

FALL  
2021



# engage

A Journal for  
Church of God  
MINISTRIES

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Creativity and Innovation  
in a Small Church

How to Tune Your Frequency  
to Hear God's Voice

Challenges Confronting the  
21st-Century Pastoral Ministry

Do Difficult Times Negate  
Planting Churches?

FALL 2021  
VOL. 17, NO. 3

# engage

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## Covid-19 Round 2: Where Do We Go From Here?

**A**S THIS ISSUE of *Engage* is released, the United States is into its second wave of pandemic-related restrictions and lockdowns. The Church of God International Offices took the Labor Day holiday and added a couple of extra days on both ends to allow for sanitization and distancing. The International Council, as well as a leadership meeting—both scheduled for September—were postponed until January.

These decisions came as many of our congregations have chosen to revert to virtual or “parking lot-only” services. Across the nation, mask-wearing is being highly recommended (or mandated) again, and the controversy surrounding the vaccine has ramped up to new levels.

Among the many questions received about the Church and Covid-19, perhaps the most prevalent lately is the Church of God stance on receiving the vaccine. The official response is as follows: “The decision of whether or not to take the Covid-19 vaccines should be a personal and individual health-care decision that a person should make, in consultation with his or her doctor or health-care provider.” Our legal counsel, Dennis Watkins, addresses it further in this issue’s *Legal Notes* column.

Just when we thought we might be on the downslide of the pandemic, the delta variant has taken it to another level, even as millions have received the vaccine. While no one knows exactly when all of this will end (or at least subside substantially), the Church of God and its leaders stand ready to address the issues as they arise. The denomination’s pandemic-related

website—[coronacog.com](http://coronacog.com)—will continue to be kept current with pertinent information and updates via email and social media channels.

A special month-long prayer emphasis was launched by General Overseer Hill on September 1 to seek guidance on this and other issues facing the church. You may join in the movement by visiting #WEPRAYCOG on any of the Church of God social media platforms. ■

*Engage Journal* is published in the interest of providing contemporary aids and resources to pastors and pastoral staffs.

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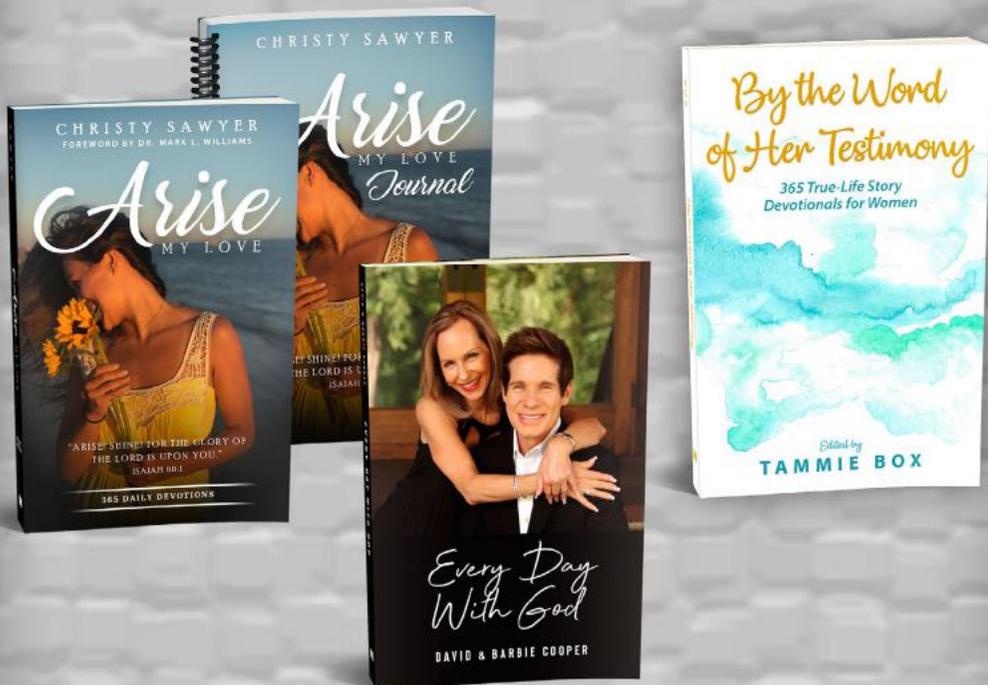
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# CREATIVITY and INNOVATION in a SMALL CHURCH

by MARY T.  
LEDERLEITNER

**B**ISHOP Thomas A. Clark IV is the pastor of World Deliverance Christian Center in Bellwood, Illinois. Prior to the pandemic, approximately 75 to 90 people attended weekly worship services. Clark and his team had been investigating how to engage people digitally, so they were a bit ahead of the curve once the COVID-19 crisis hit and they had to shift all services online. They were able to secure software quickly and shift their mode of doing ministry online. A year later they consistently have had 200 people attending their online worship services.

## SHIFTING CHURCH CULTURE

World Deliverance Christian Center finds that most of their guests join for upwards of 30 to 40 minutes. The large

number of new people are coming through referrals. Originally, it was people from the church inviting new people. Now guests are also inviting people and greeting them when they arrive. Efforts to craft a culture where people are willing to invite others are bearing fruit.

Clark spent time studying missional church movements and combined what he was learning with new tools. As he taught how to use a FRANC (**F**riends, **R**elatives, **A**cquaintances, **N**eighbors and **C**olleagues) list, things really began to change. Clark also taught the BLESS method of evangelism, which encourages people to: 1) Be praying, 2) Listen with care, 3) Eat with others, 4) Serve one another or the community together, and 5) Share their faith story about Jesus. Through these tools, the light bulb went off and people found it easier and more natural

to reach out to others. Clark explains that BLESS aligns with the church's mission statement, which includes the phrase, "We give ourselves away."

As a way to shift the church culture toward outreach, Clark implemented a new practice where every leadership meeting and small group gathering started the same way. Each begins with Scripture, prayer, the church's vision, the church's mission, and each person takes two minutes to check in. They share their outreach temperature from last month and what it is now, what they have done to engage people on their FRANC list and what the next step is on the process.

"We keep this in front of everyone so they always understand their purpose for gathering," says Clark. "What is so beautiful is they are talking about people who are trusting them now. They are doing life with them. When they are going through something like sickness, death in families, the loss of a job—they now trust enough to share this with them. It allows us to live into that mission."

## **MORE STAFF AND GREATER CREATIVITY**

"For many years, it was just me and my wife. Now we have four on staff and one more joining," says Clark. "So many great ideas about how we could engage the community during COVID-19 have come out of our time together. Before, our ideas involved coming to our building, but we couldn't

do outreach in a building during the pandemic. I explained to the team that we have freedom within this framework: How do we reach people who are unchurched? They came up with the ideas and then they invite people on their FRANC list to come."

Clark explains that in the first 12 months of the pandemic, they had four church outreach events. One event was called "Jazz in the Park." Another was "Dancing & S'mores in the Park" to include children. They also hosted a 5K Unity Walk to fund breast cancer and SIDs. All of the proceeds raised went to those groups.

"We partnered with other groups and companies," says Clark. "We had vendors providing free flu shots. SIDS gave away a pack and play and helped people understand how to protect babies. We provided vouchers for free mammograms for women."

The church also has embarked on a new outreach endeavor: starting a local school art program and helping them with a fundraiser related to it. During distance learning, they could host art projects on the church's website, auction them off, and the school would get the money. Clark says that through these efforts, the community was now seeing a different aspect of the church.

"It's about walking together in life. It allows the people in the church, in a non-intrusive way, to share Christ," he says, adding the door was opened to offer a five-minute devotion and prayer every Friday through Zoom for any teacher who wanted to participate.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Clark says, "Within the community, we want to create this idea: We don't want to be a church that is detached from the community, but a church that is part of the community. We want them to look to us not just when bad things are happening, but also when good things are happening. We've had to unlearn to relearn. For our seasoned salt saints, our older saints 60 years and up, for some of them it's been a major paradigm shift. Our older saints kept asking when we could get back to the building. But I told them, "We don't know when we can go back safely, and you are vulnerable with COVID. You now have a perfect opportu-

nity to be missional and reach the people in your life whom you care about like your grandchildren, children, other relatives and neighbors."

"The pandemic has been a blessing in a way because it forced us to live missionally, and together we can see true community transformation. Now everyone can do mission. They get to live it where they are. I'm excited about what God is going to do next." ■

**Mary T. Lederleitner** is author of the book Women in God's Mission and managing director of the Church Evangelism Institute at the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center.

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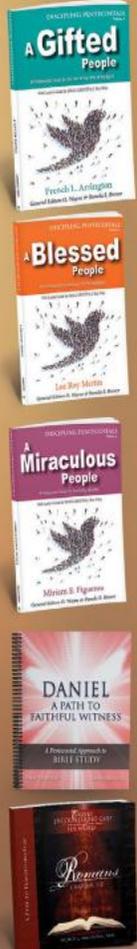
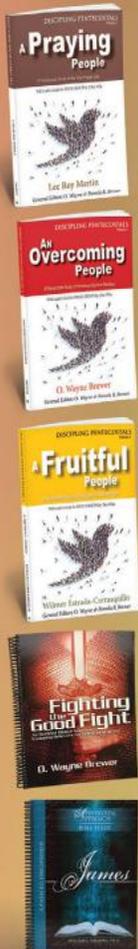
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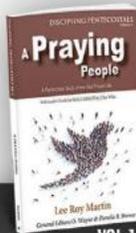
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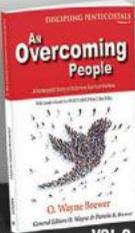
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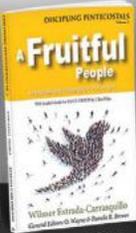
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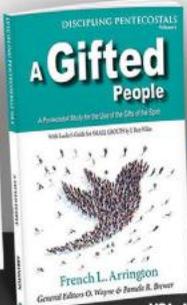
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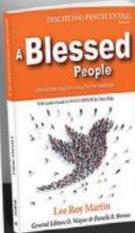
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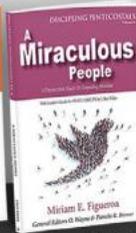
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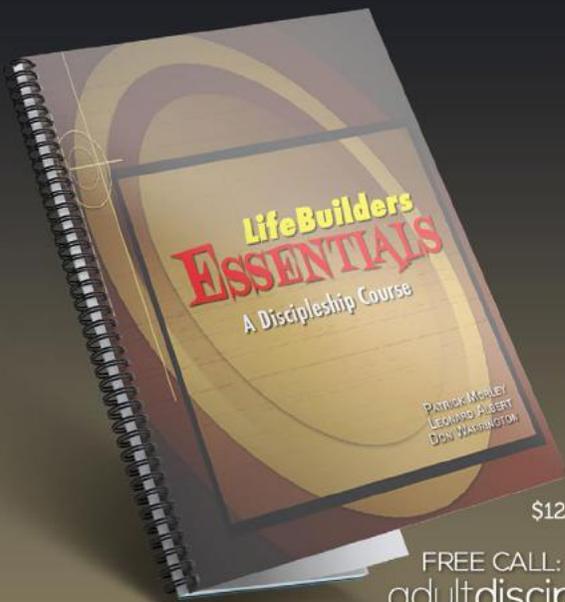


