

GRACE CONNECT

Connecting People and Churches | Summer 2020

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Sunday July 26, 2020



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Editorial Submissions: Any news and information from churches and people in the Charis Fellowship (Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches) is welcome. Letters may be edited for length or clarity. Opinions expressed are those of the authors, and there is no implied endorsement by the BMH Co. or by the Charis Fellowship. All Charis Fellowship churches have permission to use any *GraceConnect* content in church bulletins, newsletters, or websites as long as appropriate credit is given.

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AN UNPRECEDENTED SEASON

From a pandemic that kept us at home and has helped to reconfigure how church looks, to tragic events that caused us all to evaluate our personal positions on difficult topics.



What a season this has been! It's been mind-boggling and unprecedented, for sure. Phil Sparling, Charis Fellowship executive director and pastor at Auburn, Calif., calls it "crazy times." From a pandemic that kept us at home and has helped to reconfigure how church looks, to tragic events that caused us all to evaluate our personal positions on difficult topics.

What has excited me most is how the Charis Fellowship has come together, perhaps more than ever before, during the past several months. Weekly encouragement calls with pastors and leaders morphed into regular prayer times with participants from around the world. Churches quickly moved their regular worship services online, often with the help of another congregation in their region, or even across the country. Pastors found new ways to communicate with their parishioners, perhaps with a quick devotional on Facebook or words of encouragement sent through an email. Church members picked up the slack in their communities, sewing masks to be

distributed, initiating food drives, donating meals, or helping their meet needs in other ways.

As the focus turned to racial tension in our country, the Charis Fellowship hosted several online prayer times, specifically upholding our urban pastors in prayer and hearing their hearts for ministry. Women of Grace USA held an online discussion encouraging inclusivity and diversity in which women from around the country talked about ways to respond to injustice, encourage diversity in our churches, and how to be ministers of compassion and reconciliation.

The pandemic led to the cancellation of this year's national conference of the Charis Fellowship. In its place is WeAreOne, a special last-Sunday-in-July event that will celebrate who we are as a fellowship and allow us to join together in worship. It's confirmation that never before has the opportunity for declaring the Gospel of Jesus Christ been greater.

We'd already planned some articles in this issue that we knew would garner your interest, but we also thought that you might want a special memento of the July 26 event. For that reason, we've included content that highlights what to expect that evening to help you prepare, and perhaps invite others to join you.

Mark your calendars for July 26 to gather your faith family for a watch party on all major livestream platforms. You will not want to miss the opportunity to champion our family, our foundation, and our future.



Liz Cutler Gates, lbgates@bmbbooks.com, is the editor of Grace Connect. Since 2010, she has served as executive director of the Brethren Missionary Herald Company. She and her husband, Doug, live in Warsaw, Ind.

WE ARE ONE

by Phil Sparling,
executive director,
Charis Fellowship

We Are One will be the largest gathering in the Charis Fellowship's history! We will hear from leaders throughout the Fellowship, experience worship across North America, and gain resources that benefit your local congregation.

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Over the past few months, I have uttered the same phrase to myself 100s of times, “Crazy Times!” Much of what we have faced falls into two categories, among others. First, the experiences of the past few months are *unprecedented*. As one of our national leaders pointed out, “none of us has ever dealt with these kinds of issues before.” We have all waded into the water for the first time. How reassuring is it to know our Father has the wisdom and experience to be a first-class guide, helping each of us, in our unique locale, to keep moving the gospel forward.

Second, much of what we witness in our culture *defies logic*. There does not seem to be a clear and reasonable explanation for what is happening, nor an obvious path forward. Change is our only constant. *Fluidity* and *pivot* are words that have bubbled to the surface as the common responses to what is going on. How reassuring it is to know our Father is immutable and remains consistent in the midst of national and global confusion.

I cannot express how impressed and grateful I am for the Charis Fellowship during this time in history. Maybe I was too pessimistic, but I thought the events of the past months would do more harm than it has. Our churches and church leaders, along with our national ministry leaders, have stepped up and banded together.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS TO GATHER YOUR FAITH FAMILY FOR A WATCH PARTY ON ALL MAJOR LIVESTREAM PLATFORMS.

I sense a very strong bond. I hope I'm not just being naïve, but I think we are connecting well and helping hold each other up like never before. Not that we have never aided one another, but it seems to me that we are reaching out and talking, praying, and assisting in special and unique ways. From what I see, I have never been prouder to be a Charis Fellowship pastor.

Like most of you, I have not only been introduced to Zoom (online conference) meetings but can relate to the new colloquialism, *Zoom fatigue*. Who knew the kinds of shifts we would have to make to keep our ministries moving forward and our message continually proclaimed? But you did it! You *pivoted!* I have heard story after story of the difficult, but successful, changes being made throughout our tribe. From our rural churches to our national ministries, God has opened a way to not only survive, but in many ways thrive in new, and unexpected, ways. We shouldn't be surprised. Jesus Himself proclaimed that He would build His church. I should not be shocked by our strength and steadfast movement forward. He is doing His work among us.

Along with the blessings, there are also tough choices made by our local pastors and their leadership teams, our national ministry executives, our missionaries, etc. One of my hard decisions was to postpone Access2020.

After receiving much counsel, I felt that trying to have a wonderful gathering this summer would simply not work. I decided to move the entire conference, along with its theme and location, to July 2021. I am excited for that time together and we have already added some new elements that were not available to us this summer.

At the same time, we did not want us to do anything this year. After lots of ideas were shared, we landed on an online celebration. With the extra work placed on so many people who lead local ministries, there is a sense of fatigue. Our national ministry leaders are also working to prepare for the future. Hosting a summer event that would encourage people would be warranted and well received. A creative team was assembled, and they have been working diligently to plan an exciting Sunday evening that we hope will engage every Charis Fellowship congregation and every church member. Because our face-to-face meeting this year has been postponed until 2021, a unique, online gathering will be held Sunday, July 26, 2020. We are calling this event 'We Are One.'

