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Editorial Designer | Rachel Riley

Regional Convention 2020 Host Church a “Center of Hope” in Los Angeles

By Carl Stagner



PASTOR GERMERY DIXON ENCOURAGING THE SAINTS AT CENTER OF HOPE LA.

Convention 2019 and General Assembly have come and gone, but the Regional Conventions scheduled across the country next year are on the horizon. Registration is now open for all three events as program details continue to be finalized for Inglewood, California (April 22–24); Anderson, Indiana (June 24–26); and Brooklyn, New York (September 16–18). Pastor Jeremy Dixon, who spoke at CHOG Convention 2017 in Wichita, Kansas, says his Los Angeles congregation is “pulling out all the stops” for the three-day gathering next April. An interview with the influential leader offers a glimpse of the people and the ministry giving life to their city in such a way that merits the name “Center of Hope.”

A merger of two Church of God congregations formed the foundation of who Center of Hope LA is today. From 1972 to 1996, the late beloved powerhouse preacher Benjamin F. Reid shepherded the flock which had culminated from a historically white and historically black church. During the outstanding leadership of Bishop Gregory Dixon, from 1996 until 2012, First Church of God in Inglewood (Los Angeles) changed its name to First Church of God—Center of Hope. “In his mind, he wanted to express that we would be an oasis of hope for all types of individuals who found themselves seeking something better,” Geremy Dixon explains. “He wanted to express our place as a place of hope, grounding, anchoring, and a place where you

Regional Host Church...

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had a sense that, no matter where you were starting from, there is a positive destination with the saints and under the banner of an incredible God.”

When Geremy took the reins in 2012, he led the church to simplify the name of the church to Center of Hope LA and “fully embrace that vision.” He continues, “It really is more about being able to say to people, in a name, what we know they will find when they come to visit us.”

Hope is certainly needed in Los Angeles, and not only due to the proximity of cultural influences that don’t always promote Christian values. In Atlanta, where Geremy once planted a small church, he observed that going to church is an understood cultural practice. While “every place has its struggles,” Geremy points out, “There’s a population where church is what you do. Los Angeles is not like that. It’s not ingrained that you go to church.”

One of the unique challenges of doing ministry in Los Angeles is that there’s so much else to do. In the shadow of Hollywood and Disney, and with the beach not too far to the west and mountaintop adventures to the north and east, there are a variety of activities clamoring for the attention of individuals and families. But another problem is the “transient” culture, as Geremy puts it. “LA is a place where people move to,” he explains. “Seldom do we find that people were born and raised in LA. In ministry here, we are mindful that we don’t have a lot of deep roots. We have to help foster



HOSPITALITY IS PARAMOUNT AT CENTER OF HOPE LA.

a family atmosphere for them.”

In the midst of church growth, souls getting saved, believers being baptized, and life change, Center of Hope LA is expanding its reach. They recently planted a new satellite location in the Sherman Oaks neighborhood. Geremy says it’s been an “incredible success so far” and that much of that success has coincided with the active development of young leaders. “With all the commentary on young people leaving the church in droves,” Geremy reflects, “I’ve been super blessed by God sending us some incredi-

some are looking forward to attending this first Regional Convention of 2020 and tack on a California vacation, Center of Hope LA is all the more excited to welcome Church of God pastors and laypeople to their home.

“I think what’s most exciting about the Regional coming to our church is that it’s coming to southern California to begin with,” Geremy explains. “There’s such an enthusiasm on the West Coast right now with some initiatives happening out here, as well as the Movement’s work internationally.

This is an opportunity for us to celebrate this momentum. We appreciate being able to link efforts on the West Coast with what we feel is a pivotal moment for the Church of God. We’re pulling out all the stops, doing everything we can possibly do for everyone who will attend. We want to make sure our hospitality speaks to what all

our churches are attempting to do, which is not just the local work, but that we see ourselves as active team players in the global work of the Movement.”

To learn more about the Regional Conventions 2020, and to register, visit www.chogconvention.org.



HIGH-ENERGY WORSHIP AT CENTER OF HOPE LA

ble gifted young leaders, hungry to step into kingdom leadership.”

From April 22 through April 24, Church of God people from across the country have the chance to see this kind of kingdom leadership and expansion firsthand. But as much as

CHOG Congregations Preparing Now for Christmas with New Resources

By Carl Stagner



The first Church of God movement-wide unity experience known as Christ's Birthday Observance took place in 1949. Seven decades later, the Church of God initiative organized by Christian Women Connection is still equipping congregations across North America and beyond, mobilizing the collective support of the movement for the advancement of the kingdom globally, and moving our hearts and minds to the manger. This time of year, Church of God pastors, music ministers, choirs, worship teams, and local CWC ministries are already busy preparing for the most wonderful time of the year. As Christ's Birthday Observance 2019 materials hit church mailboxes late in the summer, Christmas planners have found practical tools and inspiration in a variety of new resources centered on the theme, "Good News! Experiencing the Genuine Jesus."

As one of the longest continuously running traditions in the Church of God, congregations in the United States and Canada, in particular, have come to anticipate Christ's Birthday Observance. The weekly lighting of

the Advent candle and the associated readings have sparked wonder and worship during an otherwise hectic and commercialized season. Project Prayer has led churches around the world to pray together, often in twenty-four-hour blocks, on specific days during Advent, for the global ministries of the church. Throughout Advent, and often throughout the year, Christ's Birthday Observance has prompted individuals to save money—often at significant sacrifice—to be given generously in the largest single offering in the Church of God on the Sunday immediately before Christmas. No other offering touches the length and breadth of the Church of God movement like this one—from the sending of missionaries to Trafficklight, from CBH to CWC—the Christ's Birthday Observance offering annually yields a real, lasting effect on the kingdom.

Christian Women Connection has issued four primary goals for this year's brand-new Christ's Birthday Observance: 1) Engage culture by increasing the number of people presented with Jesus during the season; 2) Enrich the church community by offering compelling and relevant seasonal tools for church life; 3) Extend the clock for pastors by providing a fully planned program to help de-stress Christmas; and 4) Raise over \$800,000 to accelerate the spread of the Good News throughout the world.