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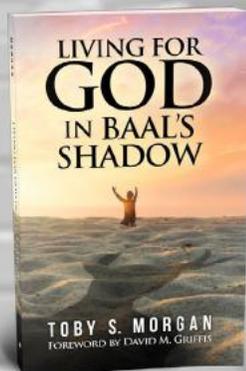
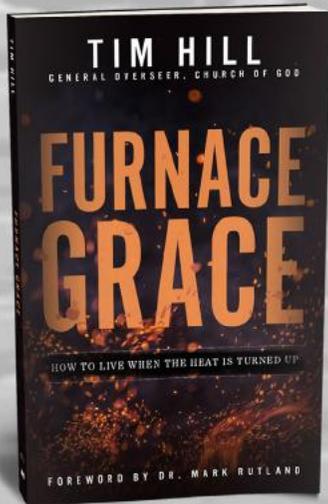
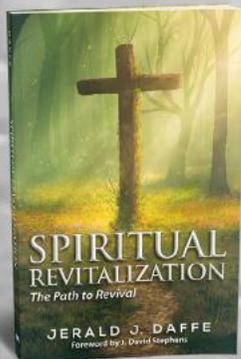
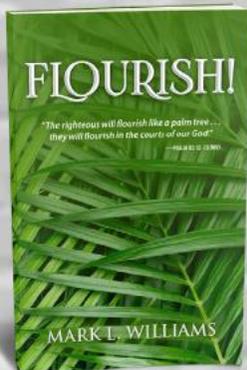
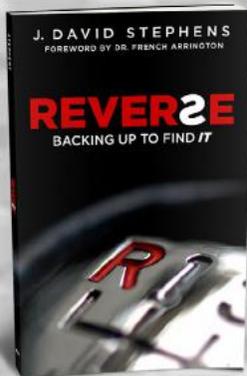
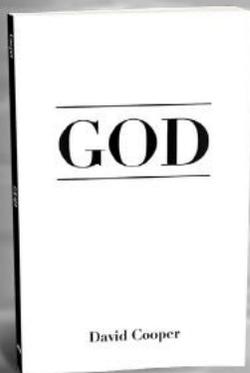
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# HOW TO TUNE YOUR FREQUENCY TO HEAR GOD'S VOICE



by J. LEE GRADY

**O**NE OF THE most amazing attributes of God is His willingness to communicate. He loves to talk to His people. As soon as He created Adam and Eve at the beginning of time, He blessed them and gave them detailed instructions. God talked to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He gave detailed instructions to Moses, David, Elijah, and many other prophets. And today, because we have the indwelling Holy Spirit, He speaks to us.

Yet, I meet so many Christians who struggle when it comes to guidance. When they pray, they strain to hear anything. They know God speaks, but either they don't believe He wants to talk to them, or they don't want to obey what He says. Many believers have never known the thrill of hearing God's gentle voice in their spirits.

There are Christians who teach that God doesn't speak to people personally. They believe the only guidance you need comes from the Bible. That's actually a

strange doctrine, since the Bible itself says God speaks to individuals. The phrases, “And God said ...” or “the word of the Lord came to so-and-so,” appear more than 2,000 times in the Old Testament.

Do you want to hear God’s voice more clearly? I believe there are four primary ways He communicates with us:

**1. You can hear God’s voice by reading the Bible.** People sometimes complain: “I just never hear God speaking.” Yet when I ask if they read the Bible regularly, they say they’re too busy. They might hurriedly read a chapter while getting dressed or listen to their Bible app while driving. But serious Bible study is rare for them.

God inspired 40 authors over a period of 1,600 years to compile the Bible. After it was written in Hebrew and Greek, many people were martyred because they translated it in a modern language. God went to a lot of trouble to give us His book. Yet today, Bibles collect dust because people are too busy to read His personalized love letter to us.

When you read Scripture with a prayerful heart, God can cause a verse to jump off the page as a direct message to you. Expect Him to speak directly to you from Scripture.

**2. You can hear God’s voice through the supernatural inspiration of the Holy Spirit.** The Holy Spirit is not an eerie presence that just hovers around us. He lives in every born-again Christian, and He comforts us and actively speaks to us. He can do this

in many ways: through dreams, visions, warnings, a sense of conviction, or—most often—through what we know as the “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12b) of the Spirit.

I have had prophetic dreams and visions, but the most common way the Spirit speaks to me is through a deep sense of inward knowing. I will never forget a time in 1985 when God spoke to me while I was driving my car in Florida. A message came to me, not audibly but in my spirit: “You will move to Washington, D.C.” It seemed to come out of the blue, and I knew it did not originate with me. Four years later I was offered a job in the Washington, D.C., area, and I worked there for three years.

The ability to hear the Spirit’s voice is developed over years as we grow in Christ. If you really want to hear Him, you should ask God to fill you with His Spirit. As you allow more of the Spirit’s presence and power in your life, you will set aside your selfish agendas and sinful habits so God can communicate without hindrance.

**3. You can hear God’s voice through people.** We are members of His body, the church, and you will hear God better when you are in fellowship with His people. God can speak to you through a pastor’s sermon, a friend’s wise counsel, a mother’s rebuke, a mentor’s phone call, or a prophetic word given to you by one of God’s Spirit-filled servants. If you live in isolation, you probably won’t hear much from God.

God uses the gift of prophecy, but you should never chase after prophecies. I know Christians who will travel across the country to attend a prophetic conference to get a word from God, yet they have not read the Bible in months or sat still long enough to hear from God on their own. Never treat the holy gift of prophecy like fortune telling. When God needs to speak to you in an unusual way, He has faithful messengers who will deliver it to you at the exact time you need it.

**4. You can hear God's voice through circumstances.** My oldest daughter wanted to attend a college in Tennessee, and we were praying about her decision. Right after we prayed, I got a call from the president of a college in Georgia.

He was inviting me to speak there, but in our conversation I learned that this school was willing to offer my daughter a scholarship. She ended up enrolling in that school, meeting her future husband there and graduating four years later. God was totally involved in that phone call from Georgia!

God is sovereign. He opens doors that no man can shut. If you have been praying about getting a job at one company, and suddenly you get an offer at a different company, this may be God's sign that He has a better place for you to work. Listen carefully. Tune into His frequency. Be willing to obey Him. He promises to guide your steps. ■

*J. Lee Grady is a former editor of Charisma magazine.*

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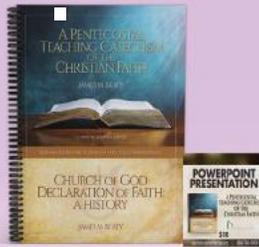
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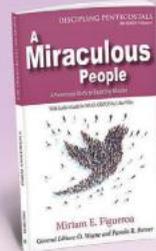
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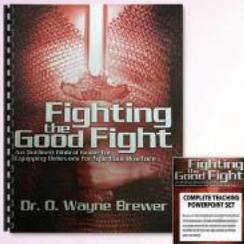
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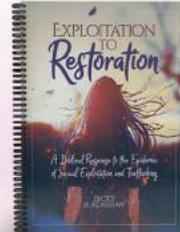
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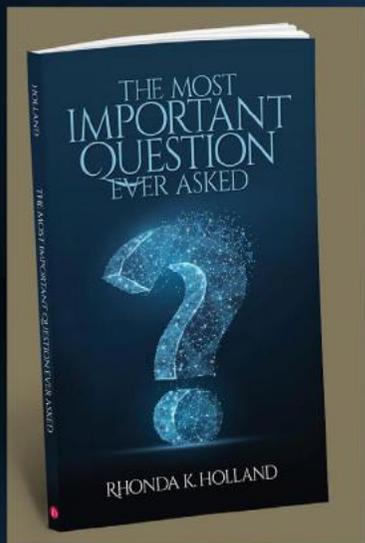
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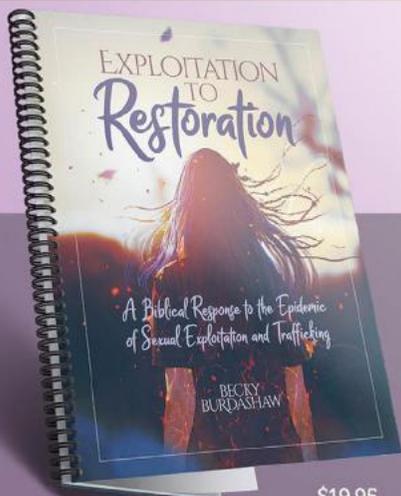
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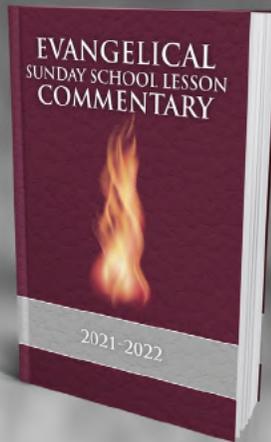
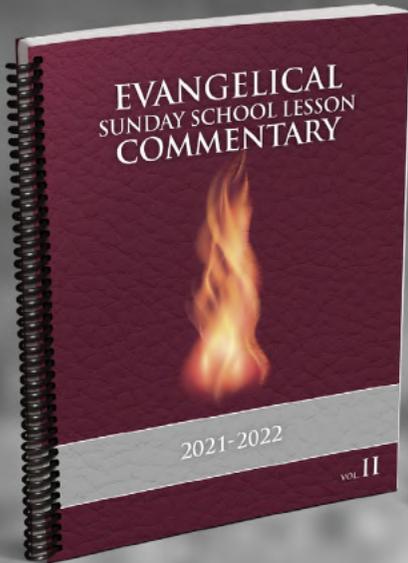
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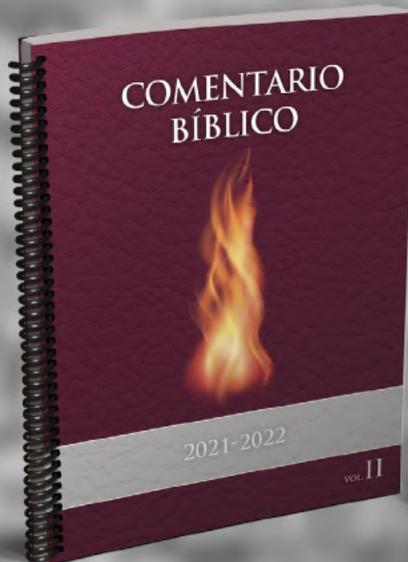
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*(Editor's Note: On Saturday, August 1, 2020, Dr. Paul Conn completed 34 years as president of Lee University. In the last week of his presidency, Faith News presented a four-part series on the legacy of his leadership at the Church of God's premier institution of higher learning. The series is being reprinted in this issue of Engage).*

**A**T AGE 38, Charles Paul Conn had been a professor at Lee College for 13 years. He had earned the highest academic degree in his field, led the establishment of a psychology major at Lee, and was a husband and father of three. He was also a best-selling author, having collaborated on life stories with Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Terry Bradshaw, country music legend Johnny Cash, and Amway founder Richard DeVos. On weekends, he delivered motivational speeches to thousands. His success as an author had allowed him to build a beautiful home in Cleveland and a vacation getaway at a new development called Big Canoe in the nearby mountains.