We Are One will be the largest gathering in the Charis Fellowship's history! We will hear from leaders throughout the Fellowship, experience worship across North America, and gain resources that benefit your local congregation. We will focus on *We are One in Truth, We Are One*

in Mission, and We Are One in Relationship. A pre-service live broadcast will feature our Canadian friends. The intention of this celebration is simply to encourage your heart and the hearts of everyone in your church.

I encourage you to create watch parties where people can gather to engage in the event. Whether that means your entire church viewing together, small groups meeting in homes, or individual families tuning in to watch, I hope that every Charis Fellowship person will join. It will be a wonderful time of encouragement and excitement. We will be lifting Jesus up and celebrating His glory and goodness. You will be inspired and blessed.

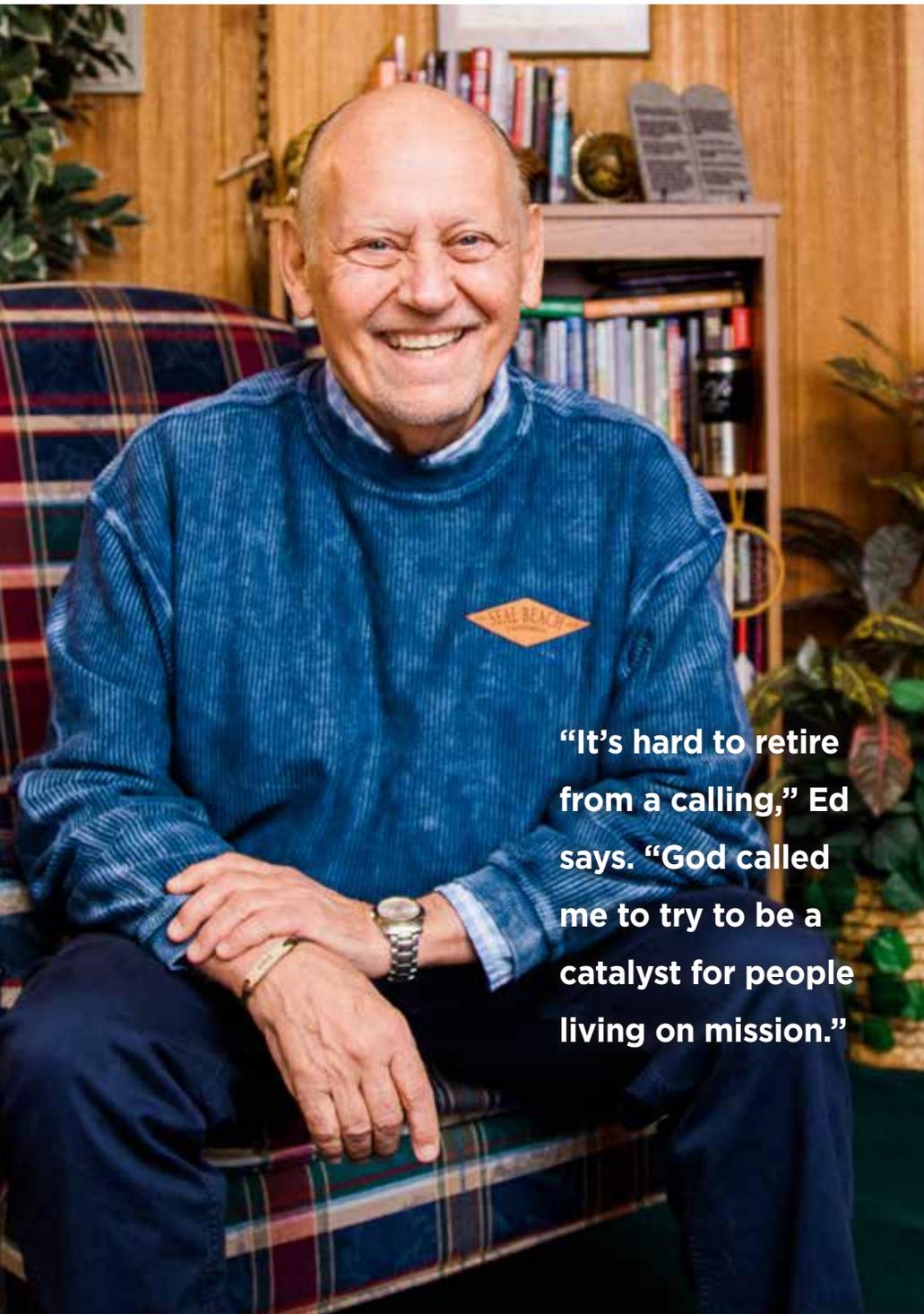
This virtual gathering is happening the last Sunday in July at 6 p.m. Eastern/3 p.m. Pacific. Mark your calendars to gather your faith family for a watch party on all major livestream platforms. You will not want to miss the opportunity to champion our family, our foundation, and our future. For more information go to *WeAreOne.Video*.

Thank you for being a part of this incredible season in history. May God continue to lead and bless you, your family, and your ministry.

As of press time, a schedule for the workshops and cohorts the week of July 26 had not been finalized. See [weareone.video](#). Click on the Breakouts link for up-to-date information.

LIVING ON MISSION

by Judy Daniels



“It’s hard to retire from a calling,” Ed says. “God called me to try to be a catalyst for people living on mission.”

After 47 years with CE National, Ed Lewis is retiring in September 2020.

Sort of.

For those who know Ed, the word “retiring” doesn’t seem to fit. The man who has more energy than a dozen teenagers and more enthusiasm than a cheerleading squad can’t possibly sit on the porch and watch grass grow.

So, a more accurate way to put this is that Ed, turning 74 in July, will be retiring from his full-time position in September. He has been president of CE National; his new title is president emeritus, and he will continue to serve CE in a part-time role.

Still, it is a milestone.

“It’s hard to retire from a calling,” Ed says. “God called me to try to be a catalyst for people living on mission. And that’s what God wants me to do.”

His new part-time role at CE will involve this very thing: being an encouragement to people for living on mission. He will continue to spend time at Urban Hope in Philadelphia and do training for Operation Barnabas. He will not do as much administrative work, which will allow free time in his schedule.

