

December 2025

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CHRISTMAS

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Megan Alexander

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the True Meaning of Christmas*

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OUR MISSION



Nashville Christian Family® exists to provide Christians and the community at large with ways to strengthen and grow as a part of the Middle Tennessee Christian Family. This local monthly publication is designed to promote positive living by sharing with readers of all ages relevant and timely news and information related to health, faith, parenting, youth, finances, Christian entertainment, missions, church leaders, and much more GOOD NEWS!

FROM THE PUBLISHER

A Message of Hope

Luke 2: 10 – 12

Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. 11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a [d]manger." NKJV

The angel's message from the Lord announced that the world would be forever changed by the birth of the promised Messiah! The Christmas season is here—a truly magical and joyful time. It's a season for gathering with family and friends, decorating the tree, serving those in need, exchanging meaningful gifts, attending festive parties, and savoring special holiday treats and meals.



But by the time Christmas Day arrives, many of us feel overwhelmed by the whirlwind of activities. Instead of experiencing the joy of the season, we can end up stressed, exhausted, overspent, and eager for it all to be over. Yet that's not what this season should be for Believers.

Christmas offers a beautiful opportunity to refocus our hearts and minds—to "be still and know that He is God." Make time for yourself and your family to embrace the true joy of the season. Gather your loved ones and read the Christmas story from Scripture. Celebrate the true meaning of Christmas: the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

From all of us at *Nashville Christian Family*, we wish you and your family a blessed, peaceful, and joy-filled Christmas, and a very Happy New Year!

Robert Stringfellow, Publisher, 615-815-8765
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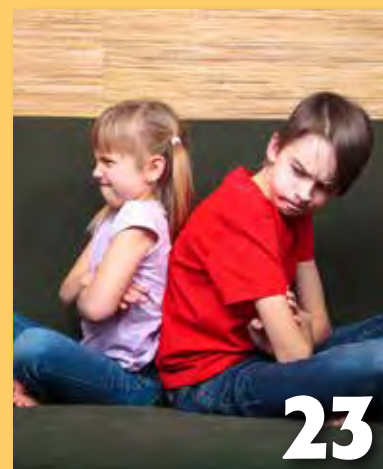
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The Heart of Christmas and the Power of Community

As Christmas approaches, I find myself reflecting more deeply on what this season truly means. It’s a time filled with joy, generosity, and connection, but at its core, it’s about the heart. The heart of Christmas reminds us to slow down, to give more than we take, and to look around with gratitude at the people and communities who make life richer.

Our mission at Lee Company has always been more than business. It’s about service. And this year, like every year, I’m profoundly grateful for the opportunity we have to serve families and businesses across the communities we call home. For 80+ years, we’ve had the privilege of walking alongside people during life’s everyday moments and major milestones. That’s something we don’t take lightly.

Communities are the foundation of everything. They are where families grow, friendships thrive, and where we learn what it means to support and

uplift one another. The strength of a community doesn’t come from its buildings or businesses, but rather, it comes from the people who show up, who care, and who serve with heart.

I see that spirit of service in our team every day. Whether we’re repairing a home HVAC system, installing a complex mechanical solution for a facility, or volunteering alongside one of our non-profit partners, our people lead with respect, integrity, and compassion. That’s what honoring God through our work looks like. And it’s why I believe Lee Company isn’t just a company, it’s a family.

This season, I encourage each of us to take a moment to reflect. Celebrate the joy that comes with



giving, the peace that follows acts of kindness, and the fulfillment found in simply showing up for one another. That’s the heart of Christmas. And that’s what continues to make our communities strong.

To everyone we’ve had the privilege of serving this year, THANK YOU! Your trust means everything to us. To our team members, you are the heart of Lee Company, and I’m so thankful for your dedication and grit. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. May this season bring you comfort, joy, and hope.

We’re honored to be part of your lives. And we look forward to continuing to serve you in the year ahead, with heart, as always.

— Richard Perko, CEO, Lee Company
www.leecompany.com

Cool Stuff With a Mighty Message

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ComeAsk.org
A Place to Ask Questions, Seek Truth, And Join the Journey

The movement of God using QR codes to reach people with the gospel is an exciting development in the world of evangelism. It shows that the Christian faith is adaptable and relevant to the modern world and that there are always new and creative ways to share the message of hope and salvation through Jesus Christ. As this movement continues to grow, it’s likely that we will see even more innovative approaches to sharing the gospel in the years ahead.

