhile, improving by 1 percent isn’t particularly notable — sometimes it isn’t even noticeable — but it can be far more meaningful.”

My defining moment: Realizing whatever I could do each day was enough.

So now you’re probably thinking of a few small habits you want to create. Great! But first, you may want to kick some of your bad habits. This can be challenging, Clear writes, for two reasons: We try to change the wrong thing, and we try to change our habits in the wrong way.

“Habits are like the entrance ramp to a highway,” Clear writes. “They lead you down a path, and, before you know it, you’re speeding toward the next behavior. It seems to be easier to continue what you are already doing than to start doing something different.”

We live in an immediate reward environment, he adds. Why would someone smoke if it leads to lung cancer? Why would someone overeat if they know it leads to obesity? Consequences of bad habits are delayed, while the rewards are immediate. Smoking might kill you in 10 years, but it reduces stress now. We all want better lives for our future selves. However, when the moment of decision arrives, instant gratification usually wins.

So, Clear suggests using a habit tracker such as a food journal, workout log, punch card or a calendar to cross off successful days. Seeing progress keeps us on track. I can attest that this tip works for me. Every month I print off a calendar with daily goals and check off five boxes a day that are important to me. It’s not always perfect across the board. And that’s OK, says Clear. Habits will fail, but you should never miss twice.

True behavior change is identity change, he writes. The most practical way to change who you are is to change what you do. So, decide the type of person you want to be. Then, prove it to yourself with small wins.

Out of the many self-help books I regularly consume, this one has made it into my top five. I believe “Atomic Habits” will kickstart your Bible reading plans, health goals, quiet-time aspirations and other ambitions. This would be a good book for a small group or church class.

LAURA AKINS is Features Editor for The Christian Chronicle. Find habit trackers and other tools from “Atomic Habits” at jamesclear.com.

A person of faith is ‘the only Bible some people may ever read’

Every week my husband asks me if I’m ready to start one of my many business ideas, and every week I shrug my shoulders and say, “Now is not the right time.”

He always says, “I believe in your idea. When you’re ready, I’m ready.”

My husband is a dreamer, and I’m the realist.

But after reading Mark Batterson’s “Win the Day: 7 Daily Habits to Help You Stress Less & Accomplish More,” I realize that maybe now is the time to join my husband’s team and dream — even if we are still battling a pandemic.

“Win the Day” reminds me that if I am waiting for the right time, then I will be waiting forever. I need to plant seeds in faith and believe in God’s power to use my story for his story.

Batterson, author of “The Circle Maker” and a minister in Washington, breaks down his methods to help you “stress less and accomplish more” into seven habits. These habits are an accumulation of research he has done through the years.

Batterson studied coaches, authors, theologians, poets and celebrities like Michael Phelps and Elon Musk. He took the habits, practices and philosophies from these studies and found the common denominators of success to form his combined method.

In this book, Batterson weaves his personal story with those of the people he studied. He also uses Scripture to emphasize his points and show how God is using every person’s experience in God’s ultimate
Seeing the miracle in Charlie Brown’s Christmas

“A Charlie Brown Christmas” made its debut at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 9, 1965, and was viewed by 45 percent of those watching television that evening, with an estimated 16 million of those watching television that evening, with an estimated 16 million homes tuned in.

That December, when I was 13, my parents, four siblings and I were living with my country grandparents, who still had five children residing in their three-bedroom house in Readyville, Tenn. (population 100). (My family was in the process of moving from Oklahoma to France, an Air Force transfer that never happened, but that’s another story.)

We slept in every room in the house but for the kitchen and bathroom. My brother and I shared a bunk in the den, while two uncles, one of them about ready to ship out to Vietnam, slept in another bed.

That Thursday December evening, after one of my grandma’s incredible suppers (I cannot remember the main course but can guarantee there would have been heaping plates of hot, homemade biscuits), a dozen or so of us scrunched in the den, and there, on a black-and-white TV set, we enjoyed the inaugural “Peanuts” special, which by the way was commissioned by Coca-Cola.

This was also a remarkable, memorable treat because in those days only Saturday mornings were reserved for children’s shows, thus a cartoon on a prime-time weeknight proved rare indeed.

I don’t believe I’ll spoil anything by sharing part of the story. When Charlie Brown cries out, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” Linus speaks up.

“Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about,” Linus says. Security blanket in hand, he walks to center stage and quotes Luke 2:8-14 from the King James Version:

“...And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord....”

The story closes as the children harmonize on “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.”

