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“St. Francis of Assisi advised us to wear the world like a loose garment—one which touches us in few places and there lightly. Most people fail in their efforts to do so. Jan Johnson can help you.”

—Dallas Willard, author of Renovation of the Heart

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“God puts poor people on their feet again; he rekindles burned-out lives with fresh hope, restoring dignity and respect to their lives—a place in the sun! ... No one makes it in this life by sheer muscle!”
1 Samuel 2:8-9  (The Message)
For All the Underdogs among—and within—Us

When I was a kid, I loved the cartoon character Underdog. With his scrawny arms, rounded belly, and pinched voice, he was the canine version of the 90-pound weakling. Even while routing a criminal enterprise or rescuing Sweet Polly from an alien kidnapper, he experienced humiliating setbacks. But no matter how many times he got flattened or thrown or pummeled—whether by the enemy or through his own clumsiness—in the end, he prevailed.

At 4, I laughed at his cartoonish antics and mishaps; 44 years later, I marvel at how he modeled the life of faith. Without our Superpower, we are like Underdog’s alter-ego, Shoeshine Boy, “humble and lovable” but helpless. With our Higher Power in place, we may, like Underdog, stumble and gather bruises along the way—but we rise to the challenge and prevail somehow at the last.

One of the things that attracts me to Father Greg Boyle, featured in this issue’s cover story, is that his faith is at once cartoonishly outlandish and pragmatically unidealized: He sincerely believes in the power of “boundless compassion” to transform former gang members’ lives, and he knows that the road to transformation is rutted with blunders and setbacks.

When Boyle’s Homeboy Industries welcomes young people whose lives up to that point have been defined by gang affiliations, violence, and criminal activity, he draws on every available remedy to deal with their scars and deficits. He prays with them, and he trains them. He loves them, and he employs them. He promises them God will never abandon them, and then he walks alongside them every day, putting flesh on that promise. Outrageous and real. Like Underdog.

You’ll find that the underdog story informs all the other features in this issue as well.

In Managua, children who have been abandoned because of their disabilities, or who have become disabled because of abandonment, find a true home among the Christian women of Mustard Seed Communities. The staff have the precious—albeit unesteemed—privilege of loving their Lord through the least of these his children.

In cities across the United States, young people raised in this country but undocumented through no fault of their own are finding the courage to step out of shame and hiding and raise their voices to say, “I am important. I have something to offer. Hear my story and allow me to share my life with you.” Their yearning to give back to a society that often vilifies and spurns them inspires us to see them and other undocumented immigrants in a new light.

In Egypt, people of every age and faith who have long felt they had no say in their country’s governance are joining their voices to demand democracy. The new bonds being created and strengthened among the Egyptians offer hope to the whole embattled region, showing the power available to us all when we cross social and religious divisions to work toward a common goal.
I was utterly astounded by “Toward a Demand-Based US Drug Policy” in the March/April issue—Bruce Wydick’s endorsement of an Orwellian police state in which the bodily fluids of every adult in the US are routinely searched without cause. This is a far cry from sobriety checkpoints for drivers on public streets. Anyone succumbing to such absurd antitab drug hysteria is truly “in the grip of a deep psychosis,” to quote Eric Schlosser (see tinyurl.com/4ssj96e).

Mike Nacrelli
Portland, Oreg.

The idea of a law that would force every US resident over a certain age to report for a voluntary drug test is insane. At what age does he suggest we start the mandatory drug testing? Children as young as preteens are doing drugs. A mandatory drug testing for every US citizen? Who is going to pay for that? Where are the ones who fail the test going to get the money for counseling and treatment? Many will already be receiving welfare checks, food stamps, and other forms of government help. Are the people with “clean cards” going to be responsible for paying for the counseling and treatment for those who fail? The hardworking American people are being taxed out their ears as it is.

Betty Bird
Hawkins, Tex.

Regarding “Toward a Demand-Based US Drug Policy”: It’s a breath of fresh air to finally see this idea espoused—and so creatively and eloquently. We Americans are so obsessed with treating symptoms that we blithely turn on its head the old saw “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” It’s an appalling tragedy that we are so ready to see the drug problem as a foreign one and are blind to our national sin that undergirds it.

Carl Grant
Concord, Calif.

We want to express our appreciation for the wonderful March/April cover story article, “No Such Thing as a Free Loan” by Amy Sherman, which really resonated with us as we dare to take our urban ministry to a new level—going from partnering with Christian ministries and churches with an ongoing presence in the city of Cleveland to purchasing a former church campus in the city to creatively engage with our partners in ministry together in the city. We’ve seen in our years of urban ministry lots of efforts with great intents that oftentimes end up unintentionally doing more harm than good.

This article poignantly and clearly nailed the importance of understanding the perpetual harm payday loans can do and also offered creative solutions. It was great to read that churches and businesses can work together to create better opportunities, such as Grace Period (a nonprofit) is doing in the partnership between Allegheny Center Alliance Church and the Pittsburgh Central Federal Credit Union, among others mentioned in the article.

In addition, it pointed out the importance of providing not just opportunities to borrow but also opportunities to learn how to save and handle finances. This is the only way to change the cycle of borrowing and debt that is created through these “economic predators.” As our members and partners engage in our new initiative, we hope that people will think about creative solutions that can bring tangible transformation to the city through the power and hope that only Jesus can offer. We appreciate your permission to reproduce this article for our volunteers and partners and are sure this information will serve as an impetus to tap into the creative power Christ has given each of us.

Julie Busch Jones and Pat Tarter
Outreach Staff, Bay Presbyterian Church
Bay Village, Ohio
“Communicating” with Lizz Wright (and Martin Luther)

I hate Christmas releases. The glitzy, glamorous treacle that hits the market every November by pious pop stars, sex symbols, and tenors of every conceivable stripe repels me with its facile beauty. Such product does not provide for a Christian spirituality but instead promotes a Christian spectacle.

Martin Luther once wrote that there are those for whom the sacrament of communion is “of little or no benefit”; I view these resplendent CDs as the musical equivalent: good tidings for listeners “who have no misfortune or anxiety, or who do not sense their adversity.” They like to get caught up in a feeling but wouldn’t be caught dead in a fellowship.

It is the practical, often uncomely, music of everyday faith that can strengthen and encourage the Christian, songs that are “willing to share all the burdens and misfortunes of Christ and his saints, the cost as well as the profit.” Give me Rev. Gary Davis, Fred and Annie Mae McDowell, Ralph Stanley, Mavis Staples, or Johnny and June Carter Cash. Much as Luther saw the Eucharist as intended for those “who are troubled and distressed by sin and evil,” the music that would accompany a transformation wherein we “make the infirmities of all other Christians our own” will be found in the bins year-round, not on holiday ends.

So at a crowded Barnes & Noble last December, while others stood in line clutching their David Archuleta, Susan Boyle, and Jessica Simpson, it felt almost subversive to use my gift card on Lizz Wright’s Fellowship, her recording of gospel music and songs of everyday faith.

It was the title of this fourth release by Wright—a jazz singer who could easily be making Anita Baker-style adult pop instead of the homegrown funk she defines with integrity and artistry each time out—that sent me back to Luther’s “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Blood of Christ” (1519) to find his definition of fellowship, a word he uses throughout. When we take upon ourselves the suffering of our fellow Christians, we “must make the evil of others our own, if we desire Christ and his saints to make our evil their own.” This is the signification of the sacrament and the origin of its name, which in the Latin is communicare; for Luther, this fellowship is a “change wrought by love.” Wright sings of such a change in “I Remember, I Believe” by her mentor Bernice Johnson Reagon; here we are partakers of Christ and “permit all Christians to be partakers of us.”

Wright’s recordings possess a strong sense of partaking. Since Salt (2003) they feel increasingly like get-togethers—musicians gathering to create sunny fields and country roads wherein her husky voice can play. There is on this album also a sense of taking part in the travails of those “assailed unceasingly” with many sins and afflictions, a reminder that “as love and support are given you, you in turn must render love and support.” You’ll join in easily through the familiar—“Presence of the Lord” (Clapton), “In from the Storm” (Hendrix), and “Amazing Grace”—and sing along with the new—“Feed the Light” (from the artist known as Joan As Police Woman) and the title track by Me’shell N’Degeocello.

Fellowship begins with a question Luther asked those of his time “who would gladly share in the profits but not in the costs” of this community: Would you walk a righteous path without the promise of heaven, paradise, streets paved in gold?

Wright and her friends sing imploringly, “Let faith guide you,” and fall into a lifting repetition of “forgiveness and love” as the song fades. The lyric’s theme of tolerance and care gives melody to Luther’s instructions: “Give yourself to everyone in fellowship, and by no means exclude anyone in hatred or anger.”

As you prepare your table for everyone, “Christ and all his saints are coming to you,” wrote Luther, “with all their virtues, sufferings, and mercies, to live, work, suffer, and die with you, and they desire to be wholly yours, having all things in common with you.” Wright sings of their arrival in the Matthew 5-based “Sweeping Through the City.”

Ultimately, music—especially that of pompous Christmas CDs—is among those things “transient and seen” that can misdirect faith. The fellowship of love in Christ must be “hidden, invisible, and spiritual.” Still, Wright’s voice has deepened so that she adds a real presence to these proceedings, which is different from the showiness that passes for authority in pop. While melismatic and a joy to follow with the ear, she sings with an awareness of her voice as an instrument of communication, as simple as bread and wine. No one is going to say that Lizz Wright is an “awesome” singer, and that is the greatest compliment that could be paid her.

J.D. Buhl would like to dedicate this column to the memory of Timothy F. Lull, teacher, advisor and friend. Lull served as president of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, Calif., from 1997 until his death in 2003. All quoted material comes from Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings, which he edited in 1989.
There have been so many recent advocacy-powered victories that we had a hard time choosing which ones to highlight. Thanks to all who submitted suggestions. Send any good advocacy news you want us to celebrate to Kristyn@esa-online.org.

MTV has promised not to air Kanye West’s offensive music video “Monster.” After a 30-second video preview was leaked revealing eroticized violence against woman, a Care2.com petition signed by over 15,000 people asked MTV not to air the video.

Guam became the third country to ban shark finning, a process that cruelly removes the fins off sharks to make shark fin soup. Nearly 15,000 signatures went out to the Governor of Guam and he listened. And Costco has become a leader in the sustainable seafood industry by stopping the sales of 12 “red-listed” seafood species. Greenpeace and over 30,000 petitioners convinced Costco that fishing “red-listed” seafood is not only damaging to the environment, but often these fish are harmful to humans. Learn more about both these victories at Care2.com.

The Oregon Center for Christian Voices (OCCV.org) helped win a major victory in the Oregon State Legislature with the passage of HB 2714. The bill will fight human trafficking by increasing the fines on men who purchase minors for sex. In addition, the bill eliminates the age defense, so the common excuse that a purchaser “just didn’t know” the age of a young victim is no longer admissible in a court of law. Lastly, the bill helps treat minors as victims rather than criminals, so minors who are commercially sexually exploited have greater access to treatment programs. When Christians work together on public policy, we can protect our most vulnerable neighbors.

On March 24 Target signed on to the No Dirty Gold campaign’s “Golden Rules” for more responsible metals mining. Because Target is one of the top 10 jewelry retailers in the US, its support could significantly boost the effort to clean up gold mining. To date, more than 70 other jewelry retailers with combined US sales of more than $13.5 billion—nearly a quarter of the US market—and more than 100,000 people have signed on to the No Dirty Gold pledge (NoDirtyGold.org).

The largest florist in the world, 1-800-Flowers, responded to 54,000 Change.org members and agreed to begin selling Fair Trade flowers and to insist on a strong code of conduct for all their suppliers to counteract the deplorable working conditions that thousands of female flower workers face in South America. They’ve promised to offer Fair Trade flowers in time for Mother’s Day, making 1-800-Flowers a leader in the industry. Go to facebook.com/1800flowers to send them a thank you note!

After months of lobbying from Polaris Project and other anti-trafficking advocates, and after receiving over 27,000 letters from Change.org members, the Maryland legislature has passed three critical anti-trafficking bills. Huge thanks go out to all the petition signers who helped spur this victory along, the champions of these bills in the Maryland legislature, and all the advocates who spoke out against human trafficking. To learn more about this victory and to advocate for the Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Deterrence and Victims Support Act, go to PolarisProject.org.

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Taking a historic and humane step, Illinois Governor Pat Quinn abolished the state’s death penalty on March 9th. Thanks to more than 9,000 people who signed a petition or called the governor’s office, Illinois became the third state to legislatively abolish its death penalty since 1972.
Building Builders

A few years ago, we hired some workers to build an extension on our home. A year later I caught up with our contractor, Des Nixon, over coffee and pancakes. Here’s how the conversation went:

“Des, I hear you’re building hospitals and factories these days. Are you getting out of building houses?”

“I don’t build buildings, Steve.”

“Well, what do you do? You’re a builder!”

“I build builders.”

You could have knocked me over with a house brick. Over the next hour I learned more about growing leaders than I had in my many years of formal training for the ministry. I discovered Des’ mission in life was not to be a builder; it was to grow young men. At our local church, Des had a ministry of discipling young men. He was smart enough to know that you don’t do that by sitting around in someone’s living room. So he piled them into his four-wheel drive, and off they went into the Australian desert for a week.

Some of the young men had troubled backgrounds. Others no longer had fathers around. As God worked in these young men’s lives, Des began thinking that he would like to give some of them a job.

Previously Des had no intention of growing his business. He was happy working on his own. Today, however, Des has a team of 18 men working for him. A number of them have come to know Christ through him.

Here’s how Des builds builders:

Recruit. Des’ first workers came through his ministry to young men in his local church. He spent time with them. He took them away on camping trips. Some came from established and stable church families, others from troubled backgrounds. As Des developed a reputation for turning boys into men, people sent others to him. Pastors, parents, other builders, even his own children would recommend young men who were looking for work and for direction. Now Des doesn’t need to actively recruit; they come to him.

Select. Before he hires anyone, Des prays and asks God if he should hire this particular young man. If the answer is yes, he employs him for two to three months as a casual laborer. Then Des watches, and his supervisors watch, and the other workers watch. They want to see if this new guy is willing to learn. Does he embrace the company’s values of honesty, integrity, fun, and commitment to relationships?

Des has created a culture. Most new workers mature quickly through being in an environment where they are valued and respected and where people have high expectations of each other. After two to three months, the team knows if someone will make it.

Grow. Once a worker has proven himself, Des takes him on as an apprentice, and the real learning begins. Des sets standards that are higher than what the government expects. He will even pay an apprentice’s wages while he works for two months with another carpenter who is skilled in a particular aspect of the trade. Des wants his apprentices to learn from the best.

Multiply. After an apprentice has finished his training with Des, he can stay on and work as a qualified carpenter. He then becomes eligible to become a supervisor. Des has seven supervisors. He meets with them regularly and shares everything about the business with them. When a difficulty arises, he draws them into the process of resolving it. They experience firsthand how much he values honesty, even when he has to pay a price for it.

Supervisors begin by quoting on and running smaller jobs; as they gain experience, they graduate to larger ones. Des stays in the background and helps his supervisors grow through the challenge. His goal is that 50 percent of his carpenters will become supervisors and go on to become builders who run their own businesses.