Jeff Bogue, the new president of CE National, says: “I’m thrilled Ed is staying on! He’ll continue to train people in evangelism and serve as a catalyst, helping people live on mission and continuing to build relationships with our churches and ministry partners!” (Bogue is also senior pastor of Grace Church of Greater Akron, Ohio.)

Bogue has known Ed for 27 years and worked alongside him in several of CE’s ministries, including 25 years at

Photo by Jer Nelsen

“ED LOVES CHRIST AND LOVES PEOPLE, AND HE IS ONE OF THE GREATEST EVANGELISTS I’VE EVER KNOWN.”

Momentum Youth Conference (formerly Brethren National Youth Conference). Although Ed says he doesn’t necessarily have the gift of evangelism, Bogue explains what is obvious to everyone else:

“Ed loves Christ and loves people, and he is one of the greatest evangelists I’ve ever known. He has a deep passion for the lost and a deep passion to help *other* people develop a deep passion for the lost, so when he is able to give his life to that, it energizes him and brings him great joy!”

That “deep passion” is what has driven Ed to give his life to the ministry of CE National. Helping people—especially young people—have ministry experiences and opportunities to share their faith has been a cornerstone of his work. His leadership through such ministries as Operation Barnabas, Momentum, The National Institute, TIME (Training in Ministry Experience), Urban Hope, and Euro Missions Institute has impacted thousands. Plus, these experiences have been a turning point for many as they influenced young people to enter Christian career work. And those already serving have benefited from CE’s discipleship and training programs.

Dave and Sherilyn Rank have a long history with Ed. He was Sherilyn’s youth pastor at Winona Lake, Ind., Grace Brethren Church in the early 1970s, and Dave became acquainted with him at youth conference and later through other CE programs. Both serve on CE’s staff: Dave as senior coordinator of Momentum and Sherilyn as coordinator of Operation Barnabas. They agree that Ed’s influence has been far-reaching.

“The ministries he has initiated through CE National have equipped many of our present-day leaders in the fellowship,” says Dave.

Sherilyn adds, “He has started several ministries that have made a big impact on the fellowship. Operation Barnabas is a great example of that—it has trained more than 2,000 students down through the years and encouraged those students’ home churches as well as the churches they visited.”

Jeff Bogue explains it this way: “In sports, you talk about a *coaching tree*. The head football coach develops assistants under him who end up becoming head football coaches themselves. This is one measurement of success. When you look at Ed’s *coaching tree*, you see tons of leaders who have developed healthy strong churches and healthy Christ-oriented ministries.”

Ed’s friendliness and genuine love for people have made him one of the most well-known figures in the Charis Fellowship (Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches). Yet many people know Ed only through “segments” of his ministry. They may have gone to college with him, had him as youth pastor, met him at youth conference, ministered with him on Operation Barnabas, or met him at Urban Hope. But it’s interesting to put all those pieces together and see how God led in Ed’s journey.

That journey started with his parents, Ed (Senior) and Ruth. When you ask Ed who influenced him most, he mentions his parents first, as “godly examples. My dad accepted the Lord when he was 21. He was from an inner-city home in Philadelphia. He had nothing to do with God. He was from a home that never had followed the Lord.”

All that changed when Ed’s oldest sister, Margaret, was born with a hip socket problem. “She was handicapped, and they had a baby, and they felt like they ought to learn about God,” Ed continues. (She has been in a wheelchair all of her life.)

“**T**hey went to a Grace Brethren church that was in Philadelphia, and that’s where they heard the gospel. Dad accepted the Lord. He had dropped out of high school, then went back to high school, went to Philadelphia School of the Bible [and] went to the First Brethren Church there.”

The pastor encouraged Ed’s father to go to Grace Seminary to prepare for ministry. So, the Lewis family, which now included another sister, Nancy (Zellner), moved to Winona Lake for seminary.

“I almost never made it,” continues Ed, “because my mother contracted typhoid fever when Dad was in seminary. Her temperature reached 106, and the doctors had given up on her. There was an all-night prayer meeting, and her temperature came back to normal by morning. Nurses she had were Dorothy Goodman and Dorothy Beaver, who became missionaries in Africa.”

Ed was born in Clay City, Ind., during his father’s first pastorate. Through the years, Ed, Sr. led other churches in Ohio, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Florida. “I thank the Lord for growing up within the Charis Fellowship/Grace Brethren Fellowship. I feel like I’m one that followed the normal path. I went to youth conference... I went to Grace College (BME 69), I went to Grace Seminary (MDiv 73), I went on short-term missions programs.”



Ed was a music major and his talent led to opportunities for him to serve in Africa and travel with college music groups. “I got to know our churches and our people, and it was only natural for me to be able to feel very comfortable with the people out there,” he says.

During seminary, he was youth pastor at Winona Lake Grace Brethren Church, where he is still a member. He says that his days there, working with Pastor Charles Ashman, were a great influence on him. He’s remembered for his style of leadership that combined fun activities with opportunities for planning and leadership.

“I wanted to focus on what young people could do,” he recalls. “We would have ministry experiences. This is where a lot of churches...are missing a golden opportunity. Where are they [youth] ever going to learn if we have no place for them in our church program? I want to see churches do more to get young people out of their comfort zones and take them in ministry experiences.”

A year before Ed graduated, CE National asked if he would join their staff as director of youth ministry. To do that, he would have to cut back on seminary classes. He said no because he was

afraid he would never finish seminary. So the job was offered to someone else.

As Ed approached seminary graduation, he didn’t know what he was going to do afterward. Then something occurred that he says, “changed the trajectory of my life.” John Mayes, then pastor of Community Grace Brethren Church in Whittier, Calif., asked Ed to consider a staff position at the church. Ed went, candidated, and felt that it went well. He asked if he should call back, but John told him, “Don’t do anything. We’ll just put it all in a letter.” Ed waited almost three weeks—but no letter came. In the meantime, the person

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THAT “NEXT GENERATION” HAS ALWAYS BEEN ON ED’S MIND. IT HAS DEFINED HIS MINISTRY AND MADE HIS CALLING SO VALUABLE.

who had taken the youth ministry job at CE National quit. Ed was offered the job again—by then-CE Director Howard Mayes—John Mayes’ younger brother.