One might wonder why this highly successful young man kept a day job teaching at a small religious college. He could have moved his family to Boston—where he had already completed two postdoctoral fellowships at Harvard University—and concentrate on writing more bestsellers, adding to his success and notoriety.

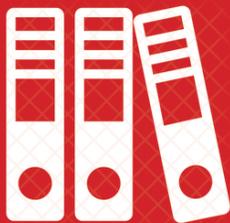
Paul Conn's lifelong passion for Lee University can be traced back to his unique set of circumstances that divinely steered him to the Church's premier institution of

higher learning. Born in Cleveland as one of 12 children to Charles and Edna Conn, he grew up on the edge of the Lee College campus, attending local schools and the North Cleveland Church of God. His father was a noted church leader, serving in multiple capacities, including general overseer from 1966 to 1970 and then president of Lee College from 1970 to 1982. Paul Conn received a bachelor's degree from Lee in 1967, moved to Atlanta to pursue graduate studies, and served with Dr. Paul Walker on staff at the Mt. Paran Church of God. Conn was hired to teach at Lee in 1971.

In 1984, the Church of God Executive Committee appointed Rev. Lamar Vest the new president of Lee College. Arriving on campus in the fall of that year, it did not take him long to realize the passion, drive, and skills of Paul Conn were elements of leadership he wanted in his administration. Vest recognized Conn's potential to help take Lee to the next level and hired him as his vice president.

Conn became Vice President for Institutional Advancement (IA) on January 3, 1985. His primary areas of focus were to be alumni relations, development, public relations, and enrollment. He inherited a small staff and hired a couple more, including me, a fresh Lee graduate and newlywed, who had yet to gain experience in his chosen profession of communications.

An early eye-opening encounter with President Conn's vision and leadership style for me came in a casual exchange with his staff. During a weekend retreat at Big Canoe,



FROM THE  
ARCHIVES

by PAUL L. WALKER

# Challenges Confronting the Twenty-first-Century Pastoral Ministry

*EDITOR'S NOTE: With this issue, Engage introduces articles written by church leaders from at least ten years ago. While cultural trends change, many pastoral leadership principles and guidelines remain relevant for today's church.*

Originally published in *Engage* Winter 2011

**A**S THE CHURCH world continues to move forward into the twenty-first century, every person who holds any form of the title of “pastor” is confronted with some rather challenging contemporary realities, such as:

1. The influence of a secularized national society that can no longer be referred to as Christian because it espouses the general philosophy that all religious roads lead to God, resulting in an erosion of the meaning of orthodoxy.

2. The increasing frustration and stress of feeling inadequately prepared to cope with the modern-day complexity of congregational problems irrespective of the higher levels of traditional pastoral education.

3. The rising number of church members and attendees who, in spite of participation in regular worship services, Bible studies, and church activities, remain largely ignorant of how to apply the basics of the Christian faith into daily life.

4. The lack of congregational devotion to serving Christ with passion, urgency, and abandon.

5. The mounting indifference to corporate worship experiences geared to leading participants into the internalization of “faith” as a way of life with demonstrated power to deal with everyday stress as an example of personal testimony and witness.

In view of these realities, it is imperative that modern-day pastoral leaders seek the answers to two basic questions:

1. What are the challenges?

2. What is an effective local church strategy to meet these challenges?

## THE CHALLENGES

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, the word, *challenge*, can mean everything from

calling into question to “... the quality of requiring the full use of one’s own abilities, energy, or resources.”

Utilizing the latter definition there are two basic questions to be considered in dealing with the contemporary challenges to the effective application of pastoral abilities, energy, and resources:

1. What is the current socio/secular/spiritual scene?
2. What is an effective pastoral strategy to maintain ecclesiastical integrity and personally minister to spiritual people capable of invading the culture of a secular world with the gospel?

### **The Secular Scene**

In answer to the forgoing questions, it is necessary, first of all, to understand that the secular scene represents a world of radical change in people characteristics of the general public. As the first President Bush once declared, “We need a kinder, gentler America.” Every day the various media headline the stories of war, crime, economic frustration, drug addiction, sexual harassment of all types, reality stories of horror, human nature at its worst, and a constant bombardment of advertising interspersed with the verbiage of talking heads imploring gloom and doom. No wonder Bob Hope, the late, great comedian, once said, “We live in a pressure-cooker world.”

Further, as pointed out by current research, historical data and experiential self-reporting, the general, unchurched

population is ignorant of basic Christianity, has a programmed conscience of doubt more than guilt, and lives in an environment of moral relativism, multiple personal alienations, lack of trust, and low self-esteem. Subsequently, ordinary life for the unchurched and nominally labeled Christian includes the idea that history has no eternal destination and is out of control, resulting in heightened personality disorders and a sense of “reason-for-living” futility.

In addition, there is an increasing trend of change in the attitudinal and involvement levels of the twenty-first-century person with regard to the respective roles of local church pastors, leaders, and laity in denominational organization, influence, and motivation.

As the current church world research reveals, there is . . .

- A shift from the neighborhood congregation to a more regional outreach.
- An expanded role of the leadership of women in all phases of ministry.
- A new era of Christian music creating tension between traditional hymnody and an experiential, praise chorus emphasis.
- A blurring of denominational requirements and the mounting confusion of conflicting theological ideas encountered in the interactive dynamics of home groups and neighborhood gatherings.
- The impact of Christian television programming together with local church multimedia and video streaming often competing with the local church, traditional practice.

•An increase in the development of the one church in multiple locations idea.

• An escalating carnal competition among some local churches for potential attendees and members.

•An erosion of centralized ecclesiastical authority and Scriptural discipline in dealing with sinful and disruptive church-body behavior.

Obviously, in the foregoing, there are also very positive, innovative, and updated approaches to relevant ministry which are meeting and fulfilling the spiritual void of the times; however, the question is, “How do local church pastors and leaders work together to move forward responsibly from the more traditional, rigid, and historically defined approaches which, too often, no longer effectively speak to the needs of the contemporary nuclear personhood of the general population?” To put it another way, “How can a blend of the traditional and the innovative be achieved without congregational schism and the loss of the fundamentals of the faith?”

## THE STRATEGY

In response, there are six strategic possibilities to be considered in facing up to these stated challenges confronting the twenty-first-century pastoral role.

First, it all starts with *relationships, relationships, and relationships*. This means that the milieu for ministry cohesion calls for the definition of relationship as the dynamic interaction fostered in the behav-

ioral expression of two or more people in a combination of spiritual, intellectual, and verbal discourse. In a word, as the quality of this interaction is experienced in the ability of pastor and congregation to work together for meaningful, positive change, the greater is the efficiency level to meet the complex challenges of these times.

Second, arising out of productive relationship interaction, direction for mutual accomplishment needs to be pastorally communicated through an articulated, scripturally driven *vision*. As Proverbs 29:18 states, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (KJV). While there are many different nuances to the definition of the full ramifications of the term, “vision,” within the confines of the relationship of pastor and church, it calls for the sharing of the inner heart of a pastor with his or her people so that a meeting of the minds can occur to facilitate new direction and explore new outreach methods as needed for enhanced relevance.

Third, a vision needs a body—a clear and concise sense of unified direction—a flexibility of cooperative spirit for effective change and adjustment when necessary. This means that a spiritual body of believers called a church operates out of a *role structure* that answers the question, “Who does what and why?” For this to happen, however, it needs to be understood that the synergistic possibilities of a church congregation are best tapped by dividing the ministry tasks, breaking them down, and matching

them to the corresponding strengths and skills of the various lay leadership personnel. Solidarity, loyalty, flexibility, and productive function are directly proportional to the level of personal commitment, emotional investment, and spiritual maturity displayed in the lives of the leadership if any overriding set of determined change in practice is to be accomplished.

Fourth, the said consistency of functional roles is dependent on the mutual, Spirit-directed *leadership interaction* of a duly instituted pastor in conjunction with authorized lay personnel. As Christ states in John 10:27, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (KJV). Over and over, it has been demonstrated that effective pastoral ministry is characterized by clear, formal, and strong leadership. However, even though formal pastoral leadership needs to set the pace, it has also been demonstrated that an effective pastoral leader is one who produces a team environment and demonstrates the capacity to operate on a moment-to-moment basis in both the delegation and improvement in the utilization of personnel skills in the achievement of stated objectives. For this to be a reality, appropriate adjustment is necessary and a sense of servanthood, together with task clarification and motivation, are essential for success.

Fifth, the glue that holds all these factors (relationships, vision, roles, and leadership) together is a *communication process* which encourages followership. From a

behavioral standpoint, desired followership is modeled by exemplary “here is the way” communication in both word and deed. From a verbal standpoint, effective communication is summarized in Matthew 5:37: “Simply let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes and your ‘no,’ ‘no’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (NIV). In turn, the apostle Paul illustrates these words of Christ by saying, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6 NIV).

Above all else, clear communication provides the impetus for cooperative effort by urging the assigning of functional roles, providing positive feedback, encouraging awareness of weaknesses, clarifying areas for improvement, and maintaining a non-threatening climate conducive to resolving conflicting situations.

Finally, to meet the challenges confronting the twenty-first-century pastoral role, thought, prayer, and the institution of an inverse model of pastoral leadership need to be explored and appropriately considered for the implementation of what the Bible illustrates as the church being a community of ministering saints. Paul, the apostle, makes it clear that the true church, designated as the saints who are the redeemed of the Lord, is to demonstrate the Kingdom inheritance received in Christ. In the *Living Bible* paraphrase of Colossians 1:12, the people of God are to “... always [be] thankful to the Father

who has made (the church) fit to share all the wonderful things that belong to those who live in the Kingdom of light.”