Sustain. It doesn’t sound like good business sense to turn half your qualified workforce into future competitors—until you ask Des how business is going. During one recent financial year his company grew by over 40 percent. His clients are happy, his workers love him, and the business is healthy. Des does not pursue profits; he pursues his mission profitably.

Des’ mission is to grow young men. He lives by the conviction that if he fulfills his mission, God will look after his business. In 10 years Des is planning to get out of the building trade and spend the rest of his life in the background, encouraging the men he has grown. Des Nixon is a movement leader. He knows the principles and practices better than most church leaders I know.
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Letting God Be God

Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped.

Numbers 9:18

As I write this, my fellow congregation members and I continue to lose control of our surroundings. Our church offices have been relocated three miles from our neighborhood, things are still in boxes, and, to make things worse, telephone and internet access has been problematic at best. Our place of worship is moving to a location in the opposite direction and into the sanctuary of a parish culturally different from ours. The start time of our Sunday service is changing to an hour considerably earlier than our bodies are used to. Our clocks are off, our routines decimated. In short, we’re in the midst of a major building renovation.

But the physical building is not the only thing being deconstructed at the moment. So are the things we do and the way we do them. Ministries and programs we’ve faithfully, if perhaps mechanically, slogged away at for years need to be significantly altered or even, in some cases, indefinitely suspended. Such change, especially for those of us most given to the familiar and predictable, can be quite threatening. We’re addicted to knowing what tomorrow will look like.

One example of “ministry upheaval” has been our beloved after-school tutoring program, which has served children of both church and neighborhood for over 15 years. For those who have devoted many years to this outreach, questions abound. What will happen to the children once the program goes on hiatus? Will the relationships continue without the weekly structure? How about our relationships as a tutoring team? What will I do with myself if I’m not tutoring a child? What will after-school ministry look like when we start it back up...if, in fact, we do?

Such questions can feel quite personal and emotionally charged when our sense of security, identity, or worth becomes wrapped up in the ministries we’re invested in. But we’re finding that when we’re in touch with such threats, God’s grace is manifest, for our real idols are mercifully exposed. We discover the counterfeits that we truly attend to—whether our need for significance or for the absence of fail-

God’s grace is manifest when our real idols are mercifully exposed.

ward, as the Lord dictates. But when we do, we discover a God whose ways are far bigger than ours.

To relinquish control is profoundly counterintuitive for a people shaped by the imperialist instinct that is the American national psyche. We’re accustomed to power, wielding all the tools necessary to maintain an environment that serves our agenda. Furthermore, it is in times of chaos when we’re tempted not only to aggressively seize control of the environment, but to alter the environment in a fashion that is favorable to our interests. We see this impulse demonstrated throughout the history of the United States, from the wresting of Native American lands and the annexation of Mexican and Spanish territories, to the covert manipulation of governments and economies in Latin America and other parts of the world. We see it today in the post-9/11 proliferation of domestic surveillance and control policies, the ideological push for privatization (whether in Pentagon planning or Wisconsin municipal legislation) in times of fiscal crises, or the neoconservative designs for American-led change amidst the current uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East.

While our nation (or, more accurately, various sub-operatives within it) chomps at the bit to solve—or capitalize on—the unraveling spaces of our world, both within and outside our borders, the body of Christ is presented with an important task. We can demonstrate to the world that human control is ultimately a delusion—in fact a tyranny—and that true hope is found when we simply let God be God.

Craig Wong is the executive director of Grace Urban Ministries. He invites your feedback at onbeingthechurch@gum.org.
Evangelicals and Animal Stewardship

For over 20 years I’ve been a student of American environmentalisms. The plural is intentional. Environmental concern flows from many springs, and though some of the streams merge, they also divide, so it rarely forms a single channel. Similarly, I’ve seen that there is more than one conservatism at work in America. Given the diversity in political communities I know well, it should have come as no surprise to me to find vast diversity among those concerned with animal welfare. But instead it set me on my heels.

In 2009, at the first conference put on by Flourish, the nonprofit I cofounded to help churches embrace and practice environmental stewardship, I was delighted to find in attendance a handful of Christian conservatives that the secular world would have considered anti-environmentalists, particularly in regard to climate issues and energy policy. I chatted in the corridor with Dr. Barrett Duke from the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) of the Southern Baptist Convention. Duke is a conservative’s conservative. I was grateful he came to our gathering. Duke is a conservative’s conservative. He identified a gaping hole, not just in our variety of environmentalisms, but in others as well.

Dr. Duke is neither a radical animal rights advocate nor a vegetarian. He is crystal clear on the distinction between humans, created in the image of God, and animals. But over the next two years he introduced me to people who taught me a great deal about the human obligation to mitigate cruelty and show kindness to individual animals, and how it is a necessary part of the creation stewardship mandate I so loudly proclaim.

One thing Duke had noticed was that the remaining states where cockfighting was not a felony were states where his organization had significant influence. Through the work of the ERLC, a number of those states now have stronger laws on the books.

Through the network of commonsense animal stewardship advocates that Duke introduced me to, I met Randy Craighead, executive pastor of Church of the King, whose New Orleans medical and dental ministry added veterinary services to its urban outreach. Low-income residents lined up around the block to get care for their pets, and the church showed in tangible ways that it cared for whole people—people who love their animals.

I visited dog trainers in Atlanta who helped inner-city youth train their pit bulls for obedience and for showing instead of fighting. I met Wayne Pacelle, head of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), who had befriended Michael Vick, former quarterback of the Atlanta Falcons and a convicted dogfighter. Pacelle and Vick have travelled the country together, as Vick talks with at-risk youth about his former pastime, about being brought low, and about being restored.

I met Ben DeVries, graduate of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Moody Bible Institute, who runs the blog site NotOneSparrow.com, which has outstanding resources for evangelical Christians who want to understand the biblical basis for animal stewardship.

Christine Gutleben, faith outreach director for HSUS, gave me a copy of Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2003) by Matthew Scully, a Christian conservative and speechwriter for George W. Bush and Sarah Palin. Scully peels back the fig leaves of euphemism and rationalization from the factory farming system, revealing the scandalous abandonment of tradition, honor, and decency that characterizes the industry.

Evangelical Christians were among the first to recognize animal cruelty as a modern problem. Anti-slavery statesman William Wilberforce made the prevention of cruelty to animals one of his parliamentary priorities. Far from a radical liberal cause, animal stewardship is part of an evangelical heritage worth claiming and conserving.

HSUS has produced Animal Protection Ministries: A Guide for Churches and a DVD called Eating Mercifully, which includes study guides. They are outstanding resources for churches that want to begin to engage this issue (watch the trailer, download guides, and order at tinyurl.com/293uko7).
JOBS NOT JAILS

Homeboy Industries embraces, nurtures, and trains former gang members for the work force—and a better future.
T JAILS

Nurtures, and trains former gang members for the workforce—and a better future

by Jan Johnson
“IN THIS PLACE OF WHICH YOU SAY, ‘IT IS A WASTE . . . ’ THERE SHALL ONCE MORE BE HEARD THE VOICE OF MIRTH AND THE VOICE OF GLADNESS . . . THE VOICES OF THOSE WHO SING.”
JEREMIAH 33:10-11

Let’s say you hear about a job site where 85 percent of the workers are on probation or parole from prison. What chance of survival would you give such an enterprise? Then let’s say all these workers are former members of rival gangs and have killed each others’ friends. What would you imagine the atmosphere of that job site to be?

This is Homeboy Industries, the largest gang intervention program in the United States. Founded by Father Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest, Homeboy assists at-risk and former gang-involved youth in Los Angeles in becoming contributing members of the community through jobs in its own businesses, job training, and job placement. Yet above all else, Homeboy is a community of people committed to one another, providing youth an array of services that address their various acute needs. When Homeboy Industries helps these former gang members redirect their lives and find hope for the future, everybody wins.

It all began in 1986 when Gregory Boyle was appointed pastor of Dolores Mission in a neighborhood of East Los Angeles, where he served through 1992. The parents of Dolores Mission—the poorest parish in Los Angeles, located among thousands of low-income apartments—continually came to Boyle requesting help for their kids who were in gangs. So Father Greg, eventually called “G-Dog” or “Father G” or simply “G” by the homies (in gang parlance, a “dog” is someone who stands by you no matter what), began patrolling the projects at night, riding his bike. His reception was chilly until he began visiting the homies when they were locked up in jail or wounded in the hospital.

In 1988 Boyle launched Jobs for a Future (JFF). Besides establishing a daycare program and an alternative high school (where one principal lasted only a day), this parish-led program worked to find legitimate employment for young people. Its success shaped the model followed today, which demonstrates that many gang members are secretly eager to leave the danger and destruction of gang life.

During that time Boyle’s philosophy began to shift. “We don’t work with gangs here, we work with gang members,” says Boyle. “In the old days I used to work on gang peace treaties and cease-fires, but I don’t do that anymore. I don’t want to validate the gang or supply oxygen to gangs. Now it’s one gang member at a time.”

To reach those individuals, Boyle says Mass and speaks at 25 regional youth camps, jails, and prisons. In conversations following his talks, he stands ready to hand out a card with his name and phone number on it. He invites young people to leave the danger and destruction of gang life.

Fresh, wholesome breads and pastries from Homeboy Bakery’s ovens are sold at 20 farmers’ markets in the greater Los Angeles area. Homegirl Café employs former gang members and serves, in part, organic produce grown at the Homegirl Gardens.

All photos courtesy of Homeboy Industries
men and women to call him when they get out, offering to hook them up with a job, provide tattoo removal, and line them up with a counselor.

Each year about 8,000 former gang members from over 800 gangs come through Homeboy’s doors seeking help to make a positive change. An additional 4,000 gang-affiliated family and community members also come seeking help.

As executive director of Homeboy Industries, Boyle has become a nationally known speaker and a consultant to youth services and governmental agencies, policymakers, and employers. In his frequent travels—he gives about 200 talks a year all over the country—he usually takes homies with him, an experience that can prove life-changing in itself. Boyle and several homies were featured speakers at the White House Conference on Youth in 2005, at the invitation of Laura Bush. Yet he’s still just “Father G.” Past the glass-fronted reception desk of the Homeboy Industries building, he can often be found talking with homies in his office.

HOMEBOYS MAKE GOOD

In response to the 1992 race-related riots in Los Angeles, Jobs for a Future launched its first in-house business, Homeboy Bakery, in an abandoned bakery across the street from its office. It provided training, work experience, and, above all, the opportunity for rival gang members to work side by side. The success of the bakery provided the groundwork for additional businesses, thus prompting JFF in 2001 to become an independent nonprofit organization, which they called Homeboy Industries. It has since grown into a national model. Its new headquarters, completed in 2007, is a two-story, 21,000-square-foot facility, most of which houses the bakery, a restaurant (Homegirl Café), and a retail store (Homeboy Merchandise). It is also headquarters to Homeboy Industries itself, as well as its solar panel installation training and certification program. This $8.5 million dollar building is located in gang-neutral territory in an industrial area with a view of LA’s city hall in the background. Homeboy Silkscreen and Embroidery is located about one mile off campus.

Hector Verdugo knows this part of the city, and its culture of hopelessness, well. “All my family members were gang members and drug addicts,” he explains. “My father died a week before my twin and I were born. Gang members were always in our home, so we saw their lifestyle firsthand. I remember as a small child holding a real gun and being amazed at how heavy it was.”

As Verdugo grew older, he began to participate in gang life, first going along for the ride and then moving on to home robbery. “In the beginning it’s fun and crazy, but then death starts coming around you when your friends get killed. Then you want to drink, do more drugs, and hurt more people. You admire gang life and hate it at same time.”

Eventually Verdugo became a drug dealer—two years of prison had provided the “business school” opportunity to learn how to move drugs across the country and maximize profit. He lived the high life. “With money, I could go out of my neighborhood. To others, that’s nothing, but to us it was everything. I bought a van, filled it up with my homeboys, went to the beach, on shopping sprees up and down Rodeo Drive, buying whatever we wanted, clothes and watches.” He paid $12,000 for a home stereo system. “It was ridiculous,” he says in retrospect, but it couldn’t disguise the pain that lay beneath his genuine yearning for freedom.

“What comes with this life is the understanding that you’re hurting people through the drugs you sell,” says Verdugo. “I know what drugs do to families, so that got on my conscience. There was always a lifeline of spirituality inside me, but I had to ignore it. I would justify my drug dealing—I’m not selling to my people in the projects’—but my conscience started talking to me. God would say, ‘These are people.’ That started messing with me.

“I never stepped foot in high school, but I knew I had something in me to make it work without doing this,” Verdugo explains. Tired of the “network of hurt,” he tried to “go legit” with a restaurant and a construction business, but found it difficult. “The legit life is harder than the illegitimate life,” he says. “You got to pay workman’s comp. If someone says no, you can’t forcefully make them say yes. You have to do marketing, make cold calls. It was a whole different thing. I failed in it.”

One day, when all his construction equipment froze at the same time, he said, “OK, God. What do you want me to do?
“I was miserable—trying to make it work on a bad foundation,” continues Verdugo. “I was on sand when I should have been on rock. I started to get drunk and party. My relationship with my kids was bad. I didn’t know what God wanted me to do. A friend said, ‘Go talk to Father G.’ I’d met him in juvenile hall years before. I couldn’t believe he was still around.”

When Verdugo met with Father Greg, he thought maybe the priest could pull some strings and get him into college. But Boyle said, “No, I want you to work for me.” Verdugo refused to take up a slot at Homeboy, saying he could find a job elsewhere. Boyle insisted, “I want you to work here. God wants you to work here.”

“Who’s going to argue with God?” Verdugo thought, so he went to work at Homeboy. “I felt good. I felt right. I’d been waiting for that feeling. Then I found out what my pay was!” he exclaims—$8 an hour. “I wondered how I would make it. But I felt like I was living in the gospels when Jesus fed the 5,000 with a few loaves of bread.

“I’ve been here ever since,” he concludes. “I’m a rich man now. I’ve gotten custody of my kids. I love my job.”

JOBS MEAN COMMUNITY, HOPE

A distinctive feature of Homeboy Industries is its small businesses, in which difficult-to-place individuals are hired in transitional jobs. Attired in silkscreened shirts sporting the phrase, “Jobs Not Jails,” they find a safe, supportive environment in which to learn both concrete and relational job skills while simultaneously building their work experience. As former rivals work together, they experience true friendship and community in place of the limited cohesion of gang life.

Job and work-readiness trainees are also required to attend some kind of class each day. If they’re tardy three times, they have to talk to Verdugo, who is now associate executive director.

“We find out what’s going on,” he says. “We tell them, ‘We love having you here, but you have to want to be here. A lot of people need this place, but your tardies are saying you don’t really want this place.’” Most of the time, they start coming to work on time. Often Verdugo talks to their case manager to figure out if they need counseling, a drug program, or legal help. Says Verdugo: “They’ll give up on us before we ever give up on them. I can’t give up. We have to find a way.”

Verdugo has learned to do what Father G does: to pick up on people’s patterns. He watches a person’s gaze. Is his chin up? “If not,” says Verdugo, “I go to him and give him some extra love. If I see that he’s on drugs, we test him. He may need to go to rehab or an outpatient drug program. Even with all the bad experiences of my life, I’m making a

REMOVING THE GANG MEMBER BADGE

One of the more unusual Homeboy services is Ya ‘Stuvo tattoo removal program. (Ya ‘Stuvo means “That’s enough, I’m done with that.”) It’s not unusual for tattoos to cover shaved heads, the length of arms, and even faces. Because tattoos are the ultimate gang-affiliated statement, their removal is an important step in the journey out of gang life and into positive social integration. Without tattoos, they are no longer identified as gang members and can more easily find jobs.