Meanwhile, John Mayes called Ed to ask what he decided about the job in Whittier, to which Ed replied, “I never got a letter.” Somehow the letter had gotten lost in the mail. In the meantime, Ed took the job at CE National and began in September 1973.

Howard Mayes finishes the story. “My brother forgave me for ‘spoiling’ his plans for Ed as a Californian and wholeheartedly supported Ed’s new ministry,” he remembers.

“For Grace Brethren, the rest, as they say, is history.”

It was during this time as Ed finished seminary and began full-time work, that he knew he was entering it as a single person. “I always thought I would be married,” he notes. He dated, but there was never that “one” girl that he fell in love with. “I realized that I have the gift of singleness. There is a role for both married and single people. If I’m going to be single, I’m going to be single to serve.” With that mindset, he has worked and traveled without hesitation.

Once Ed began his work at CE, his creativity and passion for evangelism and discipleship took shape through various outlets. Operation Barnabas started in 1974 and continues today as a summer training program for high school students. Momentum (formerly Brethren National Youth Conference) has grown substantially under Ed’s leadership. When he came in 1973, there were around 300 attendees; today, attendance runs around 2,300.

“My push has always been to see people go into Christian career work,” he says. “We’ve always called for commitments for the Lord at youth conference and... for Christian career commitments.” That “push” led CE to initiate several training experiences: TIME, EMI (Euro Missions Institute), Latin American Missions Institute, and Safari of Hope in Africa.

Ed was concerned that the follow-up afterward, especially with missions, wasn’t happening.

Grace Brethren International Missions (now Encompass World Partners) invited him to work part-time as director of candidate personnel. From 1982-1988, Ed held his full-time job at CE, plus put in part-time hours at GBIM—helping people go through the candidate process and on to the mission field. During those six years, 103 missionaries went to the field.

In 1985, Ed became executive director of CE National, and working for two organizations became too much. In Ed’s last year with GBIM, Tom Julien came on as director, and with his leadership, Ed was able to pull back from the two jobs and work only for CE.

The next few years brought much growth and in 1998, the addition of two major programs. That year, CE began to partner with Grace College in the National Institute for the Development of Ministries to Youth. The program offers hands-on training in youth ministry leading to a bachelor’s degree.

Ed adds, “That year was also the beginning of the Urban Hope Training Center program in Philadelphia...to train present and future Christian workers. The Third Brethren Church donated its facilities for

this ministry. The church had decided to close their doors since the neighborhood had changed, and few church people were from that community anymore. They gave us the keys to their facilities. We have a Studies in Urban Ministry major at Grace College as well, that coordinates with the Urban Hope locations.” [Now also in Los Angeles.]

As Ed passes the leadership of CE on to Bogue, he’s thankful that they share the same passion for developing leaders in the fellowship and for declaring God’s power “to the next generation” (Ps. 71:18b).

That “next generation” has always been on Ed’s mind. It has defined his ministry and made his calling so valuable.

“Ed’s contributions to our fellowship are seen not only in innovations in outreach projects and discipleship processes but most of all in the lives of the thousands he has touched through his long and faithful tenure,” says Howard Mayes, who preceded Ed as executive director at CE. “We know Ed as a man of great vision, but also a man of great skill in translating vision to reality.”

And the man who is following him, Jeff Bogue, agrees. “Ed has been a fixture, not only at CE National and the Charis Fellowship but actually in the kingdom of God,” stresses Jeff. “His work and the investment of his life have had ramifications around the world, and God has used him in extraordinary ways. Tens of thousands of people have come to know Christ under Ed’s ministry, or as a result of it, and thousands of people are led every week in churches and ministries by men and women that he has trained up to serve Christ.”

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The LARGEST GATHERING OF THE CHARIS FELLOWSHIP EVER!

Livestream at weareone.video
Sunday, July 26, 2020
6pm EDT/3pm PDT
(pre-service begins at 5:30/2:30 pm)

A VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

In a normal year, we'd meet in the summer for national conference, with engaging speakers, moving worship, and inspiring workshops and cohorts. But this has not been a normal year. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, Access2020, the national conference of the Charis Fellowship, has been moved to 2021. (Access2021 will take place July 27 - 29, 2021, in Winona Lake, Ind. with the originally scheduled theme, speakers, and location.)

In its place is *WeAreOne*, a virtual celebration of all things Charis Fellowship, which will be held on July 26, 2020. In a year in which the world has seemed so divided, the Charis Fellowship remains committed to the unique unity of our tribe of churches – we are one in truth, we are one in relationship, we are one in mission.

Unique and unified, churches in our tribe believes the opportunity for declaring the Gospel of Jesus Christ has never been greater.

From the Atlantic to the Pacific, *WeAreOne* will be a time when all Charis Fellowship congregations in North American assemble for a unique time of celebration and worship. It will likely be the largest Charis Fellowship gathering ever, as congregations join in the virtual festivities.

The week following the *WeAreOne* event will include online workshops and cohorts around various topics, just like you'd experience in person at an Access conference.

**For more information,
see weareone.video**

EVERY CHURCH, SMALL GROUP, OR PERSON CONNECTED WITH A CHARIS FELLOWSHIP CONGREGATION IS INVITED TO JOIN AN ONLINE CELEBRATION OF OUR CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA.

WHAT TO EXPECT AT WEAREONE

WE ARE ONE IN TRUTH, Dan Gregory



Dan notes that we live in a culture that is desperate for the truth and confused about what is true. He will talk about how the truth that unites us as a fellowship of churches places us on the same page, even though we are diverse, because it ends up pointing us to Jesus.

Dan Gregory is in his 12th year as the Norton, Ohio, campus pastor at Grace Church. Previously he planted Community of Hope Church, in Columbia City, Ind., where he served a total of 14 years. He and his wife, Jennifer, have been married 30 years and have three grown children and two grandchildren. His passion is seeing people come into a relationship with Jesus Christ, as well as training and developing young leaders.