Thus, in a self-absorbed world with a “me-first” mentality, such an inverse model of local church ministry may appropriately be diagrammed as follows:

*The Community of Ministering Saints*



To summarize, it is a valid question that asks, “How can the twenty-first-century pastor meet the challenges of a twenty-first-century world?”

In reply, while the biblical message and the subsequent Scriptural lifestyle remain the same; yet there are six strategic possibilities to be considered:

1. The establishment of a meaningful relationship context for the productive interaction of the pastor and the people.
2. The congregational internalization and expression of a scripturally driven vision.

3. The development of a role structure that coordinates and facilitates unified direction and solidarity for action.

4. The selection, empowerment, and maintenance of dedicated staff leadership.

5. The practice of a communicative process that provides a climate for clarification and resolution of interactive tensions.

6. The institution of an inverse model of pastoral leadership.

Will such a model work?

In response, some forty plus years ago, Franklin H. Littell, in an article in *Pastoral Psychology* (December 1964) published some very prophetic and motivational observations that are more contemporarily accurate now than at the time of their writing. In Littell’s words:

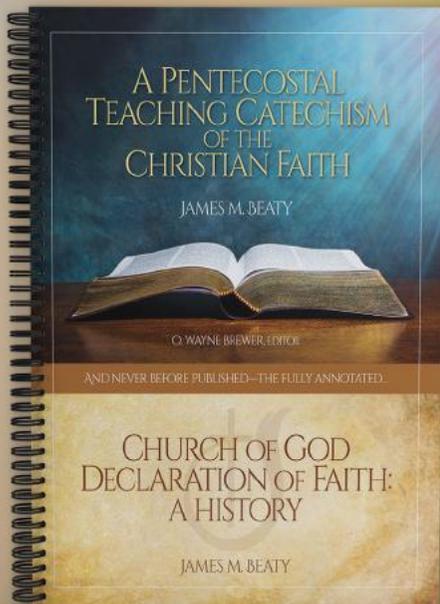
Our primary task today is the recovery of that emphasis upon a well-prepared and thoroughly disciplined membership, the renewal of our churches through new methods of lay stewardship and witness, the release of the frozen assets of the churches through the encouragement of the laity to be what He has purposed His whole people to be: apostles to the nations, servants to the peoples, freers of the captives, healers of the broken. ■

**Paul L. Walker, Ph.D.**, adjunct faculty, Lee University, Pentecostal Theological Seminary; pastor emeritus, Mount Paran Church of God; Atlanta, Georgia.

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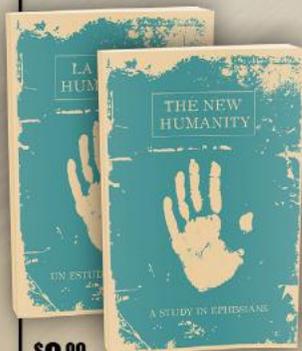
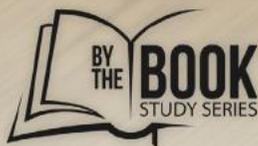
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Saturday, October 2, 2021  
11 AM - 3PM EST

### Lifestyle of a Successful Church Planter

SPEAKERS

**Bishop Mitchell Maloney**  
*Director of Office of Church Planting*  
**Dr. Sean O'Neal**  
*Administrative Bishop for Church of God in CA/NV*

- Family
- Vocational Income
- Personal Spirituality
- Attitude
- Personal

TOPICS



3

Saturday, November 20, 2021  
11 AM - 3PM EST

### Urban/City Church Planter Launch Intensive

SPEAKERS

**Bishop Mitchell Maloney**  
*Director of Office of Church Planting*  
**Dr. Sean O'Neal**  
*Administrative Bishop for Church of God in CA/NV*  
**Dr. Steve Pike**  
*President of Urban Islands Project (by video)*

- 13 Characteristics for successful city church planters
- Unique obstacles to be overcome by city church planters
- Methods and Venues where churches can be planted
- Biblical basis for city church planting
- The importance of knowing you are called to an urban area

TOPICS



2

Saturday, October 23, 2021  
11 AM - 3PM EST

### Organic Church Planting Launch Intensive

SPEAKERS

**Bishop Mitchell Maloney**  
*Director of Office of Church Planting*  
**Dr. Sean O'Neal**  
*Administrative Bishop for Church of God in CA/NV*  
**Dr. Mike Reynolds**  
*Dir. of Ministerial Development for COG (by video)*  
**Dr. Bryan Cutshall**  
*Pres. of Int'l. School of the Word (ISOW) (by video)*

- Mission, Vision, and Values
- Commitment to Prayer and the Word
- Church Planting Models
- Planting Strategically
- Building Ministry Teams
- Designing an Effective Ministry
- Practical Steps for Planting Churches

TOPICS



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# Do Difficult Times Negate PLANTING CHURCHES?

by MITCHELL MALONEY, Director, Office of Church Planting

**D**URING THE PAST one and one-half years, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted Protestant churches more than we realize. According to Lifeway Research and reported by Religious News Service (RNS), “4,500 churches closed in 2019, while about 3,000 new congregations were started” in the USA. Even before the pandemic, the pace of planting new congregations was not enough to replace those churches that closed their doors. Ed Stetzer said, “Church planting is slowing, and the number of closures is growing. Yet, the opportunity is still before us” (RNS). Statistics on the number of churches planted during 2020–2021 are not yet readily available.

Ironically, as I am writing this article today (August 19, 2021), it is the 135<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Church of God at Barney Creek, Monroe County, Tennessee. The Church of God quickly became a church-planting movement. In spite of recent negative trends, the Church of God is still planting new life-giving churches. Church planting is in our spiritual DNA. The first-century church was planted in a pre-Christian, pagan environment during the Roman dictatorship. But, on the Day of Pentecost the outpouring of the Holy Spirit infused the new church and compelled them to go and preach the Gospel in the streets of Jerusalem.

Disruptive trends have impacted all our existing churches. Average in-house church attendance has declined while online ministries have helped us to stay in contact with our members. Those who kept up with their constituency saw that their finances stayed strong, and in many cases, increased like “the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do” (1 Chronicles 12:32 NKJV). We must ask God for wisdom and insight for what we need to do today.

The bottom line is that the church will not just survive but can thrive if we continue to connect with our members both in-house and online. Growing churches must focus on staying connected.

Everything is shifting except the Word of God. We are commanded to go to every town, village, city, and nation to preach the Gospel and to make disciples. Our mandate—pandemic or no pandemic—is to continue to fulfill the Great Commission.

During the next four months, the Church of God Office of Church Planting is conducting several church-planting events. They are as follows:

• ***Lifestyle of a Church Planter***, **Saturday, October 2, 2021, from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. EST.** This important conference will focus on subjects such as family, vocational income, personal spirituality,

attitude, and continued academic or ministerial development.

• **Organic Church Planting Launch Intensive, Saturday, October 23, 2021, from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. EST.** Also, four prerecorded video sessions will be made available to be completed on your own.

• **Urban/City Church Planting, Saturday, November 20, 2021, from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. EST.** Also, four prerecorded video sessions will be made available to be completed on your own.

In all probability, we need to look at our past metrics to determine local church health and viability. New realities today impact all of us. That is the reason we need to revisit and redefine the metrics of a healthy life-giving church today. One current reality, as we move forward, is that more and more people will

engage with the church online and in small groups. How will this impact church planting?

If we follow the New Testament patterns and history from the Book of Acts, the church will thrive. During times of persecution, dictatorship, and diaspora, churches were planted and set in order everywhere the disciples went. It is not time to stop planting churches. Rather, it is a time to focus on our origins as the Church of God. During times of hardship and even persecution, the Church of God was born and, as a church-planting movement, continues today.

Ironically or even better, God has spoken to men and women all over the world to plant new churches until Christ returns. You may connect with us at [cogcpn.com](http://cogcpn.com) or email me at [mmmaloney@churchofgod.org](mailto:mmmaloney@churchofgod.org). ■

A promotional graphic for the NYLA Conference. The background is a bright yellow with a faint grid pattern. On the left, there is a collage of approximately 15 people, mostly men, some holding microphones, suggesting speakers or performers. The text 'NYLA CONFERENCE' is written in large, bold, purple letters on the right side. Below the title, there are two columns of names in a smaller, black, sans-serif font. At the bottom right, there is a purple horizontal bar containing the event details in white text, and the website 'nylaconf.com' below it.

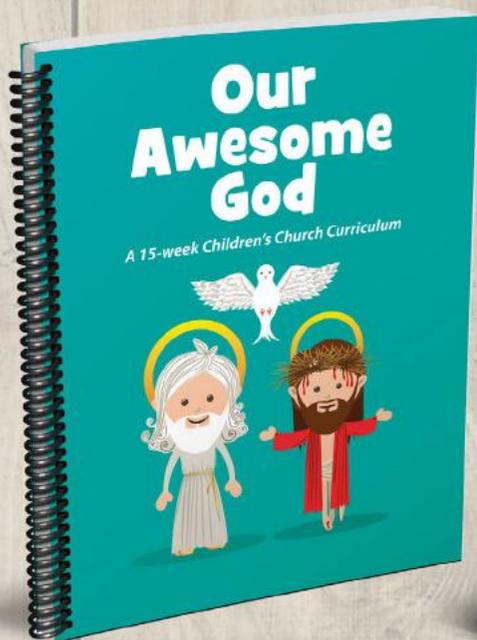
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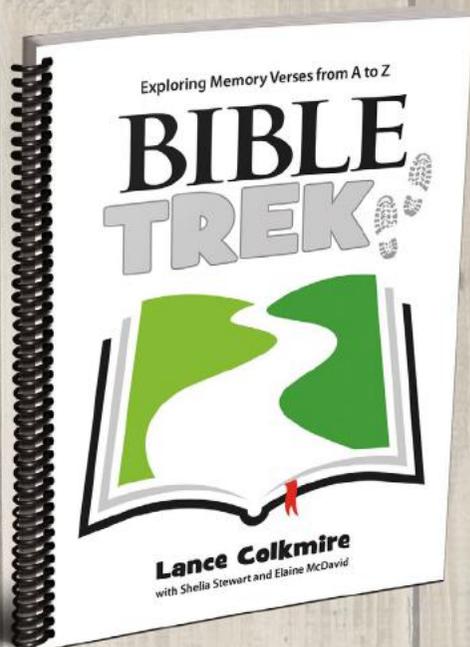
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# Seventy-Eighth International General Assembly Planning Underway

by CAMERON FISHER, Church of God Communications

**P**REPARATIONS ARE already taking place for the 78th International General Assembly of the Church of God, which will be conducted July 26-29, 2022, in San Antonio, Texas.