Using laser tattoo removal machines, a team of volunteer physicians perform about 5,000 treatments a year. Ya ‘Stuvo continues to be a critical entry point for many clients, who come in for tattoo removal and then learn of the additional services offered.

Homebody employee Ray Moreno has had tattoos removed eight times. “It’s painful, but it gives me a fresh start,” he says. “The pain reminds me of what I did and don’t ever want to do again.”

Homebody employees can be suspended for getting a new tattoo, and priority is given to juveniles 13-14 years old to help them avoid deepening their tie to the gangs. The demand for tattoo removal continues to grow: In 2004, 675 clients had tattoos removed at the Homeboy facility; three years later, 1,151 clients sought Homeboy’s services.
difference in people’s lives. The love I get from G, I push it forward to someone else. What an honor it is to be here and to work with these beautiful people. We’re all from different barrios and different races, but we’re one big family.

When trainees are ready, they work with employment counselors to prepare to transition to jobs outside Homeboy. These counselors search out available jobs and work one-on-one with clients to develop résumés, hone interview skills, and find good employment matches. They go out into the community and build relationships with local businesses, searching out employers who are willing to work with parolees or former gang members, taking the time to overcome their fears and reservations.

As Verdugo explains, “We’re putting them back on the track of life, love, health, prosperity, helping them find jobs with friends of Homeboy that say, ‘I want to take a homeboy to hire. I want to take a chance.’ But you’re not just taking a chance, you’re also changing a life, and not just one life but also his kids’. My grandfather was a gang member, my father was a gang member, I was. What about my kids if I don’t step out of this? I gotta change me, then my kids change. The ripple effects are incredible.”

The emphasis on work is strategic—Jobs for a Future and now Homeboy Industries. One of the organization’s mottos is “Nothing Stops a Bullet Like a Job.” A job enables former gang members to have self-respect, to learn the value of accomplishment, and to receive affirmation for it as well as to pay for a place to live and provide for a wife and children, which many have.

“Work is ennobling,” says Boyle, “and there’s no such thing as a job that doesn’t bring dignity. Yet jobs only do 85 percent of what needs to get done. The classes, the therapy, and so on move them toward wholeness.”

With the help of a case manager, each homie chooses from 30 education classes: 12-step meetings; charter high school classes; and classes in job-readiness, parenting, anger management, relationship building, grief and loss, computer job skills, creative writing, and music and art enrichment. Mental health counseling and legal services are available as needed. The County of Los Angeles Probation Department recently granted approval to Homeboy’s court-mandated domestic violence batterers intervention program, the first to open in eight years.

So Homeboy is not only a worksite, but also a training program and a therapeutic community. Leaving gang life is a process. Redirecting their lives in a positive direction strengthens not only the individual, but also that person’s family, enabling that person to be a leader and role model.

**Kinship**

The goal is to infuse hope in those for whom hope is foreign. It promotes the idea that God is for us, no matter what, replacing the distorted idea that God watches people to pounce on them at the first false move. The latter resembles gang life, in which every mistake is remembered and held against a member forever. Gang members are required to do whatever is asked of them, no matter how cruel; if they don’t do it, they’re deemed to be “no good.”

Disengaging from gang life requires finding a relational replacement, and Boyle believes community is the only thing that is compelling enough to do this.

“We want to illuminate the dark corners of the empty gang life,” explains Boyle, “and replace it with community, which is a sense of belonging, feeling that you’re a part of something. A community of kinship is real. The gang milieu feels like it’s real, but it isn’t. It’s hollow. I always tell them, ‘The difference between your neighborhood and this place is that we have your back. The gang doesn’t.’”

Ray Moreno, who has worked at Homeboy for about a year, says that Homeboy helps former gang members realize...
Earlie Harrell is an unlikely peacemaker. An acknowledged leader in the Sex, Money, Murder set of the Bloods gang in Trenton, N.J., he has a significant criminal history and is well known among law enforcement officials in the area. Yet when open warfare among the city’s gangs led to a number of deaths several years ago, some of the mothers in the community began to look to him to help end the violence.

In response he formed an umbrella organization, Messiah’s Hands Inc., to teach life management skills to young gang members. Together with Rev. Julio Guzman, a local pastor, he created the Trenton Peace Movement in an effort to broker peace and provide alternatives to gang violence through training and employment. He also developed his own product—designer candles—and began working with an entrepreneurial consultant to burnish the business skills he originally acquired in the drug trade.

In his unpublished manifesto, “The Bottomline Perspective,” Harrell urges “those of us who have been blessed with the vision to see the truth,” to go “into the darkness and retrieve God’s lost children” from gang violence.

To be sure, not everyone is convinced Harrell is a changed man. For many, the fact that he has remained in the gang is a major sticking point. This has doubtless cost him much-needed support, which in turn has led some of his young followers to return to crime. For Harrell, however, it’s a matter of credibility. Being a Blood is part of who he is, but drug dealing and violence, as he tells his charges, are not what it means to be a Blood. Yet, as he noted at a recent church conference on the subject of the matter of credibility. Being a Blood is part of who he is, but drug dealing and violence, as he tells his charges, are not what it means to be a Blood. Yet, as he noted at a recent church conference in Trenton, “I’m not [just] a gang member. I’m a child of God.” And as such, Harrell believes that the only way he can reach other gang members is to remain one himself.

Chicago: Sacred Transformations
by Kristyn Komamicki

Eric Dean Spruth offers former gang members (and others with pasts they want to leave behind) a chance to turn the tattoos they’ve outgrown into new symbols of hope. An art therapist who works with inmates in Cook County Jail in Chicago, Ill., he is also a tattooist who believes that transforming old tattoos is a “concrete way of letting go of the past and making commitments to a better future.”

“I design custom works with each person,” explains Spruth, “discussing what the tattoo will mean to them, in order to create an image that becomes a source of daily inspiration to maintain a life of sobriety, a life that includes a commitment to the welfare of children, to family, to the community, and, for some, to God.”

Through his nonprofit Sacred Transformations, Spruth offers his services free of charge to anyone willing to fill out the in-depth application and to work through the consultation and art development process, which takes six to eight months. The client is asked to research ideas and come up with an image or symbol that represents his new life. Volunteer artists submit designs for review, and when everything is finalized the new image is superimposed over the old, with elements from the original design often incorporated into the new one. The lengthy, reflective process is therapeutic and an essential part of the “sacred transformation.”

Israel Vargas served more than 12 years in prison for a gang-related murder. Today he is a father and runs a Chicago nonprofit that serves the homeless. “I have to make sure that the message I’m sending out there is a positive one and not a negative one,” Vargas told Chicago PBS affiliate WTTW. But the gang tattoo stretched across his back read “Satan Disciples,” so he visited Spruth to see about bringing his physical appearance into line with his spiritual reality. He settled on the image of a gargoyle, a sculpture that adorns medieval churches to scare off evil spirits. “I’ve always been battling between good and evil,” explains Vargas, “and now evil is behind me, and I’m moving forward.”

The folks at Homeboy seek to tell each person the truth of unconditional love: They are exactly what God had in mind when God made them. Their life does not matter less because of what they’ve done and what has been done to them.

Hope abounds.
“Only all the time. If you’re attentive, that will be a constant in your life.” But he admits to getting “kind of anxious.”

“I see all these people out there waiting for me,” he explains, nodding toward the folks lining up outside his office to speak with him. “That’s what the day is like. They come in and their hair’s on fire.”

Boyle likes the African proverb “A person becomes a person through other people.” In spite of and through all the challenges, “There can be no doubt that the homies have returned me to myself,” writes Boyle in his recent book, tales of two decades of his work with gang members. “I’ve learned, with their patient guidance, to worship Christ as he lives in them.”

Boyle objects to the idea he can do this work because he’s special. “People are always disqualifying themselves. They say, ‘I can’t do this because I’m not Latino, or I’m not tattooed, or I’m not a felon or a parolee.’ Then you lose sight that this is not a specialized, rarified thing but just a relational thing: human beings connecting to human beings.”

Homies like Hector Verdugo prove that. “I’m not a holy roller,” he says, “but God is with me every step of the day, every second. God whispers in my ear when I need courage to step up when I want to step down. In my mind I know this is not me; this is the spirit of love, which is the spirit of God. I still need more of it in my life. It’s great when the conversation opens up, and people ask me questions, and I get to give the respect and glory to God. People walk away getting it. Homeboy is a place that’s about action; we just do it. That makes more of a difference than anything else.”

Jan Johnson (JanJohnson.org) is a writer, speaker, and spiritual director. She is the author of 18 books, including Enjoying the Presence of God, When the Soul Listens, and Savoring God’s Word, all from NavPress. IVP will release her latest, Abundant Simplicity, in June. She lives in Southern California.

Community service plays an important role in the re-education of former gang members.
Clothed in God’s Goodness
Learning spiritual truths alongside my homies
by Father Gregory Boyle

The original Homeboy Industries bakery was hugely famous from its first week. News crews would visit almost daily. Articles were written with photos of enemies working alongside one another. Tour groups came from all over the world. Busloads of Japanese tourists dropped by. Even Prince Charles’ business advisors swooped down on us.

Our foreman at the time was a man named Luis, in his mid-20s, who arguably had been among the biggest, savviest drug dealers our community had ever known. We knew each other for more than a decade, and any offer of a job was always graciously, but surely, declined. Luis was as smart as they come and quick-witted.

He used to say, “When we were kids, we would play Kick the Can but so did the cops. You know, they’d play Kick the Mexi-Can or Kick the PuertoRi-Can.”

He never got caught. Too smart. If the cops rolled by and he was standing with me, he’d mumble, “Beam me up, Scottie.” But when his daughter, Tiffany, was born, things changed. He wanted to work at the bakery, and his natural leadership abilities soon moved him up to foreman. Not only did he work with former rivals, he also supervised them, which is a great deal more difficult.

One day we received an odd request for a tour from farmers from the central valley of California. They want to see the bakery. It’s part of Luis’ job description to greet the busloads and the film crews. He hates this part of his job, and his whining could make your teeth ache.

“Do I gotta?”

The day the farmers arrive, he and I are waiting for the bus to pull up, and I’m swinging at his whiny complaints like a bunch of pesky gnats.

Finally, the bus drives into the awkward bakery parking lot, and I wave and direct it to its reserved spot. It’s one of those ultramodern buses, sleek and slick, equipped with a microphone at the front of the bus for the tour guide.

Luis pretends he’s the tour guide. “Welcome to Homeboy Bakery,” his voice nasally drones with tour-guide disinterest.

“Observe gang members in their natural habitat.”

He is holding his fist up to his mouth, for greater amplification. “Please keep your hands in the bus at all times. Do not attempt to feed the homies. They are not yet tame.”

“Cállate, cabrón,” I say through the part of my mouth not smiling, welcoming our visitors from the farmland as they get off the bus.
Later in the day, I visit the bakery several blocks from my office. Seeing Luis triggers the memory of his earlier tour.

“Oye,” I ask him, “How’d the tour go?”

“Damn, G,” he shakes his head, “What’s up with white people anyway?”

I was actually curious as to what was up with us.

“I don’t know, what is up with us?”

“I mean, damn,” he says. “They always be using the word ‘GREAT.’”

“We do?”

“Oh, hell yeah. Watcha. This buncha gabachos stroll in here and see the place, and it’s all firme and clean and machines workin’ proper, and they say, ‘This place is GREAT.’ And then they see the homies, tu sabes, enemies working together all firme, and they say, ‘You fellas are GREAT.’ Then they taste our bread and they go, ‘This bread . . . it’s GREAT.’ I mean, damn, G, why white people always be usin’ the word ‘GREAT’?”

I tell him I don’t know. But, trust me, every opportunity I could find after that, I tell him how ‘GREAT’ he is, just to mess with him a little.

Some four months later, it is nearly closing time, and I arrive at the bakery in the evening. Luis sees me in the parking lot from inside the building and rushes outside. He’s excited, and yet “enthusiasm” is not ever the card with which Luis leads. He’s too cool for that. He barely lets me get out of my car.

“Hey, G,” he says, thrilled to see me, “You not gonna BELIEVE what happened to me yesterday after my shift.”

He proceeds to tell me that, after work, he goes to pick up his 4-year-old daughter, Tiffany, at the babysitter’s. He puts her in the car, and they drive to their tiny apartment, where, for the first time, Luis is paying rent with honestly earned, clean money. He unlocks the front door, and Tiffany scurries in, down the hallway, and lands in their modest sala. She plants her feet in the living room and extends her arms piercing it.

He proceeds to tell me that, after work, he goes to pick up his 4-year-old daughter, Tiffany, at the babysitter’s. He puts her in the car, and they drive to their tiny apartment, where, for the first time, Luis is paying rent with honestly earned, clean money. He unlocks the front door, and Tiffany scurries in, down the hallway, and lands in their modest sala. She plants her feet in the living room and extends her arms and takes in the whole room with her eyes. She then declares, with an untethered smile, “This . . . is GREAT.”

He turns and says to me, “I thought she was turning white on me.”

He tells me that he lowers himself to her eye level, placing his hands on his knees for support.

“What’s great, mija?”

Tiffany clutches her heart and gushes, “MY HOOOME!”

Luis seems to be unable to speak at exactly this moment. Our eyes find each other, and our souls well up, along with our eyes. We can’t stop staring at each other, and tears make the way south on our faces. After what seems like longer than I’m sure it was, I break the silence.

I point at him. “You . . . did . . . this. You’ve never had a home in your life—now you have one. You did this. You were the biggest drug dealer in town, and you stopped and baked bread instead. You did this. You’ve never had a father in your life—and now you are one . . . and I hate to have to tell you . . . but . . . you’re great.”

And I hate to have to tell you this, but the first time I retrieved this story from my memory bank was to tell it at Luis’ funeral. He wasn’t doing anything wrong on the Wednesday afternoon he was killed. He was loading the trunk of his car, in the projects, readying himself for a camping trip with friends. Two gang members, with their faces covered, entered their “enemy’s” territory, looking “for fools slippin’.” They saw Luis and must have thought to themselves, He’ll do. They walked up to him and executed him.

I told the “great” story at Luis’ funeral largely because of the questions I had been repeatedly asked by his friends and homies during the week that spanned his death and his burial.

“What’s the point,” they’d ask, “of doing good . . . If this can happen to ya?”

It was a good question, worthy of a response. I told that packed church that Luis was a human being who came to know the truth about himself and liked what he found there. Julian of Norwich, a 14th-century female English mystic, saw the life struggle as coming to discover that we are “clothed in God’s goodness.”

This became Luis’ life’s work. He embraced this goodness—his greatness—and nothing was the same again. And, really, what is death compared to knowing that? No bullet can pierce it.

**THE SLOW WORK OF GOD**

There is no force in the world better able to alter anything from its course than love. Ruskin’s comment that you can get someone to remove his coat more surely with a warm, gentle sun than with a cold, blistering wind is particularly apt. Meeting the world with a loving heart will determine what we find there. We mistakenly place our trust, too often, in the righteousness of our wind, though we rarely get evidence that this ever transforms anything. Inmate and guard alike at Folsom Prison (where I did a stint as chaplain) always said the same thing about the other: “I don’t want them to mistake my kindness for weakness.”