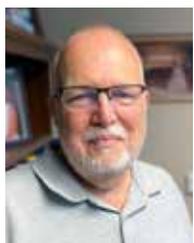
WE ARE ONE IN MISSION, Emily Tellez



Emily will share some of the ways in which she has seen God bring together ministry partners to work as a team for the furthering of the gospel throughout the world and in her own backyard. God seems to take great joy in knitting together men and women who would otherwise never find themselves in the same room, to be living examples of the unity that comes from a mutual love for Jesus and making Him make sense to the world.

Emily Tellez has been a part of the Charis Fellowship for the past 11 years. She grew up in Bogotá, Colombia, and has been married to her best friend, Juan Carlos, for almost 19 years. They have four children, Sara, Lucas, Julian and Mateo. Currently they live just outside Atlanta, where they have been in multi-ethnic church-planting ministry for the last four years. She has a passion for teaching and equipping others to become all that God has created them to be.

WE ARE ONE IN RELATIONSHIP, Tom Avey



Tom will talk about focusing on the priorities he set, and lessons learned along the way, as Charis Fellowship Coordinator.

Tom has been the Charis Fellowship coordinator since January 1998. He served as pastor at the Grace Brethren Church of Orlando, Fla., and as church administrator and pastor of church growth at the Grace Brethren Church of Lititz, Pa. He and his wife, Sandi, reside in Winona Lake, Ind. They have four adult children and eight grandchildren.

PARTICIPANTS

PRE-SERVICE INTRODUCTIONS
with Wade Rininger,
Andrew Wood,
and Erik Jensen

SPEAKERS
Phil Sparling
Dan Gregory
Emily Tellez
Bartley Sawatsky
Tom Avey

VIDEO REPORTS
Dayne Carraway
Stephen Joyce

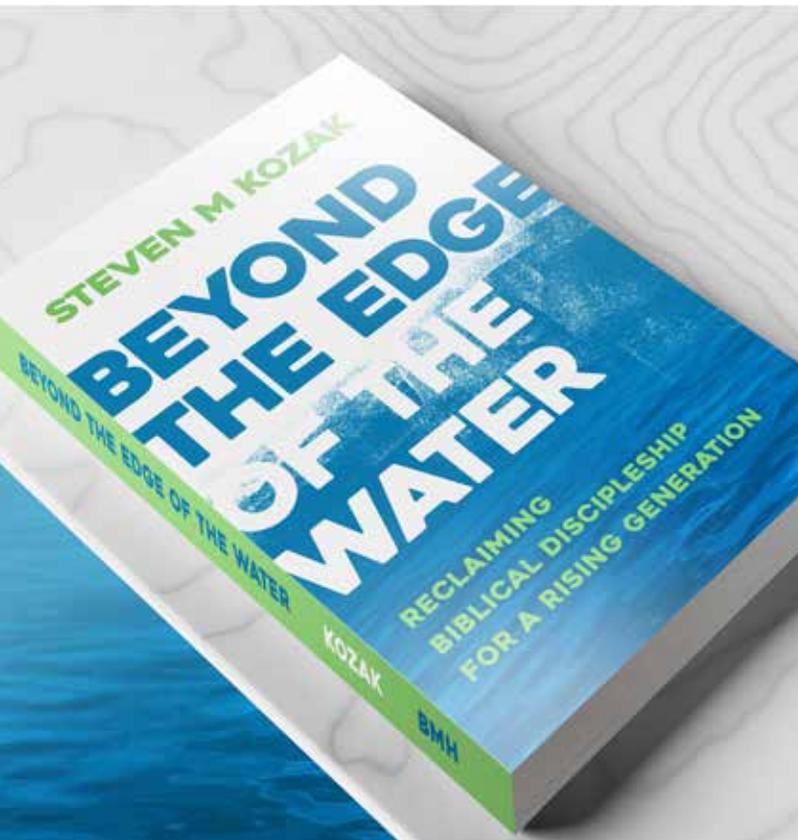
WORSHIP led by teams
from Charis Fellowship
congregations.

A VIRTUAL CHOIR
featuring musicians from
more than 40 different
churches around
North America

As of press time, the schedule for the workshops and cohorts had not been finalized. See weareone.video. Click on the Breakouts link for up-to-date information.

RECLAIMING BIBLICAL DISCIPLESHIP

by Steven M. Kozak



**I am the Way,
the Truth, and the Life.
*Jesus (John 14:6)***

Editor's Note: This is an excerpt from the new BMH Books release, *Beyond the Edge of the Water: Reclaiming Biblical Discipleship for a Rising Generation*.

I really like Jesus, but I have no intention of following him.

I was shocked, but that's what several of my high school students told me. They sincerely believed that to be a Christian only meant they had to like or appreciate Jesus and some of the things He said. To them, Jesus was nothing more than a model citizen. Loving like Jesus meant accepting people for who they were and affirming them in whatever lifestyle they chose. To do otherwise was a heinous act of hatred. This is the kind of thinking behind an ideology called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Essentially, it's the belief that there may be a higher power looking down from above, but it is not directly involved in human affairs. The key concerns are happiness and being a good person. And being a good person means setting aside disagreement and any sort of objective truth. Truth now presupposes exclusivity. And exclusivity is hateful and hurtful. This is precisely why it's easier to ignore Jesus as the only way, the truth, and the life—the only means by which we can get to the Father (John 14:6)—and confine Him to a space that fits our culture's demands.

A NEW STANDARD FOR TRUTH

In more than a decade of teaching, leading, and discipling students, I learned this kind of thinking is not at all an isolated or a rare occurrence. In fact, it's normal. Maybe disturbingly normal. So typical, it has become embedded into the culture of the rising generation. Perhaps even indoctrinated. Sure, a lot of people—students, adults, and everyone in between—like Jesus. He's got that chill vibe, a Gandhi sort of swagger. Jesus sure seems like the great example of love and acceptance. But follow Him? Be a Christian? That notion, the notion of discipleship—the kind of discipleship we get straight from the pages of Scripture—has been lost in the busyness and noise of our relativistic western culture.