To help the Church of God reach these goals, CWC has made available an incredibly wide variety of brand-new resources, many of which have already been mailed to all our churches. Numerous pastors have found sermon starters of years past to be

helpful for their weekly message prep but, *new* this year, a regional pastor cluster has collectively developed *full-length* sermons, sermon outlines, supporting media, children's lessons, and small group materials. Besides Advent readings and sample sermons (including one by Church of God Ministries' general director Jim Lyon!), a worship service guide, social media material, and PowerPoint tools are all a few clicks away at www.christianwomenconnection.org/2019-cbo.

Kayla Robinson Harden, ministry coordinator of programming for CWC, reflects on Advent with the following words: "It seems that everywhere we turn, we are confronted with bad news. Natural disasters, violence, hatred, and other evils consume our news and social media feeds. There are many days when our circumstances seem hopeless with darkness closing in all around us. For Christians, Advent is a season of waiting. As Christians we know that this bad news is not all there is. We realize that Christ's birth is the Good News the world was waiting for."

So, worship in the waiting. Adore him in the anticipation. And, don't forget to prepare for an Advent that will leave an indelible mark on you and your congregation. After all, it's not easy to remain the same after experiencing the genuine Jesus. That's what Christ's Birthday Observance 2019 is all about.

Browse the wide selection of Christ's Birthday Observance 2019 resources at christianwomenconnection.org. Follow CBO on Facebook at www.facebook.com/adventcbo/.

Pastors Help Pastors Reach New Heights of Wholeness, Wellness

By Carl Stagner



TOM PELT AND JONATHAN ABSHER HIKING IN COLORADO.

At 14,000 feet, the views are breathtaking, but so is the air. Lower levels of oxygen—considered “thin” air—combined with unpredictable weather and potentially hazardous trail conditions, can pose health risks, at minimum, to even the most avid athlete. Hiking alone is not recommended at such altitudes, though many insist on doing so. Church of God pastors Tom Pelt and Jonathan Absher have reveled in the mountaintop experience among Colorado’s highest peaks and have recognized the vivid parallels to ministry. In an effort to see pastors minister at their peak, they’ve championed the holistic health vital to the daily climb. Without reinventing the wheel, but with intentionality and a genuine love for fellow pastors, they’ve taken specific strides

in recent years to come alongside pastors, pull them out of isolation into community, and help them reach new heights of wholeness and wellness.

Tom Pelt, interim lead pastor at The Church at Bradenton in Bradenton, Florida, and Jonathan Absher, senior pastor of Rock Creek Church of God in Bessemer, Alabama, are the best of friends. Many might not know, though, that they’re actually family through marriage; Tom is married to Jonathan’s sister. In fact, Jonathan was part of the youth group at the church where his father Wayne served as senior pastor while Tom served as Jonathan’s youth pastor. “Jonathan has now been in ministry almost twenty years and I have long since been looking to him for advice,” Tom explains. “He is an amazing leader.”

Jonathan’s coaching ministry several years ago utilized what the two have dubbed the “heart, soul, mind, and strength” format to help pastors holistically. About a decade ago, Tom also led a ministry that focused on coaching churches. Today, their experiences, including Jonathan’s coaching format, have become the basis for their ministry to pastors today, known appropriately as Peak Pastors. Though Jonathan’s contributions are inextricable to the work of Peak Pastors today, it was actually Tom and his son Andrew who were listening to the Spirit together when the call from God came for such a venture.

“My son Andrew—student/young adult pastor at The Church at Bradenton—and I were hiking in Kentucky about five years ago, and we were dreaming and brainstorming about all things ministry,” Tom recounts. “It was one of those ‘What if?’ conversations. Peak Pastors really started in our hearts during that hike. We were filled with a sense of both the passion and pain associated with ministry leadership and wanted to do our part to speak into it, maybe even do something about it, even if just for a handful of pastors.”

Peak Pastors developed over a period of several years and continues to develop. The online community experience aims to promote the health of the pastor’s heart, soul, mind, and body. Through online coaching, accountability, friendship, and fun—yes, the opportunity to summit 14,000-foot peaks in the Rocky Mountains is a

Pastors Help Pastors...

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challenging and fun reality—Peak Pastors is already having an impact. Tom acknowledges that the concepts that drive their ministry aren't new or exclusive to Peak Pastors; however, he insists that the rise in ministry drop-out rates and the disturbingly high number of pastors living in isolation suggests there's much more to be done. "No part of Peak Pastors is totally original," Tom explains. "We're not necessarily called to change the landscape of pastors in Western culture. But *if we can do something...*"

Furthermore, many cohort-style ministries don't emphasize the physical health of the pastor; Peak Pastors does! "It's a shame that pastors aren't generally known as the best examples of holistic health, particularly physical health," Tom reflects. "Perhaps the old tradition of potluck dinners is to blame!" he quips, then takes a more serious tone. "The lifestyle of a pastor is anything but 9 to 5, and demands a high level of personal and organizational intentionality to live and lead healthy. 'Bodily exercise profits little...' (2 Timothy 4:8) but it does profit!"

To that end, Peak Pastors welcomes Christ-centered experts



TOM PELTS TEACHING AT THE CHURCH AT BRADENTON.



ANDREW AND TOM PELT AT THE SUMMIT OF ONE OF COLORADO'S "14-ERS."

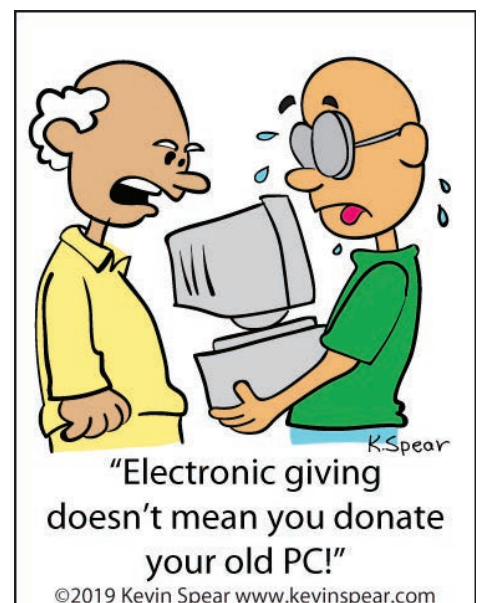
to the experience to inspire and challenge participating pastors to honor God with their physical fitness. "Besides," Tom adds, "there is a direct correlation between being physically active, and our spiritual, emotional, relational, and intellectual well-being."