Sooner or later, we all discover that kindness is the only strength there is. I can remember listening to a kid at a probation camp read at Mass from 1 Corinthians 13. If you’ve been to as many weddings as I have, you go numb as you hear, “Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is blah, blah, blah.” Your mind floats away. You start wondering if the Dodgers won last night and remind yourself to move your clothes from the washer to the dryer. But this kid started to read it like it mattered and it, as the homies would say, “woke my ass up proper.” He looked out at everyone and proclaimed with astounding surety: “Love . . . never . . . fails.”

And he sat down.

And I believed him.

Every day, you choose to believe this all over again and want only “to live as though the truth were true.”

In my early, crazy days doing this work with gangs, I will admit I was totally out of whack. I’d ride my bike, in the middle of the night, in the projects, trying to put out fires (“Put Continued on page 45
A revolution unites. Will interfaith harmony be part of the liberation of Egypt’s people?
Egypt startled the world early this year with a swiftly moving revolution that began on January 25 and resulted in the resignation of its deeply entrenched dictator/president, Muhammad Hosni Sayyid Mubarak, on February 11. In a country where tensions have historically been deep between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority, one of the more remarkable side stories to the headline-grabbing revolution was an unprecedented bridging of religious divides as Muslims and Christians protested alongside each other in Tahrir Square and protected each other in the days of turmoil. This rare interfaith cooperation was in itself history-changing and gives hope for a new harmony among all Egyptians.

The hope comes despite several violent incidents that would suggest the contrary. The first three months of the year saw a suicide bombing of a Coptic church, the burning of both a Coptic church and a Muslim mosque, and a clash between Muslims and Christians that left 13 dead and 140 injured. It is now suggested, however, that the former authoritarian regime and remnant counterrevolutionary forces may have been behind these events, staging them to deepen religious division and justify a strong police state.

Of great significance is the fact that Egyptians emphasized their desire for unification with Day of Unity celebrations across the country on March 11—this in a country where Christians represent only 10 percent of the population and where even in this slender minority there has been factionalism among the Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions.

A NATION IN SEARCH OF LIBERATION
Egypt, long considered the “sleeping giant” of the Arab world, has awakened to a new political reality. Following the lead of their Tunisian neighbors, whose revolution resulted in the ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and his regime on January 14, Egyptian activists launched their own protest on National Police Day, declared an official holiday in 2009 by Mubarak. Thousands of protestors gathered to confront the government, issuing a collective voice against the corruption of the secret police, state security, and other law enforcement sectors.

“Egyptians were fed up with corruption, lack of social justice, and living in a police-controlled state,” says Maggie Morgan, a Protestant Egyptian protestor and independent filmmaker who participated in the gatherings at Tahrir Square.

The regime also failed to address the significant needs of unemployment and poverty. Prior to the revolution, Egypt’s unemployment rate hovered around 10 percent. In 2008-2009, 16.3 million people were living below the Egyptian income poverty line, a number that has grown with the recent global economic struggles.
According to UNICEF, rural Upper Egypt, the geographic area south of Cairo along the Nile River, had the largest income poverty rate, with 43.7 percent of its population living below the national poverty line (twice the national rate).

The young leaders of the revolution were largely motivated by the desire to end the oppression experienced under Mubarak’s authoritarian regime. Following the youths’ example, hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of older Egyptians gathered around the country chanting the slogan “Taghyyeer, houreyya, adala igtema’iya” or “Change, Freedom, Social Justice,” advocating for equality and freedom for all people in Egypt regardless of economic status or religious affiliation.

Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo was the heart of the struggle against Mubarak’s regime. Tahrir means “liberating” in Arabic and suggests that liberation is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. For more than 18 days men, women, and children gathered day and night in the center of Tahrir Square, and in many other cities around Egypt, as a sign of solidarity and a call for change. Egyptian protestors did not segregate based on gender, economic status, or religious affiliation but instead united against a common enemy: injustice. For the most part, the spirit in the square was positive as protestors adopted nonviolent resistance as their primary strategy of engagement.

However, emotions ran high during the more than two weeks of protests, with activists refusing to back down and growing numbers of citizens daring to dream of the emergence of a new national “democratic” identity for Egypt. By the end of the protests, more than 350 people had lost their lives, and thousands more were injured. Harrowing videos reveal a number of government vehicles speeding through the heart of the city, crushing protestors in their path. The dead have been hailed as “martyrs of the revolution” and the sacrifice of a nation in pursuit of justice.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Egyptian revolution was interfaith cooperation. Both Christians and Muslims gathered in Tahrir Square and other venues for prayer and worship. During the revolution, even in the middle of chaos and anarchy, not a single church or mosque was bombed or attacked.

American Paul-Gordon Chandler, rector of St. John’s Church in the Maadi neighborhood of Cairo since 2003, describes the protests: “As the world looked on in amazement at the protests in Egypt, religious divisions were set aside as Muslims and Christians joined together in a multi-faith movement.”

**ONE HAND**

Muslims and Christians not only came together in their stand against injustice, but they also supported one another in tangible ways by standing guard over holy places and praying. Countless stories and photographs depict Muslims standing guard as Christians gathered in prayer and worship, and Christians protecting their Muslim brothers and sisters as they observed salla, the ritual of praying toward Mecca. Chandler describes one of the occasions when the Coptic Church held a service in Tahrir Square, saying, “Even members of the conservative Muslim Brotherhood assisted as they protected the entrances of the square. The Christian leaders conducting the service called on all to pray together and to love each other. These proclamations led the Muslim protestors present to chant *Eid Wahda*, meaning ‘One Hand,’ which emphasized the unity between Muslims and Christians.”

In addition to providing guardianship during prayer and worship gatherings, Muslims and Christians united around the common cause of protecting their neighbors. Without the protection of the government’s police force, bands of rogue individuals terrorized communities, looted, and attacked when they had the opportunity. However, communities came together to support one another across religious divides. Young men and old took turns placing perimeters around their communities to

**Christians formed a protective circle around praying Muslims during the protests in Tahrir Square.**
keep watch during the night to shield off looters and ruffians.

During the chaotic days of the revolution, thousands of criminals escaped from prisons around the country, leading to increased fear and uncertainty. Amir Wahib, a devoted follower of Christ who serves the poor living in garbage settlements on the outskirts of Cairo, shares this experience: “On the fourth day of the revolution, the police left the streets unsecured, criminals were released from prison, and thieves were violently breaking into neighborhoods. I went down the street to guard our place, and I felt a freedom I have never felt before—a freedom to take responsibility for the safety of my family which increased with people uniting in the streets for the same cause for the first time.”

Chandler tells a similar story: “Once we got used to the gunfire, we felt safe under the Egyptians’ care, knowing they were protecting us, together with their own families and property. Every street in our neighborhood had makeshift barriers and road blocks, manned by the local ‘volunteer militia’ holding clubs, knives, swords, shotguns, or pistols. But they were there to help and protect us all.”

**INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH MOSTLY SILENT**

While Muslims, Coptic Christian, Protestant, and secularist citizens crowded the streets in revolutionary fervor, the institutions of the church responded in various ways to the protests. On January 31, Pope Shenouda III, the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, publicly endorsed President Mubarak and forbade Coptic Christians from participating in the protests. Many Coptic youth, priests, and even some bishops ignored this directive and actively engaged in the protests. By February 15, Shenouda issued a very different statement, affirming the resiliency of Egypt’s youth and honoring those who had sacrificed their blood and become martyrs.

The evangelical Protestant community in Egypt, under the leadership of Vice President (and Acting President) Rev. Dr. Andrea Zaki, called the churches to prayer and issued a statement on February 2 appealing to the people of Egypt to “unite, stand together, and stand in a single row against any force that attempts to harm Egypt.” The statement did not specify who those harming forces might be and did not refer directly to Mubarak or his regime. After the revolution, the evangelical Protestant community did affirm the actions and efforts of the youth movement and the “valiant armed forces” in “standing up to this fragment of outlaws, exerting extreme efforts all through the past days, working to maintain the security of the country and the safety of its people.” In addition, churches within the evangelical community opened free treatment centers in Cairo and Tanta for those wounded during the protests, while also providing support to the families of victims.

Some Christian participants in the revolution expressed strong discontent with the lack of organizational support from both Protestant and Coptic institutions. Christian protes-
tor Maggie Morgan speaks of her personal frustration: “The Christians that took part in the demonstrations were doing so individually, because of their own convictions.”

Kasr El Dobara, a large evangelical Presbyterian church in downtown Cairo very close to Tahrir Square, was one of the few congregations that played an active role in supporting the crowds of people in Tahrir Square. In early February, Kasr El Dobara posted a statement on their website which did not advocate a particular political decision but encouraged individuals to make their own decisions. They encouraged Christians to be advocates of social justice and equality while clarifying that the biblical notion of obedience to rulers and authorities does not mean blind obedience to tyrannical governments. Church members organized clean-up crews to help clear garbage from the protest areas. They also distributed food and water and provided medical care as ways to support the protestors involved in the movement.

Despite these moments of active church participation in the movement, Maggie Morgan admits, “I am still struggling with the church’s silence and withdrawal from this movement of January 25. Many Christians are afraid, thinking that Mubarak’s regime protected the Christians, and we don’t know who will take over after him, perhaps an Islamic regime. Now, of course, official church leaders make statements to support the protests. For me, it is a moment of true loss of credibility on the part of the majority of church leaders. Too little, too late.”
A HOME FOR LIFE

BY TIM HOILAND
The first thing I noticed as the bus rolled into Managua that hot March night was an illuminated Christmas tree standing tall in a traffic roundabout. At the next intersection was another, and then another. The second thing I noticed was the graffiti. Lots of it, everywhere, all saying basically the same thing: ¡Viva Daniel! ¡Viva La Revolución!

My taxi driver explained the significance of both the next morning. The government-commissioned Christmas trees stay up year-round as a constant reminder of all that Nicaraguans have to celebrate with “the people’s president” at the helm. And the graffiti, of course, reminds them of the very same thing. It appeared virtually overnight, allegedly commissioned by a government all too familiar with history’s left-right-left-right march of power. The Christmas trees and the graffiti were embodied statements of the obvious: Power is worthless if not clutched, flaunted, and defended.

The beat-up taxi headed south, past five-star hotels and roadside comedors, and out of the city towards San Antonio Sur. I’d been forewarned about Nicaragua’s address system, devoid as it is—almost comically—of street names and numbers. Using the directions I’d been given, with approximate distances and seemingly nondescript landmarks, and after several wrong turns and stops to ask for directions, we finally found the destination on a rutted dirt street. I paid the driver, and the taxi rattled away.

**Tambourines and Crosses**

I had come to visit Hogar Belén, a ministry of Mustard Seed Communities and home to some 20 children and teenagers with a variety of disabilities who had been abandoned or orphaned at some point in their young lives.

When I arrived, the children and staff were gathering for their daily chapel service, held in a breezy room with a crucifix up front and tambourines on the chairs lining the walls. I was immediately struck by this juxtaposition: the crucifix a well-known Roman Catholic symbol, the tambourine a stereotypically Protestant musical instrument.

Sitting down afterwards with Sandra Sandoval, the director of Hogar Belén, I asked about this, knowing that in Latin America there exists between Protestants and Catholics an uneasy and sometimes hostile tension. The administrators, she told me, were for the most part Catholic, while those working with the kids were generally Protestant. As far as she knew, this was the only faith-based organization of its kind in the country; the rest separate along the Catholic-Protestant divide.

“We worship the same God and work for the same mission,” she said. “Sometimes differences arise, in chapel for instance, but we can all agree on our higher cause.”

Anita Patterson-Vans, who works at the modest on-site health clinic where the children’s medical records are kept, told me the same thing. “What these children need is love,” she said. “They don’t have families, but we are able to give them love because of our faith. Regardless of our different
backgrounds, we believe what Jesus taught, in Matthew 25, that whatever we do for the least of these we are doing for him.”

The order of worship in chapel followed a mostly liturgical style, presumably drawing on Catholic influences. When it came time to sing, however, the tambourines were put to good use, filling the room and spilling out into the courtyard in a cacophony of sound both erratically offbeat and contagiously joyful. Once or twice, strategically placed staff members intervened to keep certain tambourine virtuosos from hitting their neighbors repeatedly on the head.

After a brief sermon about the woman Jesus refused to condemn, it was time for the passing of the peace. As I was a noticeable guest in the room, several of the children seemed especially interested in shaking my hand. One small girl approached me timidly, extended her tiny hand, and then, with a giggle, withdrew it quickly and hobbled away. A teenage boy, the oldest of the group—who required close supervision by the gatekeeper, the only male staff member—gave me the heartiest handshake I can remember, and without words in any discernible language welcomed me to his home.

A HOME FOR LIFE
Without a doubt, Hogar Belén has become a home to these kids. As abandoned children in the second-poorest country in the western hemisphere, they have been spared a life—a very short one, judging by statistics—of extreme vulnerability and suffering. And as abandoned children with disabilities, the shelter and love that orphans sometimes find through adoption would have very likely been out of reach.

Many of the children come to Hogar Belén without names or birthdays, just stories shrouded in the tragic unknowns of abandonment and neglect. Some are referred by a Ministry of Health program called Mi Familia, which exists to protect the rights of children and ensure they get proper treatment and medicine. In other cases, ordinary Nicaraguans who know of Hogar Belén by reputation may discover abandoned children on the street and bring them here.

Because of the wide age range represented among the children here, and because of the need for additional space, Mustard Seed Communities opened a new home for older children in Diriamba, about 20 miles south, to protect the younger ones from being picked on by those who are stronger and perhaps unaware of their strength.

“Our philosophy is that these children have a home for life,” Sandoval told me. This is because very few families would be willing to adopt them, and no other organization or institution in the country would be willing to take them until they are 25. Even then, the most likely option is the mental hospital.

“Omar came to us with a lot of aggression when we found him on the street,” she says by way of illustration, referring to the teenage boy who had greeted me during chapel. “He is much less aggressive now, because he has experienced patience and love. But mental hospitals are environments of
aggression. I worry what would happen to these children there.”

Raising the funds to care for children on such an open-ended, long-term basis is not easy. Every month Hogar Belén receives 10,000 córdobas (roughly US$450) from the government to cover the cost of utilities and property upkeep, and a local company provides a monthly donation of rice. Occasional donations of medicine trickle in, but because many children require ongoing specialized treatments, they purchase these at a local pharmacy. All other donations are sporadic. This, Sandoval says, forces them to depend entirely on God to meet their needs.

Even the property itself, with comfortable rooms and ample shade—not taken for granted in Nicaragua’s hot climate—represents its share of uncertainty. The property has been provided to Hogar Belén for 20 years, a period of time already half expired.

“There are difficult times,” Sandoval admitted, gazing out her office window into the simple, quiet courtyard. “But if God wants us to continue, we will.”

MEMBERS OF ONE BODY

When chapel ended, everyone scattered to their classrooms according to the daily routine. Some needed help—a hand to hold, someone to push a wheelchair—but others managed on their own. A stated goal of Hogar Belén is that children will eventually be able to dress and feed themselves. While for some this may seem a modest aim, for others it is a painstakingly long process, only possible through the remarkable patience, discipline, and care of the staff.