In less than a year, the business sessions and worship services will be happening at the Henry Gonzalez Convention Center in San Antonio. Starting with preliminary sessions and registration on Monday, July 25, 2022, the Assembly will conclude that Friday, July 29, with an address from the general overseer.

The 78th Assembly, originally scheduled for July 2020 in Indianapolis, was postponed in April 2020 following a decision by the International Executive Council during the height of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The City of Indianapolis concurred with the decision and will welcome the Church of God back for

an Assembly in the future. Prior to the postponement, negotiations with the City of San Antonio had already begun for what would have been the 79th Assembly.

San Antonio has been a favorite destination for Church of God delegates since the 63rd Assembly was conducted there in August 1990. In addition to ample convention space for sessions, events, and exhibits, hotel accommodations and dining choices are plentiful. Many improvements have been made to the convention center since an Assembly was last held there in 2008. Facilities have been enlarged to where the business and worship sessions can be held there rather than across the street at the Alamodome, as they had been in past Assemblies.

Although the pandemic postponed the Assembly from last year, the Church of God as a denomination has continued to grow and flourish. Many churches from around

the globe have reported steady or increased growth and spiritual statistics from 2020, including those who have come to a saving knowledge of Christ are up from previous years. While the Church has continued, the postponement has delayed some business that needs to be conducted at an International General Assembly where debate can begin with the International General Council and be finalized by the International General Assembly.

A website for the 78<sup>th</sup> International General Assembly was launched earlier this month and contains preliminary information on activities, the

city of San Antonio, and other resources. Registration and hotel accommodation information will be released in January 2022.

John D. Childers, secretary general for the Church of God, also serves as chairman of the International General Assembly Cabinet.

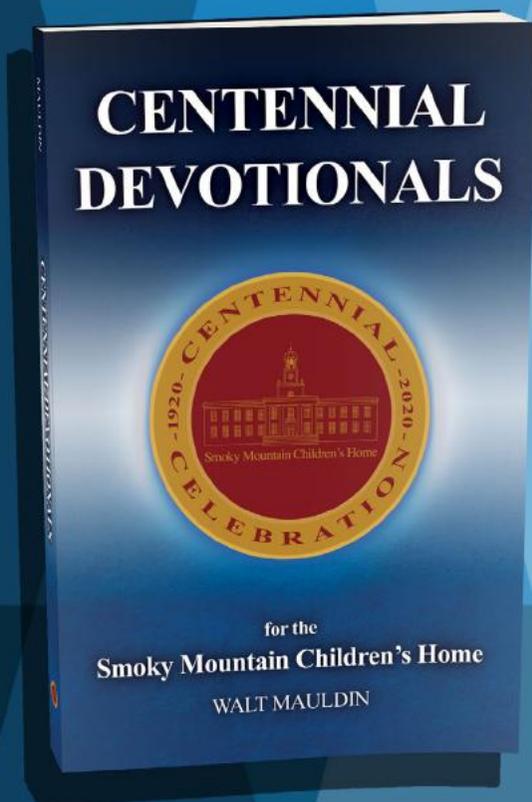
“We are looking forward to the Assembly being in San Antonio,” Childers stated. “This is a very good city to work with, and they love having the Church of God in town. After the difficult hiatus from an Assembly in 2020, I believe delegates are going to be eager to have a productive and Spirit-led Assembly next year.” ■



# **CENTENNIAL DEVOTIONALS**

**Written by Executive Director Dr. Walt Mauldin**

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# An Interesting Question About the Covid Vaccine

**O**NE OF THE aspects being debated very hotly is the issue of whether or not to take the Covid-19 vaccines. In this article, I would like to discuss a sub-topic of that issue, and that is whether or not you as a pastor should support those who have religious objections to taking the Covid-19 vaccines.

## **CHURCH OF GOD'S POSITION ON THE COVID-19 VACCINES**

In my last *Engage* article, I discussed the topic of the Church's position regarding the Covid-19 vaccines. I pointed out that the Church of God has a very diverse populace on this question. Many of our pastors and constituents are adamant that the vaccines should be taken. On the other hand, we have ministers and members who are against taking the vaccines. Some do not want to take the vaccines because of medical issues. Others simply do not trust

the medical validity of the vaccines, while others cite religious objections to taking the vaccines. I stated my understanding of the Church's position as follows: The decision of whether or not to take the Covid-19 vaccines should be a personal and individual health-care decision that a person should make, in consultation with his or her doctor or health-care provider.

## **A FURTHER ISSUE**

I am receiving regular calls and inquiries from local Church of God pastors who have members holding religious objections to taking the Covid-19 vaccines. In some instances, the decision not to take the vaccines can put these persons' employment in jeopardy. In support of their expression of objection to taking the vaccines, they are asking our pastors to write letters of support for them in this regard. In such a case, what should you as a pastor do?

By taking this position, you as a pastor are not advocating either for or against taking the vaccines, but you are recognizing the right of your individual member to express his or her sincerely held biblical and religious objections to taking the vaccines.

### A RECOMMENDATION

First, I think such a request places you as a pastor in somewhat of a difficult position, but I recognize the need to be of assistance to a member or constituent. I think there may be a way to assist in such a case, without contradicting your own opinion on the subject.

I think that you as a pastor could write a letter and say basically: "Our Church is of the opinion that whether or not to take the vaccines is a personal and individual health-care decision, but if this member has sincerely held biblical and religious objections to taking the vaccines, then we recognize that individual's right to such an opinion."

By taking this position, you as a pastor are not advocating either for or against taking the vaccines, but you are recognizing the right of your individual member to express his or her sincerely held biblical and religious objections to taking the vaccines.

If you desire to obtain a generic template letter, setting out this support and also a template letter containing numerous biblical references used by persons with religious objections to taking the vaccines,

simply contact my office by email. I can supply them as a resource to you. My email address is: [legal@churchofgod.org](mailto:legal@churchofgod.org).

### CONCLUSION

I am going to make a very transparent statement in the closing of this article: I believe in the vaccines and have taken a vaccine. However, I also am of the opinion that each person should have the right to make that decision. You as a pastor, when faced with this situation, should only be required to recognize an individual's sincerely held religious or biblical objection to taking them.

As in any other decision, I think whether or not to take the COVID-19 vaccines should be made after prayer, but with firm confidence that our ultimate healer is the Lord. It is in Him that we place all of our trust! ■

*Dennis Watkins is legal counsel for the Church of God. The writer is not engaged in rendering legal or other professional services herein. If legal advice or expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.*



**MONEY MATTERS**  
Art Rhodes

# The Perfect Allocation

**O**UTSIDE OF QUESTIONS concerning the application of the ministerial housing allowance, the number one question received by the staff at the Church of God Benefits Board is “how should

I allocate my funds to get the best return possible?” This question is even more prevalent when one or more of the funds in the Ministers’ Retirement Plan have high double-digit returns.

## HOW SHOULD I ALLOCATE?

Since the Benefits Board is the manager of the Ministers’ Retirement Plan, the staff is prohibited by securities regulations from providing advice on how a participant should allocate their account. However, we can provide general direction based upon what others in a similar situation are doing.

But the answer may not be so simple. For example, every 40-year-old with 25 years until retirement probably should not be investing the same way. Why? Their “risk

parameters” are most likely much different. In making an investment allocation choice, a person should consider age, the number of years until retirement, and his/her willingness to accept risk.

## AGE, RETIREMENT DATE, AND RISK AVERSION

Determining a person’s age and projected retirement date is rather simple. However, determining how much risk they are willing to take to get a specific return becomes a bigger challenge. While we all are willing to take a risk to get a 20-30% return on our investment, are we willing to lose 10% in one year and get a 20% return the next year? Or how would we feel if one of the funds in our account lost 20% in one year?

When a particular fund is increasing in value and having double-digit growth annually, our risk does not seem so great. However, we must factor in the potential impact of those years when there are losses. Your ability to deal with such fluctuations is your risk

aversion. In investing, risk equals volatility—and more importantly, your response to that volatility.

## MRP FUNDS

The Ministers' Retirement Plan (MRP) offers participants four investment choices: Trustees' Fund, Large Capitalization stock fund, Small Capitalization stock fund, and International stock fund. A participant can choose to invest in one, two, three, or all four of the different funds. Further, a participant can choose what percentage of their new contributions, as well as their past contributions, are allocated to each of the four funds.

By definition, the return on a low-risk investment will match, or slightly exceed, the level of inflation over time, while a high-risk investment may gain or lose a substantial amount of money. Using that definition, the Ministers' Retirement Plan's funds, listed from least risky to riskiest, would be the Trustees' Fund, the Large-Cap fund, the Small-Cap fund, and the International fund. While there have been some exceptions, historically that definition has been very applicable to our fund lineup.

## AGAIN, HOW SHOULD I ALLOCATE?

Regrettably, there is no perfect allocation formula. Some financial advisors would lead you to believe that they can assist you in crafting a perfect allocation. However, the direction that they provide you is based upon their understanding, their biases, and their preconceived ideas as to how the markets will react based upon certain unknown factors. In

other words, they are giving you the benefit of their educated guess. While their guess may ultimately turn out to be better than yours or mine, it is still a guess.

Looking at past performance of a particular fund may also be misleading, especially when you just look at the last month or so. To get an overall picture of performance, you should look at how the fund has performed over the past five years . . . or longer.

## BOTTOM LINE

To make the best allocation choice, I suggest you consider your age, the number of years to your projected retirement date, your risk aversion, as well as the past performance of each fund you anticipate investing in. Once you have done that, I suggest that you make your investment choices based upon the information in front of you. Once you have made your choice, stick with it for the next six months. At the end of that six-month period, review your decision and make sure that your decision still resonates like it did upon your initial choice. And what is most important, say a prayer that God will direct you in planning for, and preparing for, your future retirement, including your investment choices. Remember, He is interested in every aspect of our lives, including our retirement planning. Happy investing. ■

*Art Rhodes is president and CEO of the Church of God Benefits Board, Inc. The Board of Trustees and the staff of the Benefits Board are not engaged in rendering financial advice, legal advice, or other financial planning services.*



# The Tragedy of SUICIDE

IT WAS SUICIDE.”

The reality of this action is very painful for family members and friends. It differs greatly when death results from ageing, an accident, various diseases, or violence (war, terrorism, or crime). But when there is a suicide, many have a tendency not to talk about it or seek professional help.

Suicide fosters a number of questions:

- How could this have happened?
- Did we miss something that could have changed the course of the person’s life?
- Have they committed the unpardonable sin by this “self-murder”?
- Why did they think there was no reason to go on living?