Coinciding with the mountain motif, the cohort conveners are known as "trail guides." A veteran of life and ministry facilitates monthly online video conversations, which center on one or more of the four focuses—heart, soul, mind, and strength. A literal trail guide will offer a summertime expedition in the mountains of Colorado, beginning in 2020, but these spiritual trail guides offer life-changing encouragement and exhortation throughout the year.

"Generations in our families have served in pastoral ministry," Tom concludes. "Because of this our hearts have always beat and bled for pastors and their families.... If other leaders can benefit from what we have learned from both experience and the many incredible leaders we have done life with,

it's a win."

Discover the opportunities Peak Pastors has to offer, including an inspirational blog, at www.peakpastors.com.



Movement to Pray for the Persecuted Church this November

By Carl Stagner

Christians in Western culture may not fully appreciate the cost of Christianity, but those who put their lives on the line in other parts of the world, just to share their faith or simply gather together, understand. Depending on the source, the numbers of believers imprisoned, tortured, and/or killed may vary, but one thing is clear—the need for our prayerful support of the persecuted church is tremendous. After Church of God leaders in Texas proposed a motion during General Assembly 2019 in Orlando to ask all local Church of God congregations to set aside a Sunday each November to pray specifically for the persecuted church around the world,

overwhelming approval followed.

Citing the 245 million Christians internationally who face serious persecution, “Motion Five” outlined the statistics on persecution, scriptures that instruct believers to demonstrate concern and care for the suffering and mistreated, and concluded with a resolution to pray and educate. Following discussion on the floor of the General Assembly, it was determined that any



Sunday each November could be selected by local congregations to set aside for the purpose of prayer. In years past, ecumenical leadership of the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church set aside the first or second Sunday of November. This year, most prominent ministries that address the needs of the persecuted church are advocating for the first Sunday of the month, which is November 3.

But prayer is only the begin-

ning. The resolution approved by the General Assembly further asks that “congregations and leaders make an effort to educate the church about Christian persecution during the month of this event.”

Jim Lyon later reflected on the resolution in a post-Convention article. “The statistics are sobering, the suffering is real, the cost of following Jesus can be very high,” he writes. “...Think about marking your November calendar this week to embrace and follow through with this call to the whole Movement.”

Resources to aid the local church in the official observation of the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church are readily available for

download. Learn more at www.persecution.com/idop, www.idop.ca, and www.releaseinternational.org/idop.

Learn more about the international presence and work of the Church of God at www.chogglobal.org.

Giving Life, Giving All: North Carolina's Pastor's Legacy Pays It Forward

By Carl Stagner

Alvin Young was a Baptist, but she was a part of the Church of God. Fueled by close proximity as neighbors in the North Carolina countryside near the town of Hickory, Alvin's interest in her meant he would soon be attending the Church of God, too. The shift wasn't hard for Alvin, though, for besides his love interest eclipsing denominational differences, he found the teachings of the Church of God to be more consistent with Scripture. Marriage soon secured their relationship with each other and the Church of God, but could do very little to secure their finances. While making a measly \$1.15 an hour and doing his best to support a growing family, Alvin Young received a call to ministry.

Even as a child, Alvin Young barely scraped by. His father traveled by mule all over the state, working the lumber mills and doing his best to provide. When Alvin was only in eighth grade, he quit school to help his brothers and sisters around the house and on the farm. To some, Alvin's ministerial calling may have been met with skepticism, but there was no doubt in his mind. Alvin's lack of a diploma made his prospects grim, but God would



EDITH AND ALVIN YOUNG

make a way. Alvin started contacting ministerial colleges about possible enrollment, but doors of opportunity closed for the high



GARY YOUNG (FAR LEFT) HONORED ON OCTOBER 6, 2019, BY (LEFT TO RIGHT) MIKE CLAYPOOL, BEN SHULAR, AND CORNELIUS ATKINSON.

school dropout. Then he contacted Gulf Coast Bible College in Houston, Texas.

The college, better known today as Mid-America Christian University, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, gave

Alvin an intriguing proposal: take the necessary tests, score a passing grade to get your GED, and you'll be accepted. Alvin passed, and he went on to graduate near the top of his class. All this could not come to pass, however, without first uprooting his family, moving

several states away, and working three part-time jobs (in addition to his wife's work) to pay for his ministerial training. Memories of the

experience are a bit fuzzy today for Gary, Alvin's son, but he remembers several of the key details.

"It was 1958 and I was eight years old at the time," Gary recalls. "We were very poor. We were living in a two-room house when Dad decided to become a minister. We had no indoor plumbing of any kind up in the foothills of Hickory. Then he says, 'God's called me and we're going to Houston!' I didn't understand what was going on. We packed our clothes, an ironing board, and a mixer, all in a '41 Ford, and headed to Texas. No job was lined up, and what money he had was what my grandmother could afford to let him borrow to find a place to live. Dad put himself through three years at Gulf Coast by working three part-time jobs, and my mom worked, too."

Before the decline of Alvin's mother's health necessitated a move back to North Carolina, he

served as pastor in Alabama. It was during these early days that young Gary noted how compassionate of a minister his father had become. A couple that wasn't even attending their church needed some help and contacted Alvin. "They lived in a two-room house where you could literally see daylight coming through the cracks in the wall. They owned a hog, which was their food for the entire next year, as they had no money to buy food. They really had no money to buy anything. Dad had prayer with them, as the gentlemen told my dad that their hog was sick and would probably die. They said, 'Preacher, if he dies, we don't know what we're going to eat for the next year. But dad said, 'We're going to pray for the hog.' And he did. He prayed for them and prayed that God