In a room used for physical therapy, I watched Jennifer being taught to grip small plastic blocks in her delicate, uncooperative hands. Gretel Navas, a staff member at her side, explained that Jennifer had arrived only four days earlier and that her struggles likely stemmed entirely from neglect.

Across the room, a young adolescent boy, naked except for his underwear, was placed on a padded table covered with corn flour as a team of four therapists moved his head, arms, and legs in a motion vaguely reminiscent of swimming. Navas explained that this therapy was designed to stimulate the nervous system, mapping information to his brain, hopefully enabling him one day to have control of his limbs.

Nearby, in a dark room with soft music playing and dimly colored lights dancing playfully on the wall, I met Antonio, who has cerebral palsy, and Alex, who has Down syndrome. Neither possesses any language skills. For several minutes, Alex sat with his face just inches from a backlit screen, mesmerized as a variety of tropical fish passed steadily by. Audiovisual tools like these are used to improve concentration by blocking out the world’s many distractions and providing easy, more manageable focal points.

Meanwhile, across the courtyard, Marvel Gonzalez was pointing to a cartoon diagram of the human body. Five mostly attentive children sat cross-legged on the floor. As she pointed to each part of the body, Gonzalez invited her students to repeat after her while pointing to their own corresponding body parts: brazo, mano, dedo, cabeza, nariz.

“Every part of the body is important, and every part is designed for a purpose,” she told them. “If I don’t have hands, can I pick up a spoon?”

“No!” came the group response.

“If I don’t have eyes, can I see where I’m going?”

“No!”

“If I don’t have a nose, can I breathe?”

“No!”

“If I don’t have a mouth, can I sing or eat or talk?”

“No!”

The repetition was intentional. But to make sure they were paying attention, Gonzalez asked the final question in a slightly different way: “Is the stomach important?”

When, after a brief pause, a boy answered in the negative, in keeping with the litany, Gonzalez responded with a chuckle, “Then I guess you don’t need lunch!”

The point was made. And it would be made again and again, day after day, for as long as it takes.

“I’m happy to know I can help, little by little,” Gonzalez told me, emphasizing the importance of teaching the basics. “This is my work. When I retire at the end of my career, I will know that I made a real difference in the lives of a few people. That’s more important to me than focusing on myself and working to get ahead.”

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I came to this country in 1992, following my mother to the land where the bread that would feed her children was. My mother worked in a dark, windowless, fume-filled room for 12 years with her camaradas, side by side, not realizing that her lungs were being filled with harmful chemicals. Anyone who had proper documentation would not work under those conditions. She died of cancer two years ago, and at that point I realized I wasn’t going to let my mother die in vain. I have made the choice to fight. My name is Nico, and I’m undocumented. And I stand here to say that I’m not afraid anymore.
Out of the Shadows and Into the Light

The immigrant youth movement is standing up and speaking out

by Stephen Pavey

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER HOLDERNESS

AND INTO THE LIGHT

STANDING UP AND SPEAKING OUT
“Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.”
– Cesar Chavez

What do the teachings of Jesus have to say “to those who stand with their backs against the wall?” asked Howard Thurman when addressing the African American experience of racism and violence of the 1940s. His answer and challenge, in his *Jesus and the Disinherited*, shaped the civil rights movement. The good news revealed in the teachings and life of Jesus is, wrote Thurman, “that fear, deception, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.” Jesus reveals the power of love, for self and others, that enables us to overcome relations of inequality that are perpetuated by fear, deception, and hate.

Fast forward 60 years to today’s growing nativism, xenophobia, and violence surrounding the presence of immigrants in the United States, and Thurman’s analysis of the lives of the disinherit-
after high school just erase that.”

We are only just beginning to understand the stress and fears within this vulnerable community of undocumented youth. At a recent vigil in Chicago, dreamers, as they are often called, publicly shared about the mental health issues and suicide that have taken the lives and dreams of friends. Reyna shared that after graduating in 2009 she attempted suicide because she was tired of the anxiety and saw no options for her future. Those few who do decide to go on to college face many obstacles. Nearly two-thirds of undocumented high school graduates come from families who live below the poverty line. Lacking those nine essential digits, they are excluded from in-state tuition (except in 10 states), federal loans, a driver’s license, and legal work to pay for school. It is not surprising, then, that most feel what Paulo Freire described as “hope pulverized in the immobility of the crushing present, some sort of final stop beyond which nothing is possible.”

In the face of uncertain futures, of dreams deferred, and of the shame carried by living in the shadows, undocumented youth are coming out of the shadows and publicly announcing, “My name is _____, and I’m undocumented, and I’m unafraid.” An estimated 20,000 undocumented youth now active in both local and national grassroots organizations worked hard this past year to pass the DREAM Act, but failed to see their labors come to fruition.

First introduced in 2001, the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act is a bipartisan legislation that would provide a conditional path to citizenship for thousands of students who were brought to the United States as children. Under this legislation, undocumented immigrants under the age of 30 who were brought to the country before the age of 16 and have been living in the US continuously for five years would be eligible for conditional non-immigrant status. DREAM Act applicants would need to have graduated from high school, obtained a GED, or enrolled in an institution of higher learning.

During the six years after receiving conditional permanent residency status, they would have to attend college or join the US military for a minimum of two years. At the end of the six-year conditional period, if they have met all requirements, they would be granted permanent residency, which would eventually allow them to become US citizens. This is not an amnesty bill.

The undocumented immigrant youth-led movement is gaining momentum through the use of personal stories, along with grassroots organizing and activism such as sit-ins, vigils, hunger strikes, marches, rallies, and acts of nonviolent civil disobedience.

The movement includes leaders like 25-year-old Gaby Pacheco. She excelled in school and sports, became a ranked officer in the Navy ROTC, and earned three degrees, including a bachelor’s degree in special education. Her dream of becoming a teacher of autistic children is on hold because she is not a citizen. Pacheco was just 7 years old when her family immigrated to the US in 1993 from Ecuador. Last year she and three other undocumented students completed a 1,500-mile walk from Miami to Washington, DC, to share their stories and urge lawmakers to pass the DREAM Act.

In an interview, Pacheco shared, “I truly believe that people don’t hate us. They’ve been misled by the media, sometimes even their own families, to believe that we’re bad and that we’re here to get the welfare. Every day on the walk, we talked to people who saw
we are just human beings, and we were able to regain some of that humanity we’d been searching for.”

At a December vigil in DC, the night before the house would vote on the DREAM Act, Pacheco articulated the hope within this movement that Thurman once addressed—“...of coming into the light, and not being afraid.” Pacheco continued, “Now that we are in this light, nothing, nothing, is going to be able to turn it off, because the shadows are gone...the darkness is gone, and we’re going to move forward, because that light is our light. And no senator, no legislator, no president, no human being is going to be able to take that light away from us.”

I sat in a Senate gallery full of dreamers and allies when the DREAM Act failed to pass by only five votes. There was a deep sadness and many tears, but there was also the overwhelming presence of hope, love, and light that come with the recognition of our shared human dignity.

Many dreamers have told me of the liberation they feel when they tell their story to a friend or to a public audience. They say they feel released from the shame of a status. They speak about the power of finding a community, of knowing they are not alone. The power of the national organizations (see sidebar on page 31) is that they
provide a safe place to tell one’s story. This is empowering. As one dreamer shared, “What is important is that we have created a space where we can feel safe and supported and just unashamed.”

In March the annual National Coming Out of the Shadows Week welcomed more undocumented youth from across the United States, who came out as “undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic.” Hope is alive, but the numbers reveal that many more undocumented students are still hiding in the shadows. These numbers are growing every year.

The prospects of the DREAM Act passing within the next two years are slim, although Obama mentioned it as a priority in his State of the Union address on January 25. Obama said, “Today, there are hundreds of thousands of students excelling in our schools who are not American citizens. Some are the children of undocumented workers, who had nothing to do with the actions of their parents. They grew up as Americans and pledge allegiance to our flag, and yet they live every day with the threat of deportation. Others come here from abroad to study in our colleges and universities. But as soon as they obtain advanced degrees, we send them back home to compete against us. It makes no sense... I know that debate will be difficult. I know it will take time. But tonight, let’s agree to make that effort. And let’s stop expelling talented, responsible young people who could be staffing our research labs or starting a new business, who could be further enriching this nation.”

The truth is that, although the DREAM ACT is an essen-

NEW BOOK TELLS THE STORY OF IMMIGRATION THROUGH CHILDREN’S EYES

by Heidi Unruh

Unlike many other books dealing with immigration, Listen to the Children: Conversations with Immigrant Families (Judson Press, 2011) does not approach the issue from the perspective of public policy or social controversy. Rather, Dr. Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, dean of Esperanza College at Eastern University, focuses on the children affected by immigration and the emotional and relational dynamics of migrant family life. This includes about 2 million undocumented children, 3 million children born into US citizenship whose parents are undocumented, and over 13 million children whose immigrant families attained legal status.

For children, immigration is often associated with trauma, separation, and social alienation, alongside new opportunities and experiences. What are their unspoken fears? Why do they sometimes feel anger and shame? What secrets do they keep on behalf of their families? How do they cope with the stress of dislocation and loss? What do they hope for the future? How does immigration shape their understanding of God?

Conde-Frazier guides us into the world of children through storytelling and imagined family dialogues. Each chapter addresses a different scene in the human drama of immigration, beginning with the decision of parents to depart from their home country. Other chapters cover reuniting with children after a separation, adjusting to a life in a new country, and the impact of raids and deportations. Education, legal status, and the role of the faith community in the lives of immigrant families are also explored.

In each arena, the book offers insights into the factors that contribute to successful social readjustment and healthy family relationships. Conde-Frazier offers guidance to those working with immigrant families on how to help them resolve conflicts, achieve goals, and restore a sense of security and dignity. At times she also speaks directly to immigrant families, suggesting ways to improve communication and process difficult emotions. Underscoring its design as a practical and accessible resource, the book is bilingual, with Spanish and English texts back-to-back.

Jesus said, “Let the children come to me.” This resource brings us to the children. Children’s lives are directed by adult decisions and national policies, and their voices are seldom heard. By inviting us into these “conversations,” Conde-Frazier not only offers us a more empathetic and nuanced understanding of a complex issue but also calls us to “create spaces of worthiness and equality for every human being.”

Heidi Unruh is the public policy editor for ESA’s weekly ePistle, and author of Hope for Children in Poverty (Judson, 2007).
tial part of the solution, even if it passed, it remains a limited solution to a larger broken immigration system.

What can be done? We must insist that the federal government get to work on humane comprehensive immigration reform that includes a path toward citizenship for these dreamers. In response to the federal government’s inability to work on immigration reform, states are now introducing a record number of largely punitive and anti-immigrant bills, including 1070 copycats, student bans, and challenges to the 14th Amendment’s birthright citizenship. In the meantime, the growing harsh anti-immigrant culture and the lack of any sensible immigration policy continue to divide our communities and tear apart families.

At a gathering in Washington, DC, of faith leaders in support of the DREAM Act this past December, Pastor Troy Jackson from Cincinnati shared that “as evangelicals, we believe conversion is possible.” I cannot help but think his personal conversion moment came with his own community’s recent attempt to save Bernard Pastor, a high school senior who came to the US at the age of 3, from deportation. “Our nation,” he continued, “needs a conversion moment, and our senators, and congresspeople, and politicians need a conversion moment.” I would add that we as American citizens also need a conversion moment.

Pastor Jackson reminds us of Saul in Acts 9, who was brought to his knees by a great light on the road to Damascus. Out of the light he heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Saul’s radical conversion saw him transformed from the persecutor to the persecuted, from siding with the powerful to walking with the oppressed.

For us, the privileged and powerful, a radical conversion will mean discerning Jesus in the dispossessed undocumented immigrants in our midst. We must repent of our anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy, seek a conversion of the broken immigration system that persecutes the immigrant community (in whom Jesus himself dwells), and begin to walk with our marginalized brothers and sisters, joining them in the light—even as they experience a conversion from fear to freedom.

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“HAVE COURAGE, THE TIME IS NOW, TAKE THE LEAD!”
Whistling in a Hurricane

In a scene from the movie Con Air, a plane full of prisoners flies low through the streets of Las Vegas. Light poles topple, pedestrians scatter, cars lose control and collide. It’s a scene of full-on, action-flick mayhem. And through it all, Steve Buscemi’s insane character sings, “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands.” It’s a spectacularly ironic cinematic instance of whistling in a hurricane.

Xavier Beauvois’ Cannes-winning film, Of Gods and Men, stretches that same kind of whistling into an unhurried, dimly lit two-hour feature—without the irony. It lovingly details seven Trappist monks—Frenchmen living in Algeria in 1996—singing their daily offices, morning by morning, noon by noon, evening by evening, night by night, all the while battling themselves over whether to flee the terrorist violence that surrounds them.

The monks’ unison singing punctuates the narrative. Villagers talk of young women and moderate Muslim leaders murdered in the streets. We watch as Islamist radicals slit the throats of a Croatian construction crew. Terrorists burst into the monastery, demanding medical care. And each scene of terror cuts to the quiet of seven robed monks, softly singing psalms and hymns. But what Con Air calls crazy, Of Gods and Men calls freedom.

Near the end of the film, as the violence around the Monastère de l’Atlas reaches its zenith, two monks commiserate about the stress, shock, and hypertension plaguing the villagers of Tibhirine. Brother Christian, the monks’ superior, warns their medic, Brother Luc, to guard his tongue, as his patients might reveal to the Algerian army that he’s been treating their enemies, Islamist guerrilla fighters. The Catholic monks, who study Islam in solidarity with their neighbors, have refused to take sides in a political conflict cloaked in religion.

“What’s the point of trying to save the world if you’re going to behave like a Christian?” Luc asks.

“Throughout my career, I’ve met all sorts of different people,” Luc replies, “including Nazis, and even the devil. I’m not scared of terrorists, even less of the army. And I’m not scared of death. I’m a free man.”

He then excuses himself, squeezing his portly figure past Christian. “Let the free man through,” he says with a grin.

Of Gods and Men depicts a freedom that is rare indeed, for it is a freedom that needs no external defense. It is a freedom planted deep within the divine image of the human soul, a freedom not even death can steal.

Luc, played by 79-year-old Michael Lonsdale, appears to suffer no doubt, joking in an early scene that a game of hide-and-seek might save them if the terrorists come calling. But none of the younger brothers can relinquish his hold on life so lightly. Olivier Rabourdin plays a doubting Christophe, whose anguished cries in the night trouble the entire group. Christophe might be the hardest working of the monks, carefully tending his gardens, plowing the earth, and keeping the monastery grounds spotless. But for Christophe, worship is a chore, a psychological challenge because fear chokes out his hope. As the plot unfolds, however, and aided by Christian’s gentle encouragement, Christophe’s bearded, rugged expression changes like Gladiator’s Russell Crowe’s in reverse: moving from abandoned, desperate, and fearful to triumphant in the face of death.