No “Good grief!” at the end, just the silent recognition of good grace, God’s grace, through the gift of his infant son, Christ the Lord, the greatest miracle of them all.

You cannot intentionally create a classic. It must prove itself by the test of time. This 25-minute animation, the first-ever “Peanuts” special, has accomplished that. It ranks as the second-longest-running holiday special on TV, right behind “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” which premiered one year earlier.

Astonishingly, this Emmy- and Peabody award-winning cartoon, made for a mere $96,000, almost did not make it on the air. “Peanuts” comic-strip creator Charles Schulz and his production crew, guided by producer Lee Mendelson and director Bill Melendez, believed they had made a dud.

Besides that, CBS network executives hated it, complaining of its slow pace and simple animation. They gave it black marks because it had no adult voices and no laugh tracks.

That was not all.

The bigwigs of the powerful commercial network did not approve of the anti-commercialism message. They also did not like the sound of Vince Guaraldi’s magnificent jazzy score, itself a classic.

But the gripe at the top of their list? Well, at the heart of the matter was the gospel truth.

They were afraid of Linus quoting Holy Scripture. They reportedly bleated, “You can’t read from the Bible on network television!”

How mistaken they were.

KEN BECK is a member of College Hills Church of Christ in Lebanon, Tenn., and was an entertainment and feature writer with The Tennessean for 31 years. He writes weekly feature stories for Middle Tennessee community papers and has co-written several books about “The Andy Griffith Show.” Contact kbtag@aol.com.
As we enter a strange new year, we are a huddled mass, yearning to breathe free

My favorite Christmas Eve memory began on the frayed, dark blue carpet of the Chicago O’Hare International Airport in 2011.

We were on our way to see my family in Nashville. Mom was still alive. Our oldest, Maggie, was 3 and still an only child.

We sat on the floor with our McDonald’s cheese-burgers because the benches at the gate were packed. (I miss crowded airports. Well, not really.) A group of Asian women took up most of the seats. Their threadbare dresses looked like they belonged in a previous century. Their wrinkled visages bore expressions of exhaustion and bewilderment.

Something bad had happened to these people.

One woman lay cramped across two seats, trying to sleep. A toddler, maybe 18 months old, stood next to her, crying to be held. She looked too old to have a baby. She gently motioned the boy away, toward the other women. He cried louder.

I fished through Maggie’s Happy Meal sack and grabbed the toy. “You already have this one,” I said. “Why don’t you give it to that boy?”

I’ll never forget watching Maggie take those few, timid steps toward the toddler, a host of foreign eyes suddenly transfixed on her. There were no thank-you’s, just slight smiles and nods. The boy stopped crying … for about 90 seconds.

Among their meager carry-ons I noticed some white plastic bags — most recently toward its Muslim Rohingya minority.

The minister and the translator were waiting for the new arrivals at the Nashville airport and didn’t even know if they had made it to the right gate in Chicago. Could I check?

I did. Everything was fine. I told the minister I’d make sure they got on the plane. He thanked me.

“Uh, no problem,” I said. “And God bless you for doing this.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Merry Christmas.”

Suddenly, one of them was in front of me, thrusting a cell phone at my ear. She seemed ancient — the family matriarch, perhaps? I took the phone and heard a man chattering in broken English on the other end. A translator.

His voice soon was replaced by a man with a southern accent who said he was “the pastor.” The refugees were Burmese, he explained, and his church was assisting them as they resettled in Tennessee. Their homeland, Myanmar, was ruled by a military junta until 2011. The country’s government continues to have a terrible track record of human rights abuses — most recently toward its Muslim Rohingya minority.

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“Uh, no problem,” I said. “And God bless you for doing this.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Merry Christmas.”

I don’t remember much else about that trip. Two years later we were in Nashville again for Mom’s last Christmas before pancreatic cancer took her from us.

Ten months after that, our second daughter was born.

And here we are in the final days of 2020. There’s no trip to Nashville in this year of sadness. We’ve lost so much and so many, and we pray for renewed hope in God’s promise that things will get better.

Every year I think about that huddled mass of tired, poor souls in the Chicago airport.

Like them, I yearn to breathe free, to see the sun rise in a new world.

ERIK TRYGGESTAD is president and CEO of The Christian Chronicle. Contact erik@christianchronicle.org, and follow him on Twitter @eriktryggestad.
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- [✓] Wear masks
- [✓] Social distance
- [✓] Use prefilled communion sets
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— Erik Tryggestad, president and CEO

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