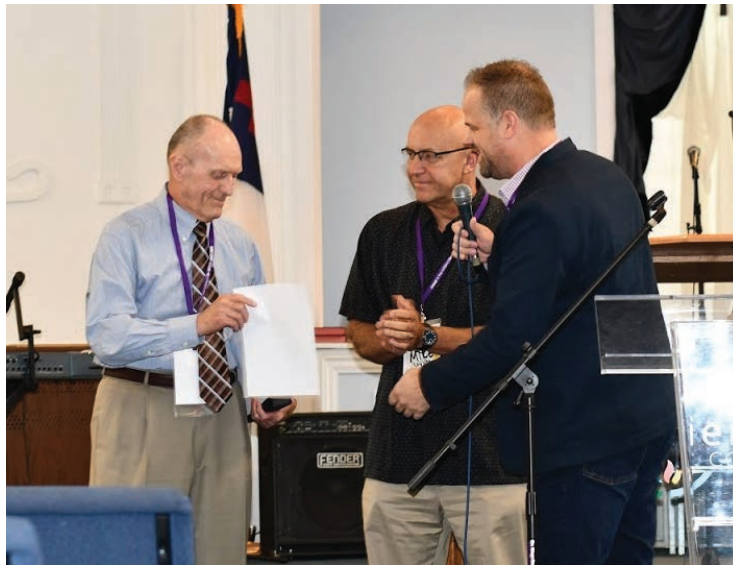
would heal the hog because these people needed the food. A couple days later, he got word that the hog had recovered! That animal's disease meant it should have been put down. But my dad was the type that nothing's too big and nothing's too little to go to God with. I've never forgotten that."

In 1966, Alvin Young and his family returned to North Carolina, where he became only the second minister to shepherd the flock at College View Church of God in Raleigh. In just six years, the congregation could no longer fit in the small block building, which would only hold about forty people. Pastor Alvin rallied the church to expand, and because of his own Spirit-given gift of craftsmanship, he served as the project's contractor himself!

"He could do carpentry, electrical,

plumbing, and much more," Gary reflects. "Obviously he wasn't highly educated but, if it needed to be built, Dad could do it, and he was very good at it."

Alvin Young poured heart, soul, and body into the church, serving until 1982. Sadly, pouring his body into the church ultimately caught up with him. While carrying shingles up a ladder to the roof of the church building, he ruptured three discs—but



GARY YOUNG RECEIVES AN AWARD AND LETTER FROM CHURCH OF GOD MINISTRIES AND CAROLINA MINISTRIES ON OCTOBER 6, 2019.

didn't stop working on the expansion until it was complete. Numerous surgeries did little to ease the pain that ultimately forced Pastor Alvin to sit down toward the conclusion of his weekly sermons.

In 2001, Alvin Young passed away and, more recently, the church's life cycle came to an end. But Pastor Alvin Young's legacy lives, as does that of the congregation. The closing worship service was difficult, but several developments have encouraged the congregation. "Dad literally gave up his health, he gave his all, for the Lord and the church," Gary explains. "But the property was purchased by another church, and that pleases us."

The new church, though not affiliated directly with the Church of God movement, is Christ-centered, and God is already blessing. At one

point earlier this year, the new congregation had already baptized sixty people.

Also, worth noting: Gary explains that the church property would have probably not even sold for a third of what it did without the expansion.

"So, what Dad built the building for is still being done," Gary reflects. "They may repaint it or remodel it, but God is still working there and that's what matters."

The sale of the church building has also provided for the revitalization of other struggling Church of God congregations. Mike Claypool, regional pastor for Carolina Ministries, says, "College View's legacy has enabled us to develop a system to help revitalize churches in North Carolina. We'll provide consultation, coaching, and funds for this purpose." Not only that, but Mike speaks of another benefit to the sale of the church, one which

he describes as an "important way to honor Pastor Young's legacy."

That is, the opportunity for today's ministerial students. Investing in the developing leaders of the Church of God, the remaining College View congregation decided to establish a scholarship with Leadership Focus to make it possible for the legacy of Alvin Young to live on with ripple effects into eternity. In the words of Alvin's son Gary, "Let's establish a scholarship fund so the next young minister doesn't have to work three jobs to get through!"

Learn more about the Church of God at www.JesusIsTheSubject.org. Learn more about Leadership Focus at www.JesusIsTheSubject.org/leadership-focus. Learn more about Carolina Ministries at www.carolinaministries.org.

CHOG Minister Completes 4,310-Mile Walk for Adoption, Foster Care

By Carl Stagner



GLENN KOSTER WETS HIS FEET IN THE PACIFIC OCEAN.

Glenn Koster left South Miami on foot, in February 2018. He intended to reach Seattle by October of last year, but the hazards around the next curve weren't always visible along the 4,310-mile adventure on which he'd embarked. Ultimately appearing in 51 newspapers, on NPR and K-LOVE, with 44 churches, and for 3 foster-care-related groups, Glenn Koster finally completed his walk across America for adoption and foster care awareness late this summer. As Glenn dipped his feet in the waters of the Pacific Ocean, it was clear that even those frustrating delays would serve a providential purpose.

Glenn Koster was adopted at age six, but neglect and abuse set the stage for a second adoption at age ten. The trauma of his childhood

conditioned Glenn to make some poor choices early in his life, ruling out the option for he and his wife Charlcie to adopt. But adoption into the family of God had left an indelible mark on his life, as well as a desire to pay it forward. While enrolled in Leadership Focus, Glenn found tremendous success last year and this year as he walked across the country with his wife tagging along

in an RV for shelter along the way. The RV's mechanical problems that followed could be classified today as blessings in disguise.

The hydraulic automatic parking break system began to fail by the time they reached western Nebraska in July 2018. Without nearby repair shops equipped to handle the magnitude of the issue, significant delays were probable. Combine that with severe weather and a health scare that confronted Glenn, who had suffered a few years ago from what's known as Grave's Disease, delays became inevitable.

Reflecting back on the hills and valleys (and some foreboding mountain ranges!) crossed, Glenn says the real challenges weren't so much the physical hauls up and down steep grades in blistering heat or dangerous thunderstorms, but rather the close brushes with traffic. On numerous occasions, the itinerary had to be adjusted due to unadvisable conditions ahead or sheer impassibility. Drop-offs, areas with little or no shoulder, and hair-pin curves weren't welcoming for

walkers—or an RV. Lack of cell phone coverage in some areas also added to the adventure.

But even the narrow misses were opportunities to make connections

about adoption and foster care. Just outside of Malta, Montana, Glenn recounts a prompting within that led to a stop at a certain



GLENN, HIS WIFE CHARLCIE, AND THEIR DOG WALKER.