The root cause is our culture's recent dive into what is now called post-truth. By now, it's likely you have heard the term. After all, it made front page news in 2016 as Oxford Dictionary's word of the year. The term denotes the "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."¹ The

¹ Oxford Dictionary Online, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/post-truth>. Accessed August 2019.

IN TERMS OF WORLDVIEWS, TWO OPPOSING IDEOLOGIES CANNOT BOTH BE TRUE AT THE SAME TIME.

term fundamentally places feeling over facts and experience and perception of reality rather than reality itself. So if Descartes described truth as “I think, therefore I am,” a post-truth advocate would argue, “I believe, therefore I am right, because that’s how I feel.”² In other words, the validity of truth is always subject to feelings.

Even Jesus is subject to this same new standard. How you view Him, which instructions you decide to obey, and how you interpret His actions are entirely based on one person’s experience and feelings. Unless you were born after the mid-1980s—the beginnings of the Millennial generation—the shunning of objective truth and rational thinking might seem entirely ridiculous. But for everyone younger, it is accepted as truth. From college to elementary school, students are being taught that all ideologies are equal, given equal time and attention, and all ought to be embraced simultaneously. Since experience guides truth, everyone’s truth has equal validity. I know what you’re thinking: This can’t be true because it can’t work. And you’re right. In terms of worldviews, two opposing ideologies cannot both be true at the same time. You can’t believe Jesus to be the only way to the Father but also believe in reincarnation. They don’t fit, yet here we are. And by the looks of our current cultural climate, it’s here to stay.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

What my students were expressing is indicative of what researchers have now determined: the western world is officially post-Christian—actively rejecting Christianity and the message of the gospel. My students—and many others like them—have no tolerance for a Jesus who demands exclusive obedience, objective morality, denial of self, and absolute truth. While many people would still consider themselves spiritual in some sense, and perhaps even possess faith in a higher power of sorts, there is a mass exodus from the idea of organized Christianity. According to the latest research from both the Barna Group and Pew, nearly half of Americans note their religious identity as “none.” That number jumps to more than 50 percent in Europe. This means that people are far less likely to accept any one religious system as true and another as false. This is forcing churches to face some new challenges.

Nowhere is this challenge more important in Christendom than in our youth groups and families. Parents and youth leaders work tirelessly to ensure that our students are discipled and giv-

en every opportunity to own their faith so that they might walk in faith boldly as they enter adulthood. But here is the problem: culture is winning. It is the world that has captivated the attention of students. It is actors and musicians like Alec Baldwin, Brad Pitt, Taylor Swift, Drake, and Post Malone who are the priests and prophets of the modern age, taking full advantage of their platform to push their own version of the “good news.” And it’s the new digital reality working around the clock to define our students’ identity. Today’s youth are faced with challenges we never saw coming or could have predicted, and our efforts to meet these challenges are falling far short. Our ability to make disciples is fading fast. At every corner, it seems culture is setting a new standard and creating deeper division between the world and the church. The church steeple rising over our communities that once served as a beacon of hope for the world is now seen as a disease that needs to be eradicated.

Perhaps I’m being too harsh. Perhaps I’m just being an alarmist. To be honest, sometimes I think I might be. But whether it’s entertainment becoming more sexualized, the growing influence of the LGBTQ community, drag queens reading stories to children at the public libraries, or the suppression of Judeo-Christian values in the broader culture—that is, the deeper we walk into a post-Christian reality, the greater the need for Christians to be engaged and impacting culture. So what’s the answer? What are churches and families supposed to do?

There may have been a time when churches and families could simply ignore culture—stick to teaching students the Bible and sound morals. Surely even the most wayward children would make their way back, right? After all, twenty or thirty years ago, the Bible still stood as our nation’s moral compass, there was still a universal understanding of sin, and much of the social justice around the world had its roots in the gospel. But times have changed, and I believe there is a cultural tidal wave with the church standing in its path. We tried to keep the water out, but when we weren’t looking, it began to seep through the cracks. In our efforts to fill buildings in hopes people will hear the gospel, and in our efforts to connect with a fast-changing culture—with every other organization outpacing the church in its ability to connect—we are showing signs of compromise. Let me give you three quick examples.

Example 1: The Church is ignoring the Bible.

In his book, *Hope of Nations*, John S. Dickerson commented that “Any ministry or family that abandons the authority of Scripture is one generation away from abandoning Christianity

² I borrowed this phrase from cartoonist Martin Shovel, <http://www.creativityworks.net/>.

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IN OUR POST-TRUTH, POST-CHRISTIAN CULTURE, THE WESTERN WORLD HAS GONE SO FAR AS TO DEMAND THE REMOVAL, INFLUENCE, AND RELEVANCY OF SCRIPTURE.

entirely.”³ It is no surprise when we hear atheists, agnostics, or other opposing worldviews discount the Bible’s authority over our lives. However, twenty years ago, that opinion was still considered the minority. This is no longer the case.

In our post-truth, post-Christian culture, the western world has gone so far as to demand the removal, influence, and relevancy of Scripture. To do otherwise is to actively promote a hate-filled agenda—creating a perceived need for the church to compromise. In our pursuit to appease culture, to be relevant, liked, retweeted, and shared, the church is dangerously flirting with putting her needs over God’s desires. Our sermons have gone from exegetical to motivational, treating the Bible as a series of suggestions rather than authoritative truth.

Now I know this is not true of every church in every place, but in our highly distracted age, it is far too easy to reduce discipleship and spiritual formation to nothing more than weekly church attendance and perhaps the occasional small group meeting; forgetting that we hold the very breath of God in our hands. I have seen firsthand Bible teachers marginalize Scripture in an attempt to connect students to God; picking and choosing what to teach so we don’t offend. However, our understanding of morality, our foundation of truth, and the purpose and mission of humanity are laid out in Scripture. It is divine. It is inspired. And it is infallible. To attempt the Christian life without it is like playing football without a football.

Example 2: Our service has become more social than it is gospel.