According to the World Health Organization, “Close to 800,000 people worldwide die by suicide every year, which is one every 40 seconds. . . . There are indications that for each adult who died by suicide, there may have been more than 20 others attempting suicide.”<sup>1</sup>

Rather than become bogged down with the broad base of statistics which are

available, just a few are being offered. In the years to come, the specific number and trends very likely will change. However, at this point, consider these realities. On June 18, 2019, *Health Day News* reported a spike in suicide rates to the highest point in two decades. Oren Miron, a research associate at Harvard Medical school in Boston, stated that “the suicide rates for 15- to 19-year olds and those between 20 and 24 are at their highest level since 2000.”<sup>2</sup> The surge for boys was up 14% between 2015 and 2017. Suicide rates for girls rose 8% annually between 2000 and 2017. Suggested reasons for this include the opioid epidemic and bullying through social media.<sup>3</sup> A January 21, 2020, *Wall Street Journal* article stated that the Center for Disease Control and Prevention released data indicating the suicide rate in the United States “jumped 39% between 2007 and 2017, the most recent data at hand.”<sup>4</sup>

It is fairly easy to share minimal concern about others committing suicide until it comes home to our circle of family, friends,

and acquaintances. Further complicating it for us is when this person is a believer or a spiritual leader. We are shocked when, within the space of several years, six pastors, all serving in larger congregations, choose to end their lives. Along with questioning why, there always is the question of, "What is this person's spiritual destiny?"

## DEFINITIONS

Looking for a definition of suicide quickly leads one to a simple listing. These include "death with dignity," "aid in dying," "hastening," and "self-deliverance."<sup>5</sup> Such labels definitely provide a limited perspective or overview on this serious personal action. In his book, *Why People Die By Suicide*, Thomas Joiner offers the following definition: "The act of killing oneself intentionally."<sup>6</sup> Another approach is to define suicide as an individual's choosing to be sovereign over one's right to live or to die.

Further complicating the definition is when a variety of situational descriptives are added. These reflect mental, physical, and political aspects attached to the term.<sup>7</sup> They include suicide bombers, suicide by lifestyle, murder-suicide, honorable suicide, protest suicide, suicide by cop, bullied suicide, and suicide as escape.

Not to be overlooked is the description of "physician-assisted suicide." Immediately, this brings to our attention Dr. Jack Kevorkian and his 1968 Volkswagen van rigged to enable gravely ill and incapacitated individuals to initiate the

process of their death. His self-made suicide machine, often referred to as the "death machine," provided the means of assisting more than 100-plus patients, according to his claim, to initiate their deaths. His arrest and resulting eight-year prison term resulted from a videotape of Kevorkian personally administering a lethal injection to a Lou Gehrig's patient.

One simple definition which will be considered in another section is "self-murder." This has been the dominant perspective within Christianity for centuries.

## SCRIPTURE

There are seven individuals in Scripture whose actions either fit or come close to the concept of suicide by the setting and manner of their deaths. They will be considered in chronological order as they appear in the Scriptures.

The first is Abimelech, the son of Gideon by his concubine. His desire to cement the position of King of Shechem is seen when he apparently sacrificed seventy male relatives who could have rights to the throne. Only one male, Jotham, escaped. After a three-year reign, an insurrection was mounted against him. Abimelech attempted to repulse it, but in the process, a woman dropped a millstone from a tower striking him. Knowing his wound was fatal and not wanting his legacy to include the shame of being killed by a woman, he requested that his armor-bearer kill him. His armor-bearer fulfilled the request (see Judges 9).

The well-known story of Samson—a one-man, fighting army—sadly ends with his death through collapsing the main pillars of the temple in which the rulers of the Philistines had gathered. Though blinded and working in a grinding mill, his hair, the symbol of his strength, grew. God granted his request to make one final blow against the Philistines and avenge his eyes (see Judges 16).

Next in the listing is King Saul and his armor-bearer. In a fierce battle with the Philistines, he was critically wounded. Not wanting to be abused and then killed by the enemy, he requested his armor-bearer kill him. When the young man refused, Saul fell on his own sword. Seeing his king dead, this young man did the same (see 1 Samuel 31:1-5).

Chronologically following the previous four is Ahithophel, the main counselor of David. For some unstated reason, he chose to join Absalom's rebellion against his father. Previously, his advices had been described in 2 Samuel 16:23 as, "The advice Ahithophel gave was like that of one who inquires of God" (NIV). When his advice to strike a quick decisive blow against the fleeing King David was disregarded, he understood the tide had turned. He knew he would be found guilty of treason. After putting his affairs in order, he hanged himself (see 2 Samuel 17:23).

After assassinating Elah, the fourth king of the Northern Kingdom, Zimri took the

throne. His reign was a short seven days. When Omri revolted against him and Zimri saw his defeat coming shortly, he chose to burn down the palace over himself (see 1 Kings 16:9-20).

The seventh and final individual is Judas. Very likely he is the best known due to his treasonable betrayal of Jesus. Filled with remorse for his actions against Jesus, he attempted to return the bribe price of silver to the priests and elders. Upon their refusal to accept it, he threw the silver on the temple floor and then proceeded to hang himself (see Matthew 27:1-5).

It is of interest that Scripture remains silent in each case other than sharing the narrative. No discussion of mediating circumstances or condemnation of the suicide action can be found. It would be so much easier if this had been included to help us spiritually interpret these events.

Samson alone stands out from each of the other individuals who participated in personal suicide. When the angel of the Lord announced to his barren mother that she would conceive a son, the express purpose for his life was to "begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines (Judges 13:5 NKJV). He made a number of sinful choices, yet at his death, he devastated the Philistine national leadership. Three thousand men and women (all the lords) perished when the temple of Dagon was destroyed as Samson, divinely empowered, pushed down the main pillars of the building (Judges 16:26-30). Not to be overlooked

is his inclusion in Hebrews 11:32 with other men of faith.

It seems only logical that Samson is not a suicide but a soldier who willingly gives his life for the greater cause of conquest. This heroic action qualifies for being a man of faith rather than an individual only seeking to randomly end his life because of circumstances.

### **CONTRIBUTING CAUSES**

What stimulates or pushes an individual to consider suicide and then progress on the path to attempting or finalizing the desired result? The following listing was derived from a variety of sources and includes statements which are similar, closely related, or even overlap. They include perceived burdensomeness (a perceived state is permanent), old age, lack of self-worth, failed belongingness, an avoidance of abuse (physical, emotional, sexual), escape, depression, mental illness, head injuries, drug and alcohol abuse, culture of honor, act of protest, repeated exposure to injury and danger, and unbearable pain.

In the face of these contributing causes, there is one factor which restricts the actions and offers hope. "Spirituality/religion may prevent suicidal behavior through religious doctrines that prohibit suicide and through the meaning, comfort, and support that spiritual communities can provide."<sup>8</sup> However, as will be discussed at a later point, this does not exempt believers

from thinking suicidal, attempting suicide, or even completing the action.

It seems that some consideration should be given to the loss of community. Dysfunctional families create a sense of "Who cares about me?" This easily progresses to: "Is there any reason to live?" Not to be overlooked are the many teens and young adults who attend church but still feel lonely—no one reaches out or speaks to them. In the middle of a crowd they have no communal identity.

### **WARNING SIGNS**

Not everyone who commits or attempts suicide will demonstrate visible or verbal signs of their intentions. There are, however, some indications which will reveal what may be hiding beneath the surface.<sup>9</sup>

1. Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself
2. Looking for a way to kill oneself
3. Talking about feeling hopeless or having no purpose
4. Talking about feeling trapped or being in unbearable pain
5. Acting anxious, agitated, or reckless
6. Withdrawing or feeling isolated
7. Talking about being a burden to others

Notice the correlation between the causes of suicide and the warning signs.

### **HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY**

In the earliest centuries of Christianity, the issue of suicide was raised in light of

persecution and martyrdom. Should a believer actively seek martyrdom during persecution to bring honor to Christ? Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, actively sought martyrdom and was even sent to Rome for this event. However, it was not fulfilled until about twenty-five years later (A.D. 135). Clement of Alexandria was critical of those who actively sought suicide as martyrdom. He saw it as a sin against God.

A second question was whether or not fleeing from death in the face of persecution was a treasonable act of a traitor to Christ? A positive answer would make this action a sin. There appears to be some exceptions in this view. Eusebius,<sup>10</sup> Jerome, and Chrysostom seem to be favorable toward the person, especially women who would commit an act of suicide (self-destruction) when pursued by those who intended to rob them of their faith or chastity. The account of Pelagia, her mother, and sisters plunging into a turbulent flowing river rather than be caught by their pursuers stands out as one example.

The conservative opinion saw suicide as “self-murder.” It was solidified in Augustine’s *City of God* and seems to have become the position of the Church for centuries.

It is significant that in Holy Scriptures no passage can be found enjoining or permitting suicide either in order to hasten our entry into immortality or to void or avoid temporal evils. God’s command “Thou shalt not kill” is to be taken as forbidding self-destruction.<sup>11</sup>

He further states: “Suicide is not a proper means to use in protecting one’s chastity. As long as the will remains unyielding, no crime beyond the victim’s power to prevent it without sin—does not compromise the virtue of chastity.”<sup>12</sup>

The actions of various Church councils reflect this opposition to suicide and negative actions following death through this manner.<sup>13</sup>

- Council of Arles—repeated Roman legislation forfeiting the deceased estate (A.D. 314)
- Council of Braga—no religious rites for suicides (A.D. 561)
- Synod of Nimes—denied Christian burial. The corpse was desecrated by dragging it through the streets prior to burial (A.D. 1572).

In his major work, *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274), a Dominican monk, formulated the Roman Catholic Church’s position on suicide.<sup>14</sup>

1. It was unnatural.
2. Every man was a member of some community, so it was unsocial.
3. Life was a gift from God and was not at the disposal of man.

Consider one other example of opposition to suicide by public exposure of the deceased who committed suicide, “. . . during the 15<sup>th</sup> century city and church leaders in Geneva [Switzerland] would parade suicide corpses unclothed in the public square.”<sup>15</sup>

Many centuries later, theologian, Karl Barth (1886–1968) raised another setting

in which suicide may be a consideration. The question was “whether a man may and should kill himself when there is danger that under torture he may betray his friends and cause, and thus directly or indirectly deny his faith.”<sup>16</sup> His conclusion was this individual can “have freedom to do this if God gives it. And he should then use it joyfully, resolutely, and with a good, rather than a doubtful, conscience.

### THREE SCENARIOS

1. A middle-aged lady is found in her garage asphyxiated from carbon monoxide. She was a faithful, dedicated believer working wherever needed in the local church. Her pastor, in a counseling session, advised her she needed professional help, not spiritual counseling. For years, she had lived with a domineering, “mean” husband.

2. Within weeks of completing a four-month sabbatical, this associate pastor of a large congregation and mental health advocate commits suicide with a handgun. How could one who understands the hurt and pain of suicide leave behind that burden on his family, friends, and fellow believers?