4,310-Mile Walk...

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gravel intersection. A semi was approaching down the highway while a pickup truck approached on the side. Focusing solely on the semi, the pickup truck driver stopped abruptly after his eyes caught Glenn at the last second. The driver's apology was followed up by a conversation right there on the roadside about the mission which had propelled Glenn to that point. "Once I explained why I was walking, his demeanor changed completely," Glenn remembers. "His dad had been a foster parent for a number of years and his sister had adopted three kids in Georgia...God used a potentially dangerous situation, made it safe, and then used it to spread the message. Amazing!"

Sundays were a day of rest for Glenn. They were also opportunities to worship with churches in the area and often chances to communicate his mission. Glenn and Charlcie were astounded on numerous occasions by the hand of God working on their behalf to help spread the word about adoption and foster care. It would take a book to describe all the incredible developments—indeed, Glenn is working on a book slated for release in 2020—but one involved a truck driver that parked next to him on a busy highway in Nebraska. For nearly ten minutes of conversation about foster care and adoption, not a single car whizzed by them. Once the driver left, traffic returned to its normal volume!



ONLY 100 MILES LEFT TO WALK IN MONTANA!



A SPONTANEOUS "WELCOME COMMITTEE" IN WESTPORT, WASHINGTON!

The final day of walking came and was no disappointment; instead, it was better than Glenn could have imagined. After about four attempts, Glenn's phone calls made it through to Scott & Kelli of the K-LOVE morning nationwide Christian radio show broadcast. Scott remembered talking to Glenn before about the walk, which prompted him to inquire further. The two radio anchors interviewed Glenn and later played the interview. "Then, as I was

nearing the turn toward Westport, Washington, there was a car parked along the road," Glenn recalls. "A gentleman got out of the car and approached me. 'Hi, Glenn! Eight pairs

of shoes, huh?' With those words, he had me off-balance until he explained that he had heard the K-LOVE interview." As it turned out, the gentleman works for the fire department in Westport. He left and recruited fire fighters and EMS workers to gather in a show of support and welcome to their community. By the time Glenn arrived,

the chief of police and even the mayor showed up. Glenn's arrival was met with cheers, cars honking, and a lot of hoopla. "It was quite the welcoming committee!" Glenn explains.

An estimated one million people have now heard Glenn's message. He knows of at least six different families that began training to become foster parents, and at least three kids who now have "forever homes" because of Glenn's walk across America. He can only imagine the ripple effects of his walk, and the stories he may never hear as seeds he planted begin to grow.

Glenn has completed both his walk and his journey through Leadership Focus. In the weeks since, he's also announced that First Church of God in Hutchinson, Kansas, called him to be their associate pastor of urban ministries and evangelism. Glenn also continues to write books, plan revivals, and advocate for adoption and foster care.

Learn more about Glenn's walk and mission on Facebook at www.facebook.com/KSCharitySteps. Learn more about Leadership Focus at www.jesusisthesubject.org/leadership-focus.

Philadelphia Pastor Publishes Legendary Account of Pain, Redemption, and Triumph

By Carl Stagner



MILTON GRANNUM TELLING HIS STORY AT CHURCH OF GOD CONVENTION 2009.

Because of his commitment to Jesus Christ, Milton Grannum's family kicked him out of their house when he was only fourteen years old. Adding insult to injury, they tossed his school books out the door and told him he should go live at the church. The words of the psalmist brought comfort to young Milton: "For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me in" (Psalm 27:10 ESV). Stuffing all his belongings in a pillow case, Milton left, unsure of what he might face. Still, Milton Grannum found resolve in the words of a song: "Whether I live or die, whether I wake or sleep, I am the Lord's, I know."

Long before he and his wife became the founding pastors of the thriving New Covenant Church of God in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Milton Grannum was a Roman Catholic schoolboy in Guyana (known

as British Guiana at the time). As Providence would have it, Church of God missionaries Herman and Lavera Smith hosted the first-ever vacation Bible school in the country and Grannum's curiosity led him to attend. Intrigued by the message of the Church of God, and won over by the love of the Smiths and later missionaries like Don and Betty Jo Johnson, Milton Grannum consecrated his life to the Lord and to the spread of the gospel. Milton was overjoyed with his newfound faith, which propelled him to organize a group of peers to minister on the streets, in hospitals, and nursing homes. But not everyone was overjoyed, particularly his parents and instructors.

When the prospects for the homeless boy were grim, God was working all things together for good. Milton Grannum found his way to the home of his Sunday school teacher, who connected him once again to Herman and Lavera Smith, who loved to call young Milton their "helper." They let him stay with them for a while until Herman found, and paid the rent for, a house for Milton. In exchange, Milton completed a variety of chores for the Smiths. At the conclusion of the Smiths' missionary service in Guyana, they arranged for the new missionaries to care for Grannum until he was eighteen. At that age, he would leave for Bible college in Trinidad.

In 1982, Milton and his wife Hyacinth founded New Covenant Church. When the building became too small to accommodate the growing congregation, they purchased a college campus that had since closed. The acquisition of this present church campus is a miracu-

ulous story in itself, replete with prayer, possibilities, and again, the hand of Providence.

Since then, Milton has authored several books, preached at numerous Church of God conventions and camp meet-

ings, served on the planning committee for the Global Gathering in 2013, and hosted the Church of God Regional Convention in 2016—among numerous other involvements. His story, which seemed to have little to no hope at the outset, proved God faithful and



C. MILTON GRANNUM & HYACINTH BOBB-GRANNUM

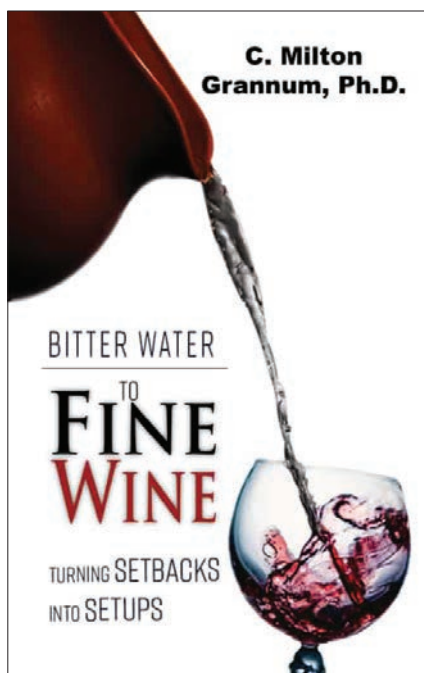
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true. Like the wedding at Cana told in the second chapter of the gospel of John, Jesus still turns bitter water to fine wine. This year that concept is the title of Milton Grannum's latest book, his first published account of this deeply personal story of pain, redemption, and triumph, which has become legendary in the Church of God over the many times it has been told and retold.