Even with the ominous news that government soldiers have killed radical sergeant Ali Fattayia, who’d been shielding the monastery, Luc welcomes a diocesan visitor, Brother Bruno, with red wine and Swan Lake on cassette. As the monks drink and listen, tears of joy fill their eyes. It is a stirring moment, not least of all because the viewer has sat with the monks in their silence, hearing only hymns from their unaccompanied voices or the domestic sounds of their digging, mopping, and dishwashing. The film has no external soundtrack. We hear what they hear. Thus Tchaikovsky’s stirring score invades the simplicity, an assault of beauty on innocent ears. We can almost see the freedom of inner peace on their faces.

Lambert Wilson, the actor who plays Christian, says that singing together united the actors, just as it did the monks they played. None of the actors had done much singing before being cast. A choirmaster taught them.

“It’s the principle of fusion in the choir,” Wilson said. “We took real pleasure in it. We felt a real sense of sharing among us. It’s a very simple joy, almost playful, to start off from the same bar and to manage to reach the last one together.”

History tells us that two monks survived by playing Luc’s game of hide-and-seek. The rest died at the hands of their captors, their fears fulfilled. Luc, among those taken hostage, left behind a letter. It ends like this: “I don’t know when or how it will all end. In the meantime, I perform my duty... Caring for the poor and the sick, awaiting for the day or the time to close my eyes. My dear friend, pray for me, may my exit from this world be done in the peace and joy of Jesus.”

It’s a letter I’d love to be able to write one day. But, immersed as I am in media filled with chaos, it may take singing the daily offices with others to get there. To sing “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” is one thing. It takes some work and the support of a community to believe it.

Jesse James DeConto is a veteran journalist and singer-songwriter with The Pinkerton Raid. He lives in Durham, N.C., with his wife and two daughters.
School Choice Conundrum

School choice is the “civil rights issue” of the 21st century, says Pennsylvania state Sen. Anthony Hardy Williams (D., Philadelphia/Delaware). Williams and Republican Sen. Jeffrey Piccola (Dauphin/York) have authored Senate Bill 1 (SB1), Pennsylvania’s school choice legislation. The bill has become a flashpoint for education reform advocates, legislators, and thousands of parents.

SB1 proposes two actions: First, “opportunity scholarships” will be available for low-income students (130 percent of federal poverty level) for three years. The bill identifies 144 “low-performing schools” that are the bottom 5 percent of public schools as measured by standardized test scores in reading and math. In the first year, all students in those schools who meet the income guidelines will be offered an opportunity scholarship (voucher) equal to the amount of the state contribution to their school. Parents can use the voucher to enroll their child in a public or private school of their choice. In year two, parents from the boundary area of that school will qualify, and in year three, all Pennsylvania parents who meet the income guidelines will qualify.

Second, SB1 gives a funding increase to the Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program. Pennsylvania started EITC nine years ago and provides up to 90 percent in tax credits to qualifying businesses that contribute to a scholarship fund for low- and low/middle-income students in the state. Currently, $75 million in tax credits is available, and SB1 would increase that to $100 million.

Proponents of SB1 say that parents of students in failing schools have waited long enough for education reform. There are successful private and charter school models that can build capacity if provided the funding for additional seats. Williams, himself raised in the West Philadelphia district he represents, says his constituency is pleading with him to provide better schools. He insists he can do that with SB1.

Others insist that SB1 does nothing to guarantee that students will receive a better education at the school in which they choose to enroll. Detractors say that a charter or private school does not necessarily provide a better education. There must be accountability for the recipient school, they say.

The largest obstacle SB1 may face is the constitutionality issue. Opponents of SB1 cite the Pennsylvania State Constitution, which states, “No money raised for the support of the public schools of the Commonwealth shall be appropriated to or used for the support of any sectarian school.” Williams and Piccola have two counter-arguments. First, Pennsylvania’s General Fund revenue, which will fund SB1, is not raised for the purposes of funding public education and therefore does not meet this definition. Further, federal funds and local property tax revenue designated for education will remain with local districts under SB1. Second, Pennsylvania General Fund dollars will go directly to parents rather than religious schools. Proponents cite the case of the Cleveland Scholarship Program heard by the US Supreme Court in 2002 that sets a precedent for the constitutionality of school vouchers. The majority opinion said that vouchers were constitutional because public money was directed to parents to choose a school rather than to religious schools.

On the margins of the fray is newly elected Republican Governor Tom Corbett. His staff has said that the governor supports school choice, but he has not made any statements specifically supporting SB1.

Because of Corbett’s 2011-2012 state budget proposal that cuts $1 billion in education funding, the School District of Philadelphia (where two-thirds of the targeted 144 schools reside) is predicting a $629 million deficit. While it is likely that targeted schools will not lose all eligible students to vouchers, some parents will choose to take their children elsewhere. If that happens, individual schools will still be responsible to operate their schools, but they will have lost a portion of their operational funds to vouchers. Those losses plus state cuts could increase problems for the targeted schools.

For those whose faith is at the center of all things—including politics, public dollars, and education—education must be a human rights matter. Caring for the poor and marginal is central to belief in God. Research on poor urban neighborhoods now suggests that failing schools are a cause of poverty. While there are examples of public school successes in urban neighborhoods, they are the exceptions. Improving education in high-poverty inner-city neighborhoods must be a top priority for people of faith.

Following the examples of Cleveland, Milwaukee, and DC, Williams and Piccola have put vouchers center stage in Pennsylvania. SB1 presents a valuable option for poor children in failing schools. However, for it to improve the educational climate, SB1 should require schools that receive voucher funds to perform at higher educational levels than the 144 low-performing schools. This will ensure children are moving to an improved school. Also, the authors of the bill need to consider how vouchers, because of decreased funding to individual schools, may lead to consolidations and closures. By demanding accountability and a long-term plan for failing schools, SB1 can become visionary legislation that creates a more equitable education for the poor in Pennsylvania and, by its example, inspires other states to do the same.
Global Positions

Sharon Gramby-Sobukwe

Restoration

On December 18, 2009, the United Nations proclaimed the year beginning January 1, 2011, the International Year for People of African Descent:

with a view to strengthening national actions and regional and international cooperation for the benefit of people of African descent in relation to their full enjoyment of economic, cultural, social, civil and political rights, their participation and integration in all political, economic, social and cultural aspects of society, and the promotion of a greater knowledge of and respect for their diverse heritage and culture (United Nations A/RES/64/169).

This is good news, but my enthusiasm is tempered, for this is not the first time such an effort has been made. In recent history there have been two World Conferences to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, held in Geneva in 1978 and 1983; three Decades to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, (1973-82, 1983-92, and 1993-2002); and the International Year of Mobilization against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, which culminated in the world conference of the same name in 2001 in Durban, South Africa. Yet racism persists, not only because of structural discrimination but also because of our collective failure to reconcile and restore relationships as individuals, groups, and nations.

The Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent was established in 2002 as a result of the above-mentioned conference in Durban. They studied countries from various regions of the world, visiting and examining several very closely, including the United States at the invitation of the US government. The working group found that people of African descent commonly face structural discrimination and that poverty is pervasive and disproportionately high among people of African descent throughout the world. They are most often engaged in unskilled and poorly paid labor, leaving them vulnerable to unethical employers and economic shifts. This poverty is compounded by discrimination in accessing fundamental services such as health, education, and adequate housing.

Poverty puts children at risk for malnutrition and health problems, which often result in children leaving school before they have acquired basic skills. In addition, discrimination is typical in the justice system. During questioning, interrogation, and arrest, people of African descent are racially profiled and often mistreated by officials, suffering violence, acts of torture, and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment by law enforcement officials. Discriminatory laws and sentencing, combined with policies that severely restrict reintegrating into society, increase the incidence and duration of imprisonment, thereby destabilizing families, altering cultures, and undermining values and ethics within communities, ultimately resulting in a pernicious cycle of poverty.

The racism at the root of this cyclic poverty, the working group report notes, is hard to identify. Structural racism is "... deeply rooted in tradition, literature, arts, and practice. Because of its social acceptance and absence of malicious intent, it [does] not at first sight appear to be wrong..." And often "the victim of structural racism [is] blamed for the situation which [is] considered to be the result of his or her culture, indifference, or passivity."

Increasingly, internalized racism is the result. Internalized racism is when victims of racism begin to believe in (even if subconsciously)—and therefore behave according to—the stereotypes that constrain them. One working group member described the context for internalized racism:

... the transatlantic slave trade and the balkanization of Africa in 1884... forced Africans to focus their energy on freeing themselves. As a result, little was known about Africa prior to slavery and frequently persons of African descent could not come to terms with their African heritage. Education needed to reclaim and value African history and the continent’s role in world history. The issue was not only to educate people of African descent, but all people of the planet. (Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, April 2010).

This description of racism would seem to prompt an aggressive and compassionate response. After all, the global, structural, and internalized dimensions of racism described in the working group report are more sophisticated and enlightening than our typical reduction of racism to “the color of skin.” However, more often than not, people of African descent are as unaware of our internalized racism as others are convinced that racism no longer exists. The resilience of our collective denial is not, unfortunately, finally dismantled by report findings.

Instead, racism is an emotional issue deeply connected to our own self-perceptions and views of justice. When we identify with Christ, his love empowers us to seek justice and provides the courage and confidence to challenge racism in all of its personal, structural, and internalized dimensions. This process is one essentially focused upon restoring relationships by taking responsibility, confessing/repenting, forgiving, making amends, and, finally, reconciling.

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**Off the Shelf**

### A New Kind of Big

**by Chip Sweney with Kitti Murray**  
**Baker Books**

Reviewed by Heidi Unruh

This review is little more than a handful of words, but it just might convince you to read the book. You might pass the book to a leader at your church, who could then invite ministers from other churches to read it together and seek God’s leading. Eventually the vision might take root, missional relationships may ignite, and the body of Christ can become a catalyst for transforming your city.

This is the trajectory that unfolds in *A New Kind of Big: How Churches of Any Size Can Partner to Transform Communities*—Christ calls the church to do big things; big things start small; small things become big by working together.

Challenged by Pastor Randy Pope to “become a church of influence and to turn itself inside out for the least and the lost,” Perimeter Church in Atlanta began a process of vision-casting, research, relationship-building, and restructuring in order to make kingdom ministry a priority. This process was driven by a pivotal question: “How in the world can churches—no one church is big enough—make a God-sized impact on a world with God-sized needs?”

The book walks through Perimeter Church’s answer to this question. After careful reflection and prayer, the church launched a community outreach department, headed by author Chip Sweney, to mobilize members for local impact. Based on community research, the church identified four focus areas for ministry within a 12-mile radius and with measurable target outcomes. Determined to be “facilitators rather than performers” of ministry, community outreach staff empowered lay leaders as “champions” of local nonprofit partners.

This partnership strategy also led Sweney to connect with outreach staff from other local churches, and they began to dream of what they could do together. This has grown into an annual Compassion in Action Day, now involving over 6,000 volunteers from about 100 churches, organized by a diverse church network called Unite! (see UniteUs.org). Unite! also sponsors ongoing gatherings to foster unity and further the shared mission of the body of Christ.

While not simply a how-to manual, Sweney’s book is rich with practical insights embedded in stories. One key factor that emerges is “life-on-life missional discipleship”; because Perimeter already had a strong foundation of spiritual maturity, when the spark of external ministry was lit, the congregation was ready to take off. Another lesson is that to expand its missional impact, a church must give itself away. For example, while Sweney gives leadership to Unite!, it is never claimed as belonging to Perimeter Church. “It doesn’t matter if no quantifiable gain comes back to our church. It doesn’t matter who gets the credit. … We have decided to make the kingdom matter more.”

The book’s structure reflects Sweney’s experience with ministry training. Each chapter closes with a set of thought-provoking questions, progressing from reflections on what is to dreaming and planning for what could be. Four appendices offer more details on Perimeter’s model, and the back page highlights Perimeter’s resources for helping churches become more externally focused.

Unlike some intimidating narratives of “model churches,” this book inspires confidence that the ministry of community transformation is within every church’s grasp—if we will let go and extend open hands to others. “A church movement can begin with just a few churches. … The key is to cast the vision and then to go with those who are willing.”

In a culture obsessed with “bigger is better,” we need this reminder that “size is all about the God who planted himself inside you.” Unimpressed by crowds, Jesus forged a small missional community whose unified, sacrificial witness rippled powerfully throughout the world. It turns out that this “new kind of big” is the oldest story in the church’s history.

Heidi Unruh is director of the Congregations, Community Outreach and Leadership Development Project, and author of *Churches That Make a Difference* (Baker, 2002). She also edits the Public Policy section of ESA’s weekly ePistle.

### 12 Steps to a Compassionate Life

**by Karen Armstrong**  
**Knopf**

Reviewed by Francesca Nuzzolese

Ever wonder why some nations claim to adhere to Christian principles yet spend more money on their military defense than on hospitals and orphanages? Ever find that you clutch your purse (and your heart) when passing a homeless person in the street yet spend many hours in prayer, worship, and church activities? Are you disturbed by the current immigration laws yet would never consider moving into a neighborhood where undocumented immigrants live?

If you are like me—a reasonably conscientious Christian,
passionate about linking love of God to love of neighbor yet often bumping against a ‘natural instinct’ to protect myself from the needs and demands of others—you will likely find Karen Armstrong’s new book as unsettling as it is compelling. I happened to read it while traveling through tough territories—both spiritual and geographic—and found it full of challenge and inspiration. Drawing on her knowledge of world religions and on her personal commitment to compassionate living, Armstrong provides an insightful manual on the concept and practice of compassion.

The book opens up with a series of profound questions: Why is the human species so dependent on love for survival yet so addicted to egotism? Why aren’t compassion and empathy more instinctual? Why, when most religious systems recommend a version of the Golden Rule, do their adherents consistently fail to practice it? How can humans possess so much creative potential yet be in constant danger of self-destruction?

Armstrong analyzes the four basic survival instincts of animate species: feed, fight, flee, and reproduce. Despite the fact that humans have evolved a “new brain,” according to Armstrong, which gives us the capacity to reason and reflect on both ourselves and the world around us, these primitive mechanisms of survival continue to inform all human activities and are the source of much destruction. Interestingly, compassion, which Armstrong says lies within the “new brain” and which ultimately improves the odds of human survival, is anything but instinctive, and acquiring it demands “an immense effort of mind and heart.”

Her bold aim is to inspire and guide the reader on a journey of personal transformation towards a more compassionate way of living, which can begin by following her well-articulated 12 steps. Learning about compassion is an important first step on the path to more merciful living, followed by steps in the direction of self, other, God, and the world. Such steps require a commitment to self-reflect, to dialogue with others and ponder our fragile interdependence, and to overcome hatred and prejudice by learning about others’ cultures and values. All steps require that we draw more and more deeply into the evolved capacities of the “new brain” and increasingly restrain our addiction to egotism, greed, power, and control.

As Christians, we know that what makes compassion so difficult is not only the instinctual pull of the “old” brain but the belligerent demands of our sinful nature, which orients us toward self-preservation at the expense of others. A core dimension of Jesus’ ministry was aimed at redirecting the human heart towards love of God and towards balancing love of self with love of other. This delicate equilibrium requires intentionality and commitment on our part and a hefty dose of God’s grace as well.

Aware of the complexity of the task, Armstrong reminds us that “the attempt at becoming a compassionate human being is a lifelong project. ... It is a struggle that will last until our dying hour. Nearly every day we will fail, but we cannot give up.” Admittedly, it is not by following her 12 steps—or anybody’s outlined programs—that we can become more compassionate human beings. However, practicing the suggestions in this book is a step in the right direction, as both the information and guidelines offer a practical and helpful way to begin the journey, to persevere on it, and to thereby become more fully the kind of humans God intended us to be.