There is no shortage of philanthropy, non-profits, organizations that donate earnings, even individuals who live incredibly generous lives. Their stories inspire us to be like them. Giving is contagious. There may not be a shortage of giving, but there is a shortage of the gospel. I know several Jesus-loving Christians who have created non-profit organizations looking to provide medical care, clean water, food, and even build entire communities—all of which are important, necessary, and noble tasks. Yet in many of these, the gospel is mysteriously absent, expecting that if we love enough, love will automatically translate into a gospel message. It is almost as if we are disguising Jesus into a more palatable version the world can stomach.

But our world’s poverty will never find its solution in our attempts to remedy external needs. The answer is not external, it

is internal. Jesus and the gospel are not peripheral benefits of our service to others or some kind of unintended advantage. The solution is the gospel. The answer is Jesus. The mission of every follower of Christ is not only to serve as a reflection of the risen Christ bringing redemption and rescue to ends of the earth, but also to proclaim the gospel and the reason for the hope that lies within.

Generally speaking, our students appreciate the ability to give back. They feel the need and are more than willing to lend a hand. But the good they are eager to do falls far short of good without the gospel.

Example 3: Sin is a constant moving target.

We desperately want to believe in the goodness of humanity. In fact, our children are taught as early as elementary school that people are inherently good, and we want nothing more than to hold on to that sense of delusional hope. The result is an increasing need to excuse many of the world’s sins. If people are generally good and we are not to judge another’s understanding of truth, then we have no basis for calling certain behaviors sin.

The line between what is moral and immoral is a continually moving target. The times when we sought after biblical, family values are becoming a distant memory. We have replaced the doctrine of total depravity with a new doctrine of acceptance and affirmation of nearly any kind of behavior. After all, who are we to judge? The result: no need for Jesus’ atoning sacrifice, or resurrection, or even Jesus at all. If sin is marginalized, then what do we need saving from?

I believe it is time to reconsider our methods for raising up and discipling a new generation. It is time to truly meet our students’ needs with the power of the gospel. It is time we reclaim biblical discipleship. It’s time we stop compromising, trying to please others in hopes they will show up to church. It’s time we show our students what it truly means to follow Jesus, what it means to sacrifice, what it means to commit, what it means to live a new resurrected life in Christ, what it means to live on mission, and what it means to love. God has invited us into a new experience of who He is and the life He has created for us. It is time we get beyond church attendance, devotionals, and small group meetings as our standard means of making disciples and enter into the journey He calls us to embrace. The journey is wrought with commitment and sacrifice and overflowing with a new kind of love, a new kind of community, and a new kind of self.

³ John S. Dickerson. *Hope of Nations: Standing Strong in a Post-Truth, Post-Christian World*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 206.

PREACHING JESUS

by Galen Wiley

God wants us to know His Book, but infinitely more He wants us to know His Son!

Editor's note: At each of the regional Focus Retreats in 2019-2020, an experienced pastor was asked to share about "how my preaching has changed over the years and, if I were starting all over, how I would preach the Bible in today's world." At the East Retreat in October in Ocean City, Md., Galen Wiley, who led Charis Fellowship congregations for more than 44 years until his retirement in 2015, had these thoughts. He currently serves as part-time administrative pastor at Grace Church, Lancaster, Pa. (Scott Becker lead pastor), where he served as lead pastor beginning in March 2004.

One word says it all – Jesus! I would preach Jesus more! That doesn't mean I would preach the Bible less. I would preach the Bible the way it should be preached.

At Grace College and Seminary, I gained a deep commitment to the study and preaching of the Bible as God's Word. I loved 2 Timothy 3:16-17. We were taught to exegete and diagram a passage, build the outline from the diagrammatic structure, and then carefully preach it with some illustration and application. (It didn't take me long to drop the diagramming.) I loved the careful exegesis and exposition of the text. I believed that if I knew the truth of the text and carefully taught it to others, that truth would set us free (John 8:32). In my first ministry as a senior pastor I preached through Colossians – for 21 months.

But then God used John 5:39-40 to change the course of the rest of my life and ministry. We do not find life, nor do we lead others to find life merely by the study of the Bible – we must come to Jesus!

The Holy Spirit reminded me that 2 Timothy 3:15 precedes 3:16-17: the real power of the Bible is that it makes us wise for the salvation that comes by faith in Jesus. The Spirit orchestrated the writing of the Bible to define exactly who Jesus is, how He works, why we need that work and what it looks like, and how we allow Him to work in

I BELIEVE GOD WANTS US TO PREACH JESUS!... THIS DOESN'T MEAN WE PREACH THE BIBLE LESS; IT JUST MEANS WE PREACH IT THE WAY IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE PREACHED – AS THE SPIRIT'S MASTERPIECE TO LEAD US TO JESUS.

us. The Spirit uses this Book to teach us Jesus – to convict us where we get off track, to restore us, and to train us in living in the righteousness of Jesus – so that we can be men and women of God. Jesus is the Truth who sets us free (John 8:36). The Holy Spirit wrote the Book to lead us to Jesus. This is the real power and purpose of Scripture – to make us wise for the salvation that is by faith in Jesus!

It is exciting to realize that though this Book is the written Word of God and Jesus is the living Word of God, Jesus is God's ultimate, greatest revelation to us (John 1:1-18; Hebrews 1:1-3). We should be passionate about studying, living, and preaching God's written Word and even more passionate about studying, living, and preaching God's living Word. God wants us to know His Book, but infinitely more He wants us to know His Son.

In the early church, they simply preached Jesus. The world was turned upside down. When they quoted the Old Testament Scriptures, it was the only Bible they had to point people to Jesus as God's Messiah who came to save. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1-2 that to the unbelievers he simply preached Christ and Him crucified (and raised and exalted). To the believers, he preached the mystery wisdom of God which includes all that God has graciously given to us through Jesus. In Colossians 1:24-2:3 Paul defined that mystery wisdom as "Christ in us, the hope of glory." Paul said that he simply proclaimed Christ, admonishing everyone, and teaching everyone with all wisdom to present everyone perfect in Christ. He did it all through the power of Christ living and working in Him.