"I've shared it a number of places and times," Milton explains. "But I felt I needed to leave a written record of the journey. The title—regardless of your bitter experiences—it's all up to you how you will handle them. Too often, someone's song is 'Nobody knows the trouble I've seen...' when it could be how instead we use our trouble for our betterment and development."

Woven into his personal tale, Milton emphasizes the vitality of giving God full control, as well as offering God thanksgiving for the bad things. The latter has already proven an attention-grabber. "There are two dimensions of thanksgiving," he explains. "One is thanking God in everything, as the Bible says (1

Thessalonians 5:18). But the other is thanking God for everything, and that's harder. We need to recognize that God is at work in everything. When we pray, we pray for God's blessings and I think we sometimes have the idea that God is a Santa Claus with a big bag of blessings.



NEW COVENANT CHURCH DURING THE 2016 REGIONAL CONVENTION.

But God has a singular process of teaching, training, and tribulation. He allows these things to come into our lives as the methodology for training and developing us."

In the book, Milton Grannum expounds on this concept by discussing his relationship with his mother. In an emotionally gripping reflection, Milton tells of how he came to the point of being thankful that his mother gave him "hell." He says, "The pain, the suffering, the homelessness, and so forth, helped me to understand life. Rather than dwelling on them, praise God he used those experiences as a ladder from God to climb up and out!"

Looking back at September 2016, when the Church of God descended upon their sprawling church campus for the Regional Convention, Milton and Hyacinth beam.

"It was a tremendous experience," Milton reflects. "It was an honor and helped our people see the Church of God. It's one thing for us to say we're a part of the Church of God, but for them to see the Church of God have an event like that on our campus was a tremendous boost."

Milton Grannum's story has been written, but God continues to write a story of his own. Even as the baton has been passed to Bob Oliver to serve as executive pastor, Milton Grannum's fifty-six years of pastoring has placed him in a new role, on-campus, comprised heavily of leadership development. The Grannums are excited to see how the Lord uses Pastor Bob Oliver in the next chapter of New Covenant Church.

Order your copy of *Bitter Water to Fine Wine: Turning Setbacks into Setups* on Amazon at www.amazon.com. Learn more about the Church of God at www.JesusIsTheSubject.org.

South Dakota Church Establishes Partnership with Local School

By Michael Smith

About a decade ago, Rustic Hills Community Church of God was looking for a practical way to build redemptive relationships in their community. The city of Sioux Falls is a small Midwestern city, but the largest city in South Dakota (population 187,000). There are lots of Christian-based ministry opportunities within the city, but we wanted something more personal, and something that would give us the opportunity to make real relationships. Connecting with one of our area schools seemed like the perfect option for us.

We prayed for an extended period of time about which school to select. Initially we were thinking one of the schools with a higher percentage of free/reduced lunches (an indicator of need) but, after much prayer, it seemed God was leading us to a different school: Harvey Dunn Elementary. It is not the closest school to our physical location, but it is nearby.

I made the initial contact with the school principal. I prayed for favor with the principal for a week before I stopped inside. I saw her car in the parking lot and simply stopped and asked the office staff if I could meet with the principal for a moment. This was in the summer, so her schedule was much more flexible. Dr. Boysen was willing to meet with me. I introduced myself and told her that my church wanted to serve her and the school. She was



HARVEY DUNN ELEMENTARY TEACHERS.

initially guarded, but I assured her several times that we did not have a secret agenda. We simply wanted to do what we could do to serve her and make her life easier for her, her staff, and the school.

We talked a bit about what that might look like. I asked her what would make her life as a principal easier. I asked her if she had needs that her budget would not cover.



PASTOR MICHAEL

The school always needs classroom volunteers. I agreed to try and recruit some. I suggested that we would like to assign a personal prayer partner for all teachers and staff. She was willing to give me a staff roster. I assured her that we would control contact between those praying and the teachers. We did not want teachers to get unsolicited contact from people

they did not know. Over time this restriction has loosened up as intercessors have sent cards or notes. Teachers have recognized that we can be trusted. Now some teachers let us know when they have prayer concerns. As time has gone on, we have found some relationships developing among staff and church people. One year I spent several hours counseling a teacher going through a divorce.

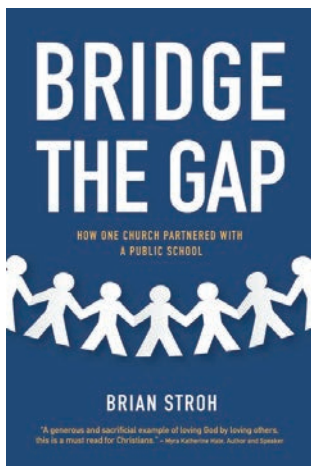
We were told that teachers love treats. We organized an effort to bring home-baked treats to the teacher's lounge on Wednesdays each week. This is an easy "win" for everyone. People that are intimidated by volunteering or some other kind of face-to-face contact are willing to bake a treat once in a while. People who thought they could never participate in outreach or evangelism find an opportunity to participate. We have people volun-

South Dakota Church...

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teer to bake treats for the teacher's lounge and usually they only have to do so once a year. We have no restrictions on what we provide. We encourage home-baked rather than purchased food—it is more meaningful.

In addition, we have provided food and support during parent-teacher conference and volunteers for special events for which the school staff needs help. We have provided clothing for young children—coats, hats, mittens, and also socks, underwear, and pants. Our elementary school has a large



number of preschool children, as well as young elementary, and they often have “accidents,” requiring fresh underwear, or other supplies. We bring clothing and give it to the office, where the staff keeps it for

when it is needed. We also provide school supplies to the office for teachers who might need extra. In our district most students already get backpack-kinds-of-things from other sources, so individual school supplies are usually not a need.