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**Fall to Grace**

by Jay Bakker with Martin Edlund

Faith Words

Reviewed by Jeff Goins

It has been a while since the feathers of Christendom have been adequately ruffled by someone with a message to share and a voice to proclaim it. *Fall to Grace: A Revolution of God, Self, and Society* may be that book.

It begins like your typical nonfiction Christian book—the basic idea followed by a few theological proofs and then illustrated with some real-life scenarios. Quickly, however, author Jay Bakker introduces a few twists and turns that make Fall to Grace more than an average read.

Much of Bakker’s writing is comparable to that of Philip Yancey’s in *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* Alternating with the header theological sections, explaining why the church needs to return to a grace-filled approach to ministry, Bakker peppers in stories of everyday, broken people who have experienced grace firsthand. These “grace notes” are stories written by those who have lived them, and the variety of direct voices creates a more dynamic reading experience.

Bakker, a tattooed pastor of a church that meets in a bar in Brooklyn, is known for his “edgy” appeal. He draws upon his cultural relevance in *Fall to Grace*, referencing popular cultural figures, obscure TV shows, well-known movies, and song lyrics, tying them all back into the gospel of Jesus.

He tells the story of Revolution Church, which started out as a “subculture ministry” that initially reached out mostly to skaters, goths, punks, and hippies. But Bakker quickly realized there were others who also needed God’s love. And that idea became the premise on which he built a ministry.

Bakker draws a lot from the book of Galatians for his theological positioning and draws parallels from Martin Lu-
ther's journey, calling those who know the exhaustion of “trying hard” to earn God’s favor to rest in unmerited grace. He boldly decries legalism in the church, lamenting that we often celebrate “grace plus” something else, which he calls “hurdles” to God.

While Bakker thoroughly addresses the issue of how some churches have mistreated the gay community, he states plainly, “[G]race is bigger than any one hot-button issue... It applies to everything: our views of God as revealed through Christ, our image of ourselves as God’s children, and our relationships to others.”

He shares some of his struggles and failures in ministry, continuing to return to the overarching theme of grace and its importance in his life. He even tells a fascinating story of being invited to a party by RuPaul, his reluctance to go, and how a drag queen emcee publicly thanked him for coming to “where Jesus would be if he were alive today.”

Bakker wraps up the book by proactively responding to critics, making a case for why grace really does trump “works,” and delivering some strong challenges to the evangelical community about its treatment of the gay community.

Bakker includes a brief but colorful description of his painful, public childhood, which he explored in much more detail in his 2001 book, Son of a Preacher Man. He explains how his mom, the larger-than-life but heartbreakingly fragile Tammy Faye, intentionally reached out to the gay community over the years and how they received her with open arms. A gay friend explained to Jay why this was so: “It’s because she’s a survivor. No matter what people say about her, no matter what happens to her, she survives.” And that is the crux of this book. At its core, Fall to Grace is about surviving. Jay Bakker tells his own story of surviving law-based living and the freedom he found through grace. And he invites us to join him there.

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Passport through Darkness by Kimberly L. Smith
David C. Cook

Reviewed by Michele Clark

This is perhaps the most difficult book review I have ever had to write. It shouldn’t have been. I’ve lived through bloody civil wars in Africa and have seen the worst of human trafficking. Passport through Darkness: A True Story of Danger and Second Chances is a compelling personal adventure about one woman’s search for purpose and her courageous efforts to bring light into a very dark place. A short review should have been easy. But draft followed draft into the trash bin on my computer and with each attempt ringing hollower than the last. What was wrong?

In summary, Kimberly Smith is a mother, wife, and successful professional woman who wants more out of life. As the result of a midlife season of deep soul searching, she and her family move to Portugal where, in a small orphanage, she confronts corruption, child trafficking, and unfettered human depravity. Rather than flee, she rushes headlong into an emerging call to Southern Sudan. There, against the backdrop of genocide and inhuman cruelty, she establishes an orphanage, rescues children, builds a missions organization, and brings hope.

When her husband’s health compels him to return to the US, she remains in Sudan, where she learns that she cannot save all the children who cross her path. She witnesses the prolonged agony of a 12-year-old child bride who dies trying to give birth. She leaves a little boy on the side of the road, knowing full well that the warm blanket she wraps around his shoulders will not protect him from the predators, both animal and human, that prowl the region at night. Valiantly, she raises funds, brings in supplies, and throws herself into meeting a bottomless pit of need and suffering. Her inevitable failures—the result of her mere humanity—weigh heavily upon her. The fullness of her calling is marred by the fact that her husband is now living in America, and the extreme differences of their daily experiences drive a wedge in their relationship.

Honestly, yet at times with excessive hyperbole, she takes us along on her emotional roller coaster rides. Saying yes to God turns out, as it usually does, to bring anything but tranquility—at least in the short term.

And then she is raped. Just a dozen pages from the end of the book, while seeking to bridge the chasm between her and her husband, she confesses that, while in search of another homeless child, she wandered away from the center of the village and was raped by a group of men. This is the stuff of nightmares, the dark reality that she has been dealing with throughout the book, but now it has come home to her in the most personal of ways. Yet she devotes a mere 12 pages to confessing the incident to her husband, making an apparently speedy healing of their relationship and framing the final message that there is hope for all of us in our darkest moments: “Paradoxically, once I took the very action I was most certain would tear down everything I’d worked so hard to achieve—reveal my failure, sin, and suffering—shame lost its lien against me. Instead of condemnation, I felt free for the first time in many years.”

This is why my efforts to review the book were so frustrating—because at some fundamental level, the book is dishonest. While every rape victim must have the freedom and grace to come to grips with that horror on her
own terms, Smith chose to draw readers into her nightmare—only to promptly dismiss us at the heartbreaking intersection of her story and the story of those people she seeks to serve. Finding comfort in her husband’s arms, she makes little of the horrors of rape’s aftermath and reduces the healing process to time under the covers with the man she loves. Instead, she needs to take the rape out of parentheses and make it the thesis statement of the last section, if not the whole book.

Rape makes us all uncomfortable, and we would just as soon brush it away. In preparing to write this review, I listened to and read a number of interviews Smith gave to pastors, church leaders, and reporters but didn’t find any mention of her being raped. I wondered why it was all right to talk about what happened to other women but not what happened to her. If Smith’s call were to another field, I would perhaps feel differently. But she has embraced the call to combat modern-day slavery—a crime whose victims are subjected to serial rapes on a daily basis; who find only stigmatization and shame in the aftermath; who are treated as criminals for the crime done to them. In the United States, too, children and young women are being raped around the clock. But very few people talk about it, and, inevitably, the rapes continue.

I respect Kimberly Smith. I admire her courage, love her passion, and embrace her call—which is why I am left so disappointed by her book’s ending. Was it a squeamish editor? A market-conscious publisher? Why then not cut out all the suffering and the gore that the book exposes? Or is the rape of a white American woman something we still can’t talk about—especially if she is serving God? An important opportunity to explore difficult questions about the presence of God in the midst of our own suffering—as opposed to that of “those people” whom we seek to help—has been missed here, and I grieve the loss.

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Moral Excellence in the Small Things

I am worrying these days about a gradual decline of Christian commitment to moral excellence in the small things. I speak of things like anger, profanity, gambling, alcohol abuse, and lack of everyday honesty.

Perhaps, as a man altogether too close to turning 50, I should just accept that we are witnessing a generational change and that my cohorts’ values are being left behind. That certainly appears to be what Dave Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons found in their important 2007 book, UnChristian. They saw dramatically different beliefs on issues such as cohabitation, gambling, profanity, drunkenness, drug use, and sex outside of marriage between the 42+ (“born-again older adults”) crowd and the 23-41 (“born-again busters”) crowd. For example, 37 percent of the 23-41 born-agains found profanity morally acceptable, while only 17 percent of the over-42 group did. On getting drunk, 35 percent of the younger group found it morally acceptable, and only 13 percent of the older Christians. Fifty-nine percent of the younger Christians found cohabitation okay, compared to 33 percent of my generation.

I see these kinds of changes regularly as a professor who teaches both college and seminary students, most of whom are Baptists. I certainly see much more comfort with casual use of profanity, the regular taking of God’s name in vain, the wide practice of gambling on sports and cards, the abandonment of scruples related to alcohol use, and a seeming comfort with outbursts of anger.

I also see among some a loss of any kind of clear line between right and wrong when it comes to matters of financial integrity. One recent example had to do with a case where a store employee invited a Christian young adult to pay him a reduced cash price for a store product, with no receipt. In other words, that cash was going to go into the employee’s pocket, the product was going to go out the door, and the “only” loser was going to be the company that did not get paid for its product. This young person seemed to see no reason at all why it might be wrong for a Christian to participate in such a transaction.

It is hard to know why this generational change is afoot. I know that, in my own experience, when I entered an evangelical Christian church as a 16-year-old kid I was pretty raw. I had issues with language and anger among other things. But I recall that such behaviors were mainly sanded out of me through the ministrations of a really quite demanding program of discipleship training. It was made perfectly clear to me by both the words and example of the mature Christians around me that there are certain things Christians just do not do. It was understood that Christians are simply a different kind of people, and that this is part of what it meant to “accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.”

It was my understanding that one reason Christians must be visibly different was that we were on an evangelistic mission. In our very secular northern Virginia schools and neighborhoods, we were to be salt and light, witnesses for Jesus Christ. I know this did not always go very well, or go over very well, but the sense of being “on mission” certainly helped motivate a morally serious way of life among many of us.

It might have made a difference that in my Southern Baptist congregation we were constantly being taught something. That first summer of my new Christian life I was exposed to biblical teaching in Sunday school, morning worship, evening disciple training, evening worship, Monday night Bible study, and Wednesday night church—each week! This kind of intensive worship and teaching schedule is now a thing of the past in most churches, and I believe it shows. Not to mention that the preaching and teaching that are offered today appear much less likely to demand anything of people, and more likely to help Christians feel better about themselves....but now I really am sounding like an old fuddy-duddy.

Still, a certain commitment to everyday moral excellence appears in the process of being abandoned.

You don’t get too many prayers like this one, which I just recently encountered in William Barclay’s 1959 Book of Everyday Prayers:

Grant unto us each day to learn more of self-mastery and self-control.
Grant unto us each day better to rule our temper and our tongue.
Grant unto us each day to leave our faults farther behind and to grow more nearly into the likeness of our Lord.

I appeal for a return of this striving for moral excellence among Christians of every generation.

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How far should I take this neighbor thing, Jesus?

Who is my neighbor?

Is it just me, or have some of you also felt, as you read through the gospels, that Jesus was a master of evasion? Ultimately of course, he didn’t evade anything, but it does seem that way sometimes because of the way he went about answering—or not answering—questions. While the clever peppered Jesus with tricks and riddles, I imagine myself there as a 13th disciple, taking him aside and saying, “Lord, far be it from me to tell you what to do, but would you just answer these people’s questions?”

One of my favorite instances of this is when a lawyer asked him, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29), to which Jesus responded with the parable of the good Samaritan. He essentially said that to show compassion to the needy as the Samaritan did in the story is to fulfill the command to love your neighbor (vv. 30–37). But as simple as the familiar story reads nowadays, I suspect that it took years for that lawyer to recover from the holy shock of the parable’s implications. First of all, “good” and “Samaritan” did not belong together at all in those days, not to the Jews anyway. To them, Samaritans were an immoral, heretical, disloyal mongrel of a people, and they had no rightful place in society. How dare they claim to worship the one true God? The animosity between Jews and Samaritans was absolute. So who does Jesus assign as the hero of the story in answer to the Jewish lawyer’s question? Not the priest, not the temple assistant (the Levite), but the good-for-nothing Samaritan.

As one looks behind the lawyer’s question, it becomes apparent that his inquiry had to do with the limits of neighborly love; it had to do with selectivity. The lawyer agreed well enough with Jesus that love of neighbor summed up the bulk of the Law (vv. 25–28), but how far should I take this neighbor thing, Jesus? Who is my neighbor?

This question reverberates through time, because in every age there are people who are outside the good graces of God’s holy people. In Christian circles today, I can hear the question framed like this: Jesus, are the people in the gay-lesbian community our neighbors? Or how about those on the other side of that line; are the gay bashers our neighbors? And what do you have to say about those fundamentalist, extremist Muslims who blow up buildings in the name of Allah; aren’t they the number one rival of Christianity in the 21st century? They can’t be our neighbors, can they? Lord, how about those Tea Party Republicans; you can’t possibly expect us to love them, can you? Or how about those tree-hugging leftist Democrats; are they our neighbors too? And how about just our literal neighbors who live right next to us—especially those obnoxious, loud, quirky ones? Are our annoying neighbors our neighbors? In contemporary terms, Jesus would be telling the parable of—depending on who was listening—the good transvestite or the good jihadist or whomever one considers pairing with the word “good” to be an oxymoron.

Those keen to the text will notice that Jesus didn’t really answer the who-is-my-neighbor question, at least not on the lawyer’s terms. The lawyer wanted to know where he could draw the line, where he could justifiably withhold love, for surely some were undeserving of God’s goodness. But Jesus didn’t play by the rules. He rather turned the tables and defined a neighbor in terms of God’s justice, which, according to Cornel West, is simply “what love looks like in public.” He shifted the weight of the question from the object of our love to the subject, to the one who practices God’s unconditional love indiscriminately. “If you want to be a good neighbor, then be like this Samaritan.” I suspect that this shift contributed to the holy shock from which the lawyer had to recover afterward; from that point onward, the onus was placed on him to show compassion to the needy if he wanted to be a good neighbor.

By answering the who-is-my-neighbor question with the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus basically ignored the selectivity question. And we should interpret this as not being granted permission to select; we don’t get to choose who our neighbors are. We get to love everyone, which is at least the beginning of understanding the nature and practice of biblical compassion and justice.

I am sure that in my own heart I harbor “Samaritans,” even as I go about championing diversity and equality. Beneath my commitment to justice, I, too, draw enemy lines not unlike the lawyer’s in the passage. Which people are on the outs in my book? Answer this question, Jesus!

Search my heart, O Lord, and cleanse it of all unrighteousness and injustice. Fill it with Christ’s love, so I can love indiscriminately.

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Despite the lack of official church involvement, thousands of Christians acted as individuals and actively participated in the Egyptian revolution. Perhaps the most uncelebrated of Christian contributions were the thousands of individuals who were committed to supporting transformation and change in Egypt through active prayer. In addition to the public prayer gatherings, many churches, including Kasr El Dobara, committed themselves to pray for the protection of the protestors and a peaceful transition.

“We prayed for light to shine through darkness,” says Amir Wahib, “the release of joy, justice, the supremacy of God, and the authority of the church to bind and release spirits in the name of Jesus.” Many congregations prayed and fasted, beseeching God for constitutional changes and praying for the leadership that will replace Mubarak. One of the main ongoing prayers is for the church and Christians in Egypt to be released from fear—fear of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic organizations, fear of persecution, and fear of an unknown future.

PERSONAL REVOLUTIONS

The success of the Egyptian revolution accomplished far more than the ousting of Mubarak and his regime. Individual and cultural change will be a lasting outcome of the Christians and Muslims who participated actively in bringing about the governmental transition.