3. After completing the season with playing in eight games and starting four, this large university, freshman quarterback returns to the school planning to kill himself to bring awareness to the importance of mental health. On the chosen day, his mother called to say, “I love you.” This was just two minutes after his having said,

“God, if this isn’t your plan for me, please send me a sign.”<sup>17</sup>

Much more could be written in each of these narratives. Suffice it to say each one includes anxiety, pain, and depression which became a driving impulse.

### THOUGHTS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. The pages of historic Christianity are filled with opposition to the act of suicide. The sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13 KJV), was the major scriptural foundation for their opposition. But at the same time, as previously noted, there are selected instances when taking one’s own life was seen to be acceptable in view of dire circumstances.

2. Believers are not exempt from what has been labeled as “the darkness of the soul.” Overcome by physically and mentally depressing, haunting circumstances they find themselves resisting but still moving down the suicidal path.

3. What responsibility does the local church have in providing a community environment in which hurting individuals can feel security, love, and understanding while being tossed to and fro mentally and even physically? Feeling care by others helps to answer the question: “Why should I continue going on living?”

4. Further consideration needs to be given to the area of accountability. Mental illness and mind-altering medication may erode or rob the ability to make a rational decision due to their free will being violated.

5. Regrettably, many believers are hesitant to obtain professional help for mental health issues. This is especially true for pastors. They are still regularly fired after the local church leadership “discover[s] they suffer from depression, bipolar disorder, or other mental health disorders.”<sup>18</sup>

6. We believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to comfort, deliver, and heal. That must never diminish as Pentecostals. At the same time, there are situations when individuals need a professional to help them work through their particular mental, emotional, and physical struggles.

7. Because of variable factors unknown to us, even though we do not approve of suicide, it seems our approach must be one of leaving this person in the hands of a gracious, just, all-knowing, loving heavenly Father. ■

*Written and submitted to the Doctrine and Polity Committee of the Church of God by Dr. Jerald Daffe, Lee University professor and member of the D&P Committee.*

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**NOTES**

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- <sup>2</sup> Dennis Thompson, “U.S. Youth Suicide Rate Reaches a 20-year High,” *U.S. News* (June 18, 1919), <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2019-06-18/us-youth-suicide-rate-reaches-20-year-high>. Accessed January 16, 2020.
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- <sup>4</sup> Dan Lovett. “Churches Struggle With Mental Health” *Wall Street Journal* (January 21, 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> Heidi Johnson. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis. “Preaching for Suicide Awareness: A Pedagogical Experiment in

- Teaching Preachers to Engage the Topic of Suicide From the Pulpit,” 20,21.
- <sup>6</sup> Thomas Joiner. *Why People Die by Suicide*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) 27.
- <sup>7</sup> Johnson, “Preaching for Suicide Awareness: A Pedagogical Experiment in Teaching Preachers to Engage the Topic of Suicide From the Pulpit,” 20,21.
- <sup>8</sup> Regina M. Sherman, Barbara D’ Orio, Miesha N. Rhodes, Stephanie Gantt Johnson, and Nadine J. Kasto, “Racial/ Ethnic Spiritual and Sexual Orientation Influence on Suicidal Behavior,” *The Oxford Handbook of Suicide and Self Injury*, ed. Matthew Nock. (Oxford University Press, 2014).
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- <sup>10</sup> Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, Tr. J.E. L. Oulton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 291.
- <sup>11</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, (New York: Image Books, 1958), 52.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Norman L Farberro, ed. *Suicide in Different Cultures* (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1975), 7.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 8
- <sup>15</sup> Johnson, “Preaching for Suicide Awareness: A Pedagogical Experiment in Teaching Preachers to Engage the Topic of Suicide,” 59.
- <sup>16</sup> Karl Barth, Geoffrey William Bromily, and Thomas Torrance. *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, Part 4 (vol. 3: Edininburgh: T&T Clark; 2004), 402–413.
- <sup>17</sup> Chris Low, “Vol QB shares suicide struggles,” *Cleveland Daily Banner* (May 3, 2020), B3.
- <sup>18</sup> Lovett, “Churches Struggle With Mental Health.”

**FOR HELP WHEN CONSIDERING SUICIDE, CALL:**

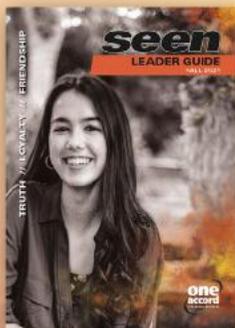
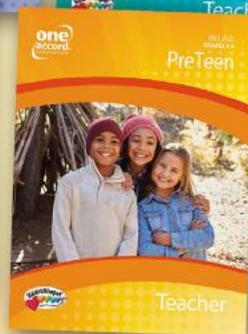
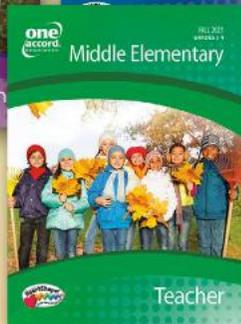
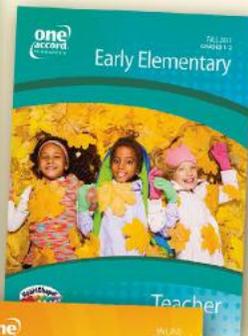
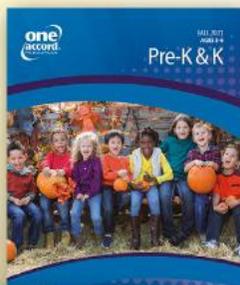
**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**  
**1.800.273.8255**

**Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Hotline:**  
**988**

While not equipped to deal with life-threatening crises, The Church of God Center for Ministerial Care exists to provide care and counseling for Church of God credentialed ministers and their immediate families. For more information, visit [www.CenterforMinisterialCare.com](http://www.CenterforMinisterialCare.com).

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## LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Tim Hill, General Overseer

# Preach 'Em Happy

*(Editor's Note: The following is an article from the "Let's Talk About It" series by General Overseer Tim Hill. To read more of his thoughts in this series, please visit [www.letstalkaboutitbytimmhill.com](http://www.letstalkaboutitbytimmhill.com).)*

I HAD JUST RETURNED home from one of my very first preaching ventures as a 16 year-old evangelist. Dad had risked his reputation and friendship with one of his fellow pastor friends by asking him to give me a shot at preaching in his pulpit. Dad was a great booking agent and went for a primetime spot on the program. Dad convinced that pastor that I was ready for a Sunday Morning opportunity. Looking back on that occasion, I can only imagine what a risk that must have been for that pastor. Fortunately, everything turned out alright. I preached, pounded and perspired for almost twenty minutes.

I'm sure the content was lacking but it was energetic to say the least.

I recall someone's question to me upon my return home. "Did you preach 'em happy, Boy?"

I'm sure that individual was sincere and just wanted to know that the Lord had used me to bless the poor people subjected to my fledgling efforts. What a question though. "Did you preach 'em happy?"

### PURPOSEFUL PREACHING

Forty-five years since that first sermon, that individual's question makes me stop and ponder, "Is that really any minister's responsibility—preaching folks "happy?"

Every preacher wants his/her sermons to at least be appreciated, if not entirely "liked" by the hearers. However, Paul's charge to Timothy about preaching and its content, indicates that a congregation's listening

Whether you preach in a pulpit or your sermon is a daily life lived out before others, stay focused on the gospel. Yes, preach it with love, compassion, and tears but never compromise truth.

pleasure isn't necessarily the aim and won't always be accomplished.

**2 Timothy 4:2** *“Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching”*(NASB 1995).

Few if any, step into the line for reproof and rebuking. The lines do get long, however, for shallow meandering that's short on Scripture and long on platitudes bent on tickling the ears of a culture gone mad with compromise and blatant rebellion. Soft peddling sin and blurring the lines seems to be more popular now.

Paul further elaborated on his instruction to Timothy in **Chapter 4:3-5**, when he wrote, *“The time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths”* (NIV).

## A CHARGE TO PREACH

What a challenge for a young, aspiring preacher to be given. I don't think Paul was at all concerned about preaching anyone happy. He was more intent on “preaching 'em” toward holy living and a lifestyle that pleases Jesus.

Whether you preach in a pulpit or your sermon is a daily life lived out before others, stay focused on the gospel. Yes, preach it with love, compassion, and tears but never compromise truth.

Paul's charge to Timothy in **2 Timothy Chapter 4:5** is also my prayer for you: *“But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry”* (NIV).

Preaching anyone happy about their compromised life is never the aim but preaching to ignite personal revival should always be the goal. ■

## Book Review:

# The Bible, Sexuality, and Culture

In *The Bible, Sexuality, and Culture*, Dr. Brian Neil Peterson, associate professor of Old Testament at Lee University, introduces moral issues that the church faces in contemporary times and provides biblical responses to the issues. His introduction furnishes the reader with an overview of current, major moral issues by providing

a historical trail of the development of the issues, as well as a summary of the issues. Along the way, Dr. Peterson addresses the moral issues from a biblical and historical point of view, demonstrating how the church

may continue in the evangelical tradition and witness of the Christian faith.

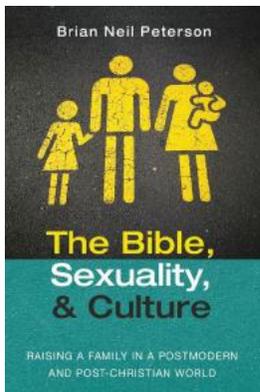
On page 18, Peterson asserts that the moral issues have developed with the demise of modernism and the rise of postmodernism. Part of this history includes European thinkers who suggested that Christianity was . . .

- For the “morally weak” (Friedrich Nietzsche—1844–1900)
- For the “psychologically unhealthy” (Sigmund Freud—1856–1939)
- A “tool of oppression” (Karl Marx—1818–1883)
- “Scientifically unsupported” (Charles Darwin—1809–1883).

In more recent times, postmodern thought in America became more notable in the significant chaotic cultural shifts of the 1960s and 1970s. The questioning of established values challenged the foundations of society—marriage, procreation, gender distinction, and environment.

Peterson answers these challenges in what he calls four mandates found in the creation account of Genesis and throughout the Bible. The four mandates are: (1) marriage, (2) family and procreation, (3) gender distinctions, and (4) species distinctions.

Within the marriage mandate, Peterson discusses marriage and sexuality as seen in the Genesis accounts and in the teachings of Jesus. He also describes how current secular teaching has redefined marriage and sexuality so that marriage may be defined in many ways and sexuality is fluid.



In the family and procreation mandate, Peterson shows the purpose of the family and the role of procreation in God's plan for the world. In addition, he indicates the secular teaching about abortion and its culture around abortion. Then he gives an in-depth answer about the Bible's view of abortion and personhood, explaining many Scriptures in his answer.