Also, one of the teachers has started using our church facility parking lot for a summer basketball camp. This is at no cost to us, but gets dozens and dozens

of elementary-age children into the parking lot and building for a week each summer.

The churches in Sioux Falls have a voluntary network through which we try to keep track of which church is volunteering at which school. For us it is often confusing if more than one church is volunteering at one particular school. Brian Stroh (an associate pastor of one of our city churches), has just written a book on church-school partnership which might be of help. For more helpful ideas and strategies for partnering with schools, visit Brian's resourceful Facebook page at www.facebook.com/BrianStrohSchoolPartnerships, which contains thirty-one interviews from participating churches—including Rustic Hills.

Learn more about the Church of God at www.JesusIsTheSubject.org.

MACU Music Major: “Jesus Put a New Dream in Me”

By Whitney Knight

From the big screen to the chapel stage, music and ministry worship major Kevin Dugay is used to drawing a crowd. With his soulful voice and God-given gift for performance, Dugay frequently leads worship during Mid-America Christian University chapel services every Wednesday and Friday. But long before he found himself in Oklahoma City, Dugay was an accomplished young actor with twelve years of stage experience and a promising professional career ahead of him.

“I had been acting for most of my life,” he said. “I wouldn't have given it up for anyone or anything. Not a person or a thing would have ever stopped me from continuing.”

While he was on the rising plane of success, Dugay didn't have a

place for God in his life. He was raised Catholic, but he became apathetic in his belief.

“I never really knew who Jesus was or what he did, what sins were or anything like that,” Dugay said.

That all started to change when he met an Oklahoma girl named Linda with a heart burning hot for Jesus Christ. Their friendship turned into a long-distance relationship and, although Dugay remained respectful of his girlfriend's beliefs, he still couldn't hear the sound of God calling out to him—until one fateful day that remains vivid in his memory.

“I used to struggle with a lot of anxiety attacks,” Dugay recalled. “One time at work, I had a bad panic attack and went to the bathroom to try and calm myself down. Instead

of shaking, my heart rate started to slow, and I felt this voice. I couldn't hear it; it was in my chest. I didn't believe in God then, but I still knew it was God. He asked, ‘Is this what I put you on earth for?’ in reference to me pursuing a music and acting career.”

In that moment, Dugay remembers images flooding his vision. He saw himself feeding the homeless, ministering to youth and singing in churches.

“All the sudden, in an instant, I understood that this is real. Jesus is real; God is real,” he said. “When I opened the door of the bathroom that day, it was like when Dorothy opened the door in *The Wizard of Oz* and everything went from black-and-white to color. Everything in my life that I thought mattered didn't



MACU Music Major...

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matter anymore.”

Dugay decided he wanted to fully pursue Christ.

“I wanted to do what he wanted me to do,” he said.

That started with moving to Oklahoma, where Dugay took up a youth worship leadership position in his girlfriend’s church. Today, he serves as a music minister while attending school full-time at MACU.

“My goal is now to use the gifts God gave me to glorify him and to reach out to the people who are lost and broken and bring them to the family of Christ,” Dugay said. “I chose MACU so I could strengthen my theological background. I want to be able to minister to people effectively and be honest and truthful as I shepherd people with music.”

He said MACU’s Christ-centered environment has allowed him to become closer to God.

“I love the spiritual life on campus,” Dugay said. “There’s so many people on campus who I can just sit down with, and we can start talking about the gospel and ask questions and find the answers together. Everyone here knows my name and treats me like family.”

As Dugay works to complete his degree, he said it’s not himself, but God, who he wants to keep in the limelight.

“I used to dream about being this famous actor and being popular and glorified,” he said. “But when Jesus got a hold of me, he really put a new dream in me, and that’s to use music to minister to as many people as I can. MACU has really been equipping me as a Christian and as a musician. I’m extremely thankful that this school is helping me obtain that dream.”

Mid-America Christian University offers a Christian liberal arts education through two dynamic colleges. The College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) offers undergraduate degrees to traditional residential and daytime commuting students. The College of Adult and Graduate Studies (CAGS) makes college education affordable and accessible to busy working adults and graduate students. Degree programs are offered online or on-ground at the MACU campus in south Oklahoma City. MACU is an endorsed agency of the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana) and is regionally accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Visit www.macu.edu for more information.

Attention Pastors!

Please print and distribute this newsletter as an encouragement to your church

Get Ready to ROAR!

Did you know that God's voice can sound like a roaring lion? The Bible says in Job 37:2, "Listen! Listen to the roar of his voice; to the rumbling that comes from his mouth" (NIV). God's voice is bold and fearless in love. His voice speaks what is right and true. We want to teach our kids from an early age to listen to God's voice and learn to recognize when he is speaking to them.

God wants our kids to be lion-like—courageous, strong, fearless, innovative, and creative! In *Born to Roar! Devotions for Kids*, author Diane Cory has written ninety stirring devotions to help kids see their amazing uniqueness and find their roar. The lion's voice is one of the things that makes it fearless and a king of the