I am overwhelmed with how God has so patiently and graciously led me from the pride and self-confidence of my law mindset. I thought I had arrived because of my heritage, my law-righteousness, my academic achievement, my hard work, and my self-sacrifice. Now He is leading me to His grace mindset where I accept that I have not arrived and that I must humbly turn to Jesus by faith alone to allow Him to unleash in me all the power of His death, resurrection, and exaltation (Philippians 3).

He has been convicting me recently how I still live sometimes in fear because of that law/slave mindset that what

all I have to do to please God as Master, instead of accepting that I am home, relaxing with God as Father, crying out "Abba, Father," and enjoying all the riches of my inheritance (Romans 8:12-17).

We love this Book. It is God's Word. But we love Jesus more. He is God's Son and our Savior/Lord. So how has my preaching changed? I want to preach Jesus. I want to study, live, and preach the Bible more than ever before because this Book makes us all wise for the salvation that is by faith in Jesus. I want to study, live, and preach Jesus even more because Jesus is the One who saves us. He is the One who gives us life.

There's a lot I don't understand about preaching Jesus. The same Holy Spirit who wrote this Book can help us learn how to study, live, and preach it in the way that He wants us to. He knows how 2 Timothy 3:15-17 works. He can empower us to be living witnesses of Jesus, to be so excited about experiencing Christ living in us and saving us that we tell everyone we meet (Acts 1:8).

A couple of months before Elsie and I got married, my dad gave me a little book on sex and marriage (or at least I remember the sex part). Then on June 9, 1968, when we got to the motel, of course, I got out the book, exegeted it, and explained it carefully to my wife until midnight when we both fell asleep. No way! We made love! And we had an awesome honeymoon. That was a lot more exciting than just reading the book. I am so glad for the book because I was naive. But I love my wife infinitely more than I loved that little book. Here's the question: do we just want to read the Book, or do we want to make love with Jesus and live in an intimate, exciting love relationship with Him – the way the Book tells us to?

I believe God wants us to preach Jesus. Preach Jesus first to ourselves so we will fall in love with Jesus more and more. And then preach Jesus to everyone we can, so they can fall in love with Jesus too. This doesn't mean we preach the Bible less; it just means we preach it the way it's supposed to be preached – as the Spirit's masterpiece to lead us to Jesus, so Jesus can lead us to life!

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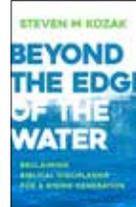
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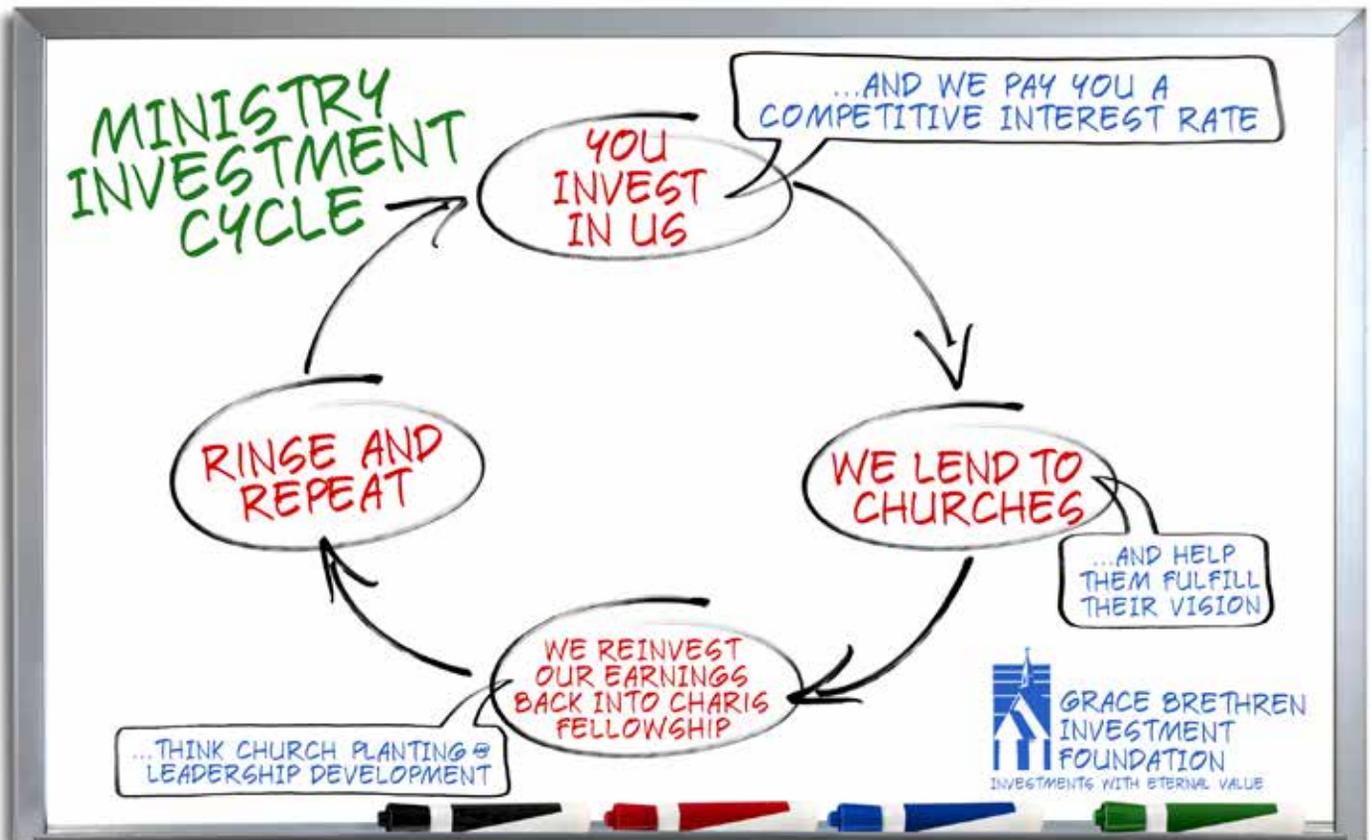
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