The gender distinction mandate establishes the biblical teaching on gender. In discussing the gender distinction mandate, Peterson includes an examination of homosexuality and its place in contemporary culture, as well as giving a biblical reply to homosexuality. Peterson also discusses transexual issues in both secular society and the Bible.

In the final mandate—species distinctions—Peterson establishes the place of humans and other species. He demonstrates from Scripture that God commanded humans to have dominion over the animals and inanimate creation. However, according to Peterson, Western culture is shifting this belief to elevating animals and inanimate creation over

human life, often under the umbrella of environmental concerns.

*The Bible, Sexuality, and Culture* is recommended for these reasons. First, Peterson addresses moral issues for which the church needs to provide answers. His book is a good starting point and resource for formulating answers. Second, Peterson gives a very good introductory history of the rise of radical views about the moral issues, as well as a summary of the views. The introduction provides the reader with a point of reference for understanding current arguments and enables the reader to develop talking points with those advocating the views. Third, Peterson provides initial answers for the issues by reviewing the four mandates as they are mentioned in Scripture. Fourth, Peterson's writing style is engaging. It is like Peterson is sitting across the table and talking with the reader, and the reader anticipating his next point. Last, Peterson provides a wealth of resources in his bibliography whereby the reader can broaden and deepen his or her knowledge of the issues, as well as be prepared to talk with others about them. ■

# CHURCH OF GOD HIGHLIGHTS

*Abbreviated news from faithnews.cc between May 11, 2021 and September 15, 2021.  
To link to the entire article, click on its title.*

## [New Jersey and Michigan Church of God Celebrates 100 Years](#)

Two states where the Church of God first emerged in 1921 staged centennial celebrations this summer.

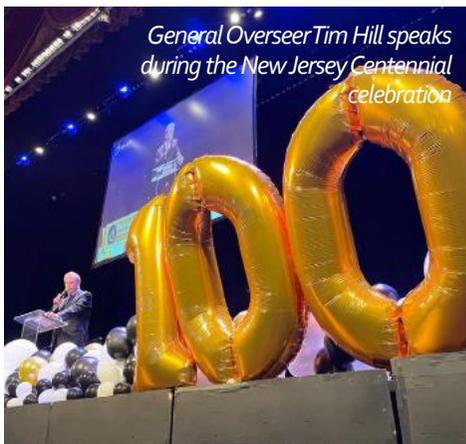
**New Jersey:** The Church of God in New Jersey celebrated 100 years of ministry in the Garden State with a “Mighty Exploits Centennial Celebration” held between June 22-27. State Overseer Raymond Burch coordinated the events which began with a three-day virtual event June 22-24 each night at 7:30 on Facebook and YouTube. An in-person event was held on June 25 at the Newark Haitian Church of God, followed by a culminating celebration on Sunday, June 27 at the Patriots Theater in Trenton. Speakers for the nightly services included Evangelist Jonathon Ziegler, Director of Ministerial Development for the Church of God, Michael Reynolds, and Assistant General Overseers J. David Stephens and Raymond Culpepper. Church of God General Overseer Tim Hill was the keynote speaker for the June 27 service.

“As we look back over the years, we must take pause and be thankful to the Lord who has blessed us with his presence, year in and year out,” Burch stated. “Little did those early pioneers realize what would take place, but I’m sure they dreamed a bit about the possibilities of having 57 churches and over 5,000 members!”

**Michigan:** The history of the Church of God in Michigan hearkens back to when

Detroit was starting to mass produce automobiles. At the 1921 General Assembly, Efford Haynes was appointed as overseer of Ohio and Michigan, and soon afterward a congregation was organized in Detroit and another in the Upper Peninsula town of Bessemer. In 1924, M. P. Cross came as pastor of the Detroit congregation and as Michigan’s first resident state overseer. In all, twenty-eight men have served in that office. By the end of its first decade, the Church of God in Michigan had organized churches in White Cloud, Sebewa, Pontiac, Flint, Grand Ledge, and Port Huron.

The first Church of God state-owned property was the state parsonage in Royal Oak, purchased in the mid 1940s. This spacious home—so large that it later became a private nursing home, housed both the state parsonage and the state office for more than a decade.



Subsequent parsonages and offices were located in Pontiac and Troy until a modern new office building and parsonages for both the overseer and youth director were constructed on the Fenton Campground in the late 1970s. Massive campus-wide improvements, including a total renovation and winterization of the tabernacle was completed in 2002 with further substantial upgrades being celebrated in 2008.

Michigan has not lost its passion to evangelize its cities, to win the lost to Christ, and to make disciples in the Spirit and Power of Pentecost. We praise God for 100 years of pure blessings on the Church of God in Michigan!

(Historical research by James E. Cossey)

### [Texas Dedicates New State Offices](#)

**Weatherford, Texas**—On Saturday, June 19, 2021, leaders of the Church of God in the state of Texas were joined by General Overseer Tim Hill who led an official dedication of a new office building. Those present joined with Hill and thousands of Church of God members and constituents across the Lone Star state, in giving thanks to God for a new, debt-free building, dedicated to the furtherance of the gospel.

The journey toward a third-generation state office facility has spanned tenures of four Texas state overseers. During the tenure of State Overseer Wayne Dority and continuing through the administrations of State Overseers Les Higgins and Tim Brown, the state office worked through issues of imminent domain with the Texas Road Department, which resulted in the construction of a thruway along the eastern edge of the property. Shortly after the arrival of current State Overseer Toby Morgan, the State of Texas finalized their plans and the



former state office building, along with several parsonages and the Centerpoint Road Church of God, were acquired to facilitate construction of the new roadway. The state office was temporarily relocated to a vacant parsonage on the campground property as plans were developed to build a new office building.

State Overseer Morgan stated, “Now, as we celebrate the victory being experienced over a pandemic, we rejoice in the dedication of the new Texas Church of God State Office in conjunction with Texas Camp Meeting 2021.”

### [Yaun Installed as Assistant International Youth & Discipleship Director](#)

Brian K. Yaun was formally installed into the office of Assistant Director of Youth and Discipleship on Wednesday, July 14, 2021.

The ceremony took place at the International Offices with the Church of God Executive Committee, and joined via Zoom by state administrative bishops and members of the Youth and Discipleship Board.

Yaun assumed the post under unusual circumstances following the death of David C. Blair on March 21, 2021, who was serving as the international director. Former Assistant Director Rob Bailey was then installed in the director’s post, and Yaun now succeeds Bailey. Previously,

Yaun was serving as the youth director for the Church of God in Tennessee.

Upon Yaun's election, General Overseer Tim Hill said, "He (Yaun) will bring outstanding leadership qualities to the Youth Department. The Jeremiah Generation is in great hands with Rob Bailey and Brian Yaun."

Prior to being appointed in 2014 to Tennessee as State Youth and Discipleship director, Yaun spent more than twelve years serving in Florida as a youth pastor, music pastor, associate pastor, and as lead pastor. In 2002, he was called into youth ministry on the state level and served in Arizona and Kentucky before the last seven years in Tennessee. Cathy Yaun is employed at Lee University as director of Online Academic Services, in addition to serving as an academic advisor and English

instructor. They have two sons and three grandchildren.

### [Hill Releases Furnace Grace](#)

Church of God General Overseer Dr. Tim Hill recently unveiled his latest book, *Furnace Grace*, with the subtitle, "How to live when the heat is turned up."

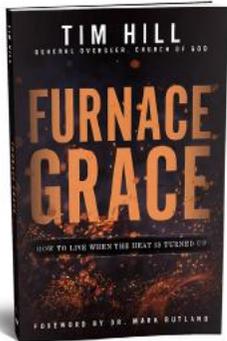
Hill's inspiration for the book came primarily from the last 18 months of observing and dealing with fallout of the global COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the author addresses other cultural issues that rose to the surface during the same period that "turned up the heat" in our society.

"I think for most people, 2020 might have been like an inferno, blazing higher and higher with its red-hot flames of fear and anxiety,"



*Joining at the Commissioning of the new Assistant Director of Youth and Discipleship were (l-r) Mark Swank, Christal Bailey, Rob Bailey, Paula Hill, Tim Hill, J. David Stephens, Brian Yaun, Joyce Stephens, Cathy Yaun, Fernanda Ramirez, David Ramirez, Debbie Childers and John Childers.*

Hill stated in the introduction. “The blazes of a global pandemic quickly merged with the burning embers of racial tension, political division, and multiple natural disasters.”



The twelve chapters of *Furnace Grace* address topics titled as, “Fireproof Faith,” “Surviving the Crucible of Crisis,” “Waiting for Victory,” and

“Chosen for the Fire.” Each is a message or sermon placed in Hill’s heart as he came upon various critical challenges.

*Furnace Grace* is available for \$14.99 by visiting [timhillministries.com](http://timhillministries.com)

## Youth and Discipleship Announces 2022 YWEA Project

The Church of God Department of Youth and Discipleship has officially announced the YWEA project for 2022 titled, “Land of the Rising Sun.”

The announcement came from International Youth and Discipleship Director Rob Bailey.

“Sixty-one years ago, Youth and Discipleship began a journey to impact the world through a new initiative called Youth World Evangelism Action, or as it’s known now, YWEA,” Bailey stated. “Since that time, more than \$38 million dollars has been raised by Church of God children, students, adults, and churches.”

“It is with great excitement that we now are launching the YWEA 2022 project, ‘Land of the Rising Sun,’” Bailey continued. “This incredible effort targets Asia, the most populated region of the world that is home to more than 4.6 billion people. Our goal for 2022 is to make a global impact in three strategic countries: Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines.”

In Japan, the project will focus on reaching Tokyo, the political and economic center of Japan. The Y&D strategy is to establish the “J Center” which stands for Jesus Center to serve as a Church Planting and Ministry Training hub to reach college students and young families who live in this megacity.

In Vietnam, the YWEA 2022 goal is to provide financial support for an orphanage and children’s feeding program. On the surface, it appears that Vietnam, located in Southeast Asia, has recovered from decades of war, but extreme poverty has created an orphan crisis where parents are unable to provide and children are being abandoned at churches, orphanages, or hospitals.

The third vital initiative for the YWEA 2022 project is completing the fourth floor of the Asian Seminary of Christian Ministries (ASCM) in the Philippines. Church of God Youth and Discipleship partnered with World Missions in 1983–1984 to help establish ASCM. Part of the YWEA 2022 goal is to finish the interior of the fourth floor of the multipurpose hall and student commons area. The hall will be used for chapel services, seminars, and training events. To learn more about the YWEA 2022 effort, please visit [cogyouth.org](http://cogyouth.org).

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