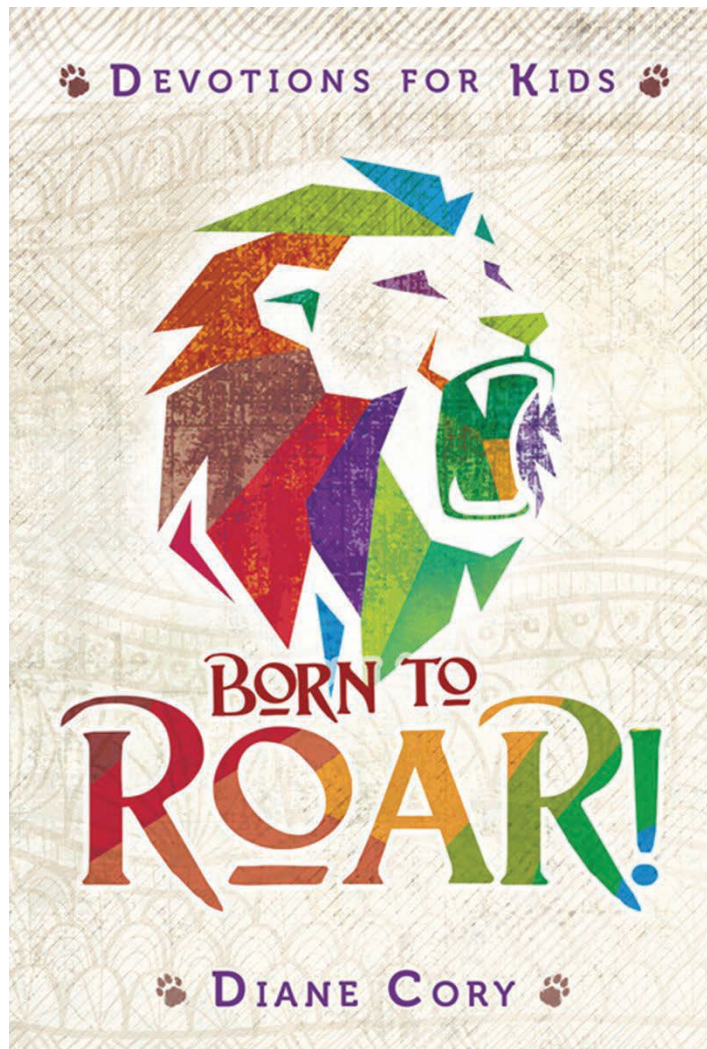
jungle. Boldness makes the lion stand out among the other animals. God wants kids to have a bold roar, too! He wants kids to have a powerful voice in this world. Cory believes kids don't have to wait until adulthood to change the world. God has a plan and a purpose for their lives right now!

For kids and adults alike, the lion's strength, power, boldness, and roar are captivating. Lions are viewed as brave and protective. What if we could teach our kids to be like lions when it comes to the things of God in this world? What if they were brave in standing up for what's right with no fear? What

if they knew how to protect their heart from evil—not allowing anyone or anything to steal their heart away from God?

We want our kids to roar for God in every area of their life—to look daily for ways to be brave in their beliefs. We want to raise kids who are creative, inventive, and original—not going with the flow. Lions are willing to fight when they need to. They don't pick fights but, because they are protective of their food, mates, and territory, they fight when necessary. What do you want your kids to be willing to fight for?

It is never too soon to help kids develop the disciplines that build



a strong, lifelong faith in God. Do your kids know how to hunt through the Bible? Do they know how to seek after God without adult help? *Born to Roar! Devotions for Kids* will have kids diving into their Bibles as they read a Scripture verse each day and follow the Bible reading plan in the back of the book. They will read a devotional story that will encourage them to grow in their walk with God. Insightful questions and activities will challenge them to think and apply the truth of what they have read. Space in the book is provided for kids to write or draw as God speaks to them.

Kids can live a life that roars for God and with God. He wants them to be confident in who they are. When the world tries to

make our kids conform to its ways, our kids can change the world and make it more like heaven. Our kids can roar, letting the world know who Jesus is in them, holding nothing back. Encourage the kids you care about and help them to discover their roar!

Discover how to help your kids roar at www.warnerpress.org.

From the Archives: The City is God's Gift

By Samuel G. Hines



I believe that the urban pastor must be a lover of the city. If he is attracted to skyscrapers as some people are by mountains, if he can enjoy the often strange and irreverent city sounds as some people enjoy hearing birds chirp, more power to him! But whether he can “fall in love” with these things or not, he has to love them.

The city is one of God's greatest gifts to mankind—and to the church—but we're running away from it. We are told that the city is something that man built because of his material greed, and therefore the city is something we should despise. The Babel episode in the Old Testament has been used, misused, and overused to show God's supposed opposition to urban concentration.

It seems to me that we've become so preoccupied with “second causes” that we've forgotten the First Cause. The water that's piped to my kitchen in Washington, D.C., is just as much God's gift as the water you would find in a clear spring out in the country.

The city is God's gift of diversity. Paul says that God's ultimate purpose is “to gather all things together” (Eph

1:10). There is no place on the face of the earth where you'll find the diversity Paul talks about, except in the city.

In all the conflict and fluid mobility of our metropolitan areas, the church is an element of stability. While everyone else is destroying people's pride, Christians come to discover the potential in people. We must be able to call forth the gifts of people.

A little fellow who came to one of our foster care centers in Washington couldn't read or write, and he was nine years old. He had been in a juvenile home for three or four years, so when he tried to get into public school, the teacher insulted him because he couldn't write his own name.

But the foster parents discovered that he could draw. They got him some paper and crayons, and our congregation arranged to have someone skilled in art come and work with him in the evenings. In the semester

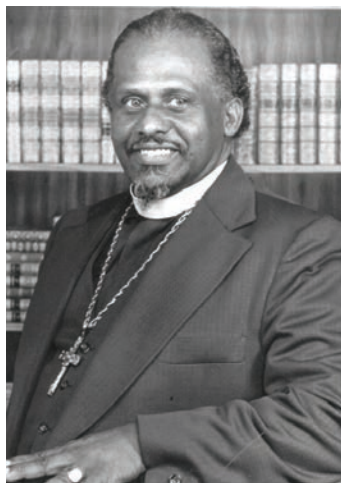
just ended, he got the highest marks in his class for art.

He still has problems reading...But then I have problems drawing!

In the city all kinds of traps and obstacles hinder people from realizing their potential, so the urban church becomes an obstacle-mover. This is where we might get into a radical kind of ministry, because we have to move all kinds of obstacles, including people. There is no universal formula for moving obstacles. If you want to move garbage, you'll have to do it in a certain way; if you want to move people, you'll have to do it

another way. You must be sensitive to people's hurts, and respond to them.

Most people don't stumble into this kind of “love affair” with the city. They rise up in commitment and walk into it deliberately. “Loving” is as much of the will as it is of the emotion. Jesus loved Jerusalem like a mother hen



SAMUEL G. HINES

From the Archives...

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loves her chicks (Matt 23:37). You will note that he made whips in the temple, but he shed tears over the city.

Yes, the first thing that the urban pastor, or any Christian in the city

must do, is this: he must learn to love his city as a gift from God.

Samuel G. Hines served the Church of God in numerous capacities, including as longtime pastor of Third Street Church of God in Washington, D.C. Article originally published in the December 10, 1972,

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