“There are personal revolutions happening here every day,” said Maggie Morgan in describing the events at Tahrir Square. One devout Muslim declares that it was the first time he had ever heard Christians pray. After the prayers had ended, he and the Christian group he was standing alongside sang the Egyptian national song, “Barek Belady” (“Bless Our Country”), together.

One member of the Muslim Brotherhood actively involved in Tahrir says, “I can honestly say that today is the first time I have ever met a Christian brother. We hugged and kissed, and I cried because I have never felt so close to another Egyptian who wants the same things that I do.”

Another member of the Muslim Brotherhood confessed having made judgments about “westernized girls in jeans” but describes how, when he was injured, these girls were the first to rush to his aid and to provide him with medical support and water.

Rev. Chandler, similarly, says he’s seen Christian views about Muslims change as a result of the revolution. “An Egyptian friend of ours,” he says, “who previously had hardly a good word to say about any Muslim, is in a state of real doubt about his previous convictions as he discovered what he has in common with Muslims through the necessity of defending their Egyptian way of life together.” Chandler affirms the continual opportunity for ongoing transformations within Egyptian society. “There has never been a time when the church in Egypt needs to focus more on reaching across the religious divide to work with their Muslim countrymen and women for a new Egypt.”

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that Uzi down”; “Now you sure you wanna shoot that guy?”). Trying to “save lives” is much like the guy spinning plates on Ed Sullivan, attempting to keep them from crashing to the floor. I’d look for the wobblers. Who was about to smash into a million pieces? — and then I’d be frantic to keep that homie from self-destructing. It was crazy-making, and I came close to the sun, to the immolation that comes from burning out completely in the delusion of actually “saving” people.

I took a break in 1992, and in the stillness of meditation and the sweetness of surrender I found a place of balance and perspective. I found consolation in a no doubt apocryphal story of Pope John XXIII. Apparently, at night he’d pray: “I’ve done everything I can today for your church. But it’s Your church, and I’m going to bed.”

Before, I guess I never really went to bed — available 24/7 to respond to any call and at the ready to talk homies off the ledge.

A touchstone story happened not long after I returned from my time off. A homie, Pedro, who works for me now as a case manager, was then a greatly troubled kid filled with a measured rage and resentment he submerged beneath first heavy drinking and then crack cocaine. Pedro, among the gentlest and most kindhearted of homies, disappeared, eventually, into his own netherworld of substance abuse. He was seemingly oblivious that he had left us at all. Daily, I’d see him and offer rehab. He’d gently decline with a sweetness that never grew defensive.

“Oh thanks, G, but I’m okay.”

You never stop asking, and sometimes the “no matter whatness” prevails. And so it did with Pedro. I drove him to his rehab north of Los Angeles, and he began the long, hard (slow) work of returning to himself.

Thirty days into his stay there, his younger brother, Jovan, enfeebled by similar demons and displaced in the same chemical dependence, did what homies explicitly don’t ever do. He put a gun to his head and an end to his pain. Homies, more often than not, just decide to put themselves in harm’s way when things turn bleakest. They just take a stroll into their enemy’s domain. Gangbanging is how they commit suicide. And any shooter is never “going on a mission” (foray into enemy territory) intending to kill—but rather, hoping to die. Jovan’s homies were unfamiliar, then, with this new language, so direct, bypassing the slow dance with danger that eventually gets you to the same end.

I call Pedro, and he is, of course, devastated. But since he is now 30 days sober, he allows the pain passage to his core and doesn’t permit the hurt to waste time, languishing in some distant way station. He lets all the sadness in, and this is new. I schedule to pick him up for the funeral and make a point to emphasize that I’ll be driving him back right after the burial.

“Course, G. I wanna come back here.”

I make the trek to the mountaintop and feel inadequate, as I always do, in accompanying such loss, especially as huge as this one felt.

Emily Dickinson writes, “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, that sings the song without the words and never stops at all.”

I’ve come to trust the value of simply showing up — and singing the song without the words. And yet, each time I find myself sitting with the pain that folks carry, I’m overwhelmed with my own inability to do much more than stand in awe, dumbstruck by the sheer size of the burden — more than I’ve ever been asked to carry.

Pedro is out front waiting for me, and we greet each other with abrazos and a minimum of words. We hop in the car. Any worry I have about what “to say” gets punctured by Pedro’s insistence to tell me about a dream he had the night before.

“It’s a trip, G. I had this dream last night. And you were in it.”

And in this dream, Pedro and I are in this large, empty room, just the two of us. There are no lights, no illuminated exit signs, no light creeping in from under the doors. There are no windows. There is no light. He seems to know that I am there with him. A sense, really, though we do not speak. Suddenly, in this dark silence, I retrieve a flashlight from my pocket and push it on. I find the light switch in the room, on the wall, and I shine this narrow beam of light on the switch. I don’t speak. I just hold the beam steady, unwavering. Pedro says that even though no words are exchanged, he knows he is the only one who can turn this light switch on. He thanks me for happening to have a flashlight. He makes his way to the switch, following the beam with, I suppose, some trepidation. He arrives at the switch, takes a deep breath, and flips it on. The room is flooded with light.

He is now sobbing at this point, in the telling of the dream. And with a voice of astonishing discovery, he says, “And the light . . . is better . . . than the darkness.”

As if he did not previously know this to be the case. He’s weeping, unable to continue. Then he says, “I guess . . . my brother . . . just never found the light switch.” Possessing flashlights and occasionally knowing where to aim them has to be enough for us. Fortunately, none of us can save anybody. But we all find ourselves in this dark, windowless room, fumbling for grace and flashlights. You aim the light this time, and I’ll do it the next.

The slow work of God.

And you hope, and you wait, for the light — this astonishing light.

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Later, during lunch, Gonzalez pointed to a laminated schedule pinned to the wall beside the table where the children eat their meals. Every day, she said, the staff emphasize the daily routine, which is spelled out in detail: First, thank God for the day, then go to the bathroom, wash hands, get dressed, eat breakfast, go to chapel and class from 8 to 12, wash hands, eat lunch, clean up, change clothes, free time, rest, wash hands, dinner, clean up, change clothes, go to sleep.

“With time,” Gonzalez said as she watched the children with a motherly smile, “they begin to remember the process. You start to notice them doing it on their own.”

When he was finished eating, Becker, a 10-year-old who had just told me of his interest in baseball and his dream of visiting the United States, took his plate into the kitchen. He did so with a proud grin and without any prodding. He came back and wiped off his spot at the table, which wasn’t even messy. Then he turned and cleaned up the spot where 3-year-old Alexi had spilled his rice during a futile search for phantom chunks of chicken.

**MUSTARD SEED FAITH**

Mustard Seed Communities, Hogar Belén’s parent organization, was founded in Jamaica in 1978 by Father Gregory Ramkissoon, a Diocesan priest. Now present in the Dominican Republic and Zimbabwe as well as Jamaica and Nicaragua, MSC remains committed to serving the vulnerable by creating communities that foster mutual respect and interdependence—but it always starts small.

“We can’t build huge institutions,” Ramkissoon says. “We must go very small where people can manage it. If you start very small with a methodology, with a goal, and with an objective that the people themselves can carry on, it is much more viable in the long run. This is why we call it the mustard seed.”

Twice in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus mentions mustard seeds in his teaching. The first comes in a progression of parables, when he tells the crowd, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”

A bit later, just after the transfiguration, when Jesus’ face shines like the sun and his clothes glow with holy light before the dazzled eyes of Peter, James, and John, a man brings his epileptic son to Jesus’ disciples, who have tried in vain to heal him in Jesus’ name. After Jesus heals the boy, even casting out a demon, the disciples come to him privately, wondering what they have done wrong. Why have they failed to heal the boy?

Jesus answers, “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

The disciples, like each of us, were people of little faith, people with hearts prone to wandering. In the corresponding account in the gospel of Luke, we read that no sooner has Jesus healed the boy than an argument breaks out between the disciples over who is the greatest. Jesus has a response, but his answer is the furthest thing from their minds and the furthest thing from our own. He takes aside a small child—a Jennifer, an Alex, a Becker—and says to his disciples, “Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For whoever is least among you all is the greatest.”

Paul picks up on this theme in his first letter to the battered and scattered Corinthians, teaching them what it means to be one body with numerous parts, each designed for a unique purpose to be exercised for the good of the whole. “God has put the body together,” he writes, “giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”

To an impatient, power-hungry world, the mustard seed comes to us as a radical alternative. It remains true across time and space that who Christ calls his disciples to be is precisely what the world needs and what the children of Hogar Belén have truly found: a body of people who hold their power with open hands, eager to give it away in small acts of faithfulness among a chosen few for a very long time.

To learn more or donate, please go to MustardSeed.com.

Tim Høiland is a journalist focusing on the intersections of faith, justice, and peace in the Americas. For more please visit TJHoiland.com. Look for his cover story on de/reforestation in the next issue of PRISM.
Intergenerational Justice and the American Debt: Biblical Foundations

A weight of debt burdens America. For much of a generation and more, we Americans have been living beyond our means, steadily and irresponsibly expanding the size of the debts our children and their children will have to repay. A culture of debt has shaped the financial practices of households, businesses, and governments. Household debt relative to gross domestic product (GDP) grew from less than 30 percent around the early 1950s to roughly 100 percent around 2007. Gross federal debt relative to GDP went from 32 percent in 1981 to 83 percent by 2009. Our national debt puts us on a path toward economic disaster. If unchanged our current culture of debt threatens to bankrupt us both economically and morally.

Not all borrowing is bad. Borrowing to invest in education or infrastructure to create future wealth is often wise. So is temporary borrowing to avoid an economic depression. But continual borrowing for consumption is irresponsible.

Today’s federal debts inhibit our capacity to do justice and mercy, to offer hospitality and generosity. A legacy of excessive debt threatens not only the present generation but also our children and generations yet unborn. To do justice between the generations we must lift the prospect of this burden. Intergenerational justice requires that one generation neither benefit nor suffer unfairly at the cost of another.

The biblical call to stewardship demands a reform of our culture of debt. God placed us in creation to watch over and care for it (Genesis 2:15) and to wisely use the intricately created order to shape civilizations of beauty and goodness. Wise farmers do not destroy their land; they act as good stewards to carefully preserve it for future generations. Faithful economic stewardship today demands that we pass on an economic order in which our children and their children can flourish.

The Creator who fashioned persons in the very image of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—made us for community. We flourish in communities (Psalm 133:1; Jeremiah 29:7; Romans 12:8). For us to flourish, our communities must be healthy. While our communities are fashioned for diverse purposes—families for nurturing love; businesses for the production of goods and services and the generation of wealth; political communities for the administration of public justice—every kind of community must exercise economic stewardship which promotes justice and, to the degree possible, secures a sustainable future.

Reforming our culture of debt is not just the responsibility of government. A materialistic live-for-the-moment mentality has seduced most Americans to live beyond their means. Families must decide to change their thinking and spending. Businesses must become more responsible citizens concerned not just with corporate profits but long-term community well-being. Churches must teach more about stewardship, justice, and concern for the poor. But government does have the primary responsibility to reverse at least one part of our mad rush to economic disaster—our ever-increasing government debt.

In a democratic republic like ours, citizens and governments on their behalf share the responsibility for stewarding the national treasure for the common good. Those elected and appointed to make, administer, and adjudicate laws are called to exercise courageous and prudent leadership in the face of challenges like this debt crisis, and they must often do so in the face of potential electoral disapproval. Citizens must share in bearing this responsibility. We must tell those whom we’ve elected that we recognize our duty to temper our wants and even sacrifice with regard to some of our legitimate desires: for the sake of frugal stewardship and long-term sustainability of our economy; for the sake of continuing governmental care for the poor and weak; and for the sake of doing justice to our children and our children’s children.

Genuine community extends across the generations. Jesus taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves and then made it clear that anyone in need is our neighbor (Matthew 25; Luke 10). Regularly, too, the Scriptures teach that parents must act in ways that help their children to flourish (Deuteronomy 6:7; Psalm 78:4; Joel 1:3), and that children bear a responsibility of care for their parents (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16; Mark 7:9-11). To place our current expenditures on the credit cards of our children and grandchildren is a violation of the biblical summons to intergenerational community and justice. It also places our extravagant consumer desires above the health and well-being of our parents and grandparents. The call to intergenerational justice is no less valid for governments and citizens than it is for parents and children, business owners and business employees. Parents must do justice to their children and children to their parents. One generation in a business has responsibilities to the preceding and succeeding generations. The same is true for governments and citizens.

The scriptural material on the land in ancient Israel tells us much about the biblical understanding of economic justice. In an agricultural society, where land was the primary capital for producing wealth, God demanded that every family enjoy their own land. God also insisted that every 50 years, the land should return to the descendants of the earlier owners so that future generations would have the means to flourish (Leviticus 25). To spend now on self-centered consumption in a way that undermines the economic well-being of our descendants violates the biblical summons to justice. Again, the call to intergenerational economic justice is no less valid for us in our political communities than it is for families and markets.
But how our governments and we as citizens together decide to reverse the trend of our ever-growing government debt is crucial. Some proposals place much of the burden on the poor. To reduce our federal debt at the expense of our poorest fellow citizens would be a violation of the biblical teaching that God has a special concern for the poor. The Bible is replete with passages that teach that God and God’s people demand justice for and compassion to the poor, the needy, the widow, orphan, the foreigner (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18; Zechariah 7:10).

A biblically grounded deficit reduction program will not balance the budget on the backs of the poor. Rather it will make sure that effective programs to offer relief and empower poorer members of society, both here and abroad, will continue and be adequately funded. (That includes programs like the following: the Earned Income Tax Credit that rewards work; food stamps that reduce hunger and malnutrition; unemployment insurance for those looking for work; the Child Tax Credit that reduces child poverty.)

Those of us who are more wealthy have the moral obligation to contribute proportionately more of our resources to the administration of public justice through paying taxes. Taxing persons with higher incomes, indeed increasing their taxes beyond the present level, is both necessary at this historical moment and just. We should all contribute to the common good, but those blessed with more economic resources rightly contribute more. Governments must aggressively eliminate waste and inefficiency in their programs, remove many tax loopholes, and reduce entitlement programs, but those changes alone, without increased taxes, will not adequately reduce our gross federal debt.

The challenge of the present moment and the biblical summons to intergenerational justice demands that we build a transpartisan movement of citizens that insists that government exercises both fiscal frugality and compassionate action for the sake of the long-term sustainability of our political economy—and for an economy of care. And such a movement for intergenerational justice must itself be intergenerational. In particular, we need seniors and youth working together and speaking out together. All must sacrifice—time, wealth, entitlements—for the common good. To the young we say: It is your credit card that will now receive the additional trillions of dollars of debt—unless we act to end ongoing federal budget deficits. To the parents and grandparents we say: We must give up some things so our descendants can flourish. To all we say: Let us answer the call to do justice, together.

Please join us in this movement. Go to EvangelicalsforSocialAction.com, sign the Call for Intergenerational Justice, and urge your friends to read and sign.

Ron Sider is president of Evangelicals for Social Action and director of the Sider Center on Ministry and Public Policy at Eastern University’s Palmer Seminary. This column was coauthored by Gideon Strauss, president of the Center for Public Justice (CPJustice.org).
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