Our Story:

This is a unique way to learn about who you are and what you were created for. In 2022, the Lord began to suggest one way for His people to share their faith with friends, family, and community, is to place a QR code that matches the message of Truth printed on that gift. We then created a corresponding website that uses the QR code to lead the recipient of the gift to ways to learn more about God. The site would offer ways to learn who He is, and ways get to know Him through the Truths and questions. We are to provide a place for prayer, questions, and direction for those asking, seeking, and knocking. Then over time, a community will develop by interacting with the Truth, videos, worship, prayer, and music on the community website.

Our Goal:

As believers, we trust that a life in Christ is the key to true fulfillment, joy, and purpose. Sharing Christ and our faith helps people develop a deep relationship with God, becoming more like Jesus, and fulfilling their unique calling and purpose in life. Becoming more like Jesus, develops the character and qualities that enable us to live a life of purpose and meaning.

How It Works:

- Purchase a Gift. An Individual purchases a gift for a loved one.
- Gift Received. The individual received the gift and notices the QR code.
- Scan the QR Code. Recipient of the gift scans the QR code.
- Deeper Faith. The individual then has a chance to learn more about Jesus.

Current Topics:

- Easter: Learn more about the Last Supper, Jesus’s Sacrifice, and His Resurrection.
- Who is God?: Discover who God is as the Creator.
- Who are you?: Find out who God says you are and what your purpose is.

- Communion: Take a glimpse into Communion.
- The Exchange: Learn what happens when we ask to be forgiven.
- Faith: Explore the significance of belief and faith according to Scripture.
- Anointing Oil: Investigate the healing properties of anointing oil.
- Prayer: Discover the different ways to pray.
- Serving: Find out what exactly “serving” is.
- Fear Not: Figure out how to minimize fear.
- Unveiling God’s Plan & Purpose: Unearth your unique role in God’s grand design.
- Rest: Explore the wisdom of Scripture concerning rest and being still.

We hope you will take time to navigate ComeAsk.org and dive deeper into your faith. Share this website with a friend who may be searching for hope in their lives. As always, feel free to reach out with any questions on our website (comeask.org) via our contact page. God bless.

— Katherine Stewart,
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Understanding RMDs –
Making Your Retirement Money Work for You

Retirement should be a time to enjoy life, not worry about confusing rules. But if you have an IRA or retirement plan, you’ve likely heard the term RMD, or Required Minimum Distribution. RMDs are the minimum amounts you must withdraw from certain retirement accounts once you reach a specific age. These withdrawals are important because the IRS requires them and they are taxed as income. Understanding how RMDs work can help you make smarter choices, avoid penalties, and even save money on taxes. Here are five key points every investor should consider.

1. Know Your RMD Starting Age

The SECURE 2.0 Act updated the rules for RMDs. If you were born between 1951 and 1959, you must start taking RMDs at age 73. For those born in 1960 or later, the starting age increases to 75. The IRS sets a Required Beginning Date, which is April 1 of the year after you reach the starting age. Knowing your age and timing can prevent missed distributions and penalties.

2. Understand How RMDs Are Calculated

RMDs are based on your account balance on December 31 of the previous year and a life expectancy factor provided by the IRS. The idea is to slowly withdraw your money so your account lasts through retirement. Your first year is special – you can delay until April 1 of the following year, but then you’ll have to take two distributions the next year. Knowing how the RMD is calculated helps you plan withdrawals efficiently.

3. Consider Your Tax Implications

RMDs are taxed as regular income, not capital gains. This means taking out large amounts at once could bump you into a higher tax bracket. Planning RMD withdrawals carefully can help manage your tax bill. Some investors spread distributions throughout the year or use tax-advantaged strategies to reduce the impact.

4. Use Options to Make RMDs Work for You

You don’t always need the money immediately. RMDs can be deposited into a bank account for living expenses or left in an after-tax account to continue growing. Charitable investors can use a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD) to satisfy their RMD directly to a charity, reducing taxable income. Exploring your options can maximize your retirement funds and even help charitable causes.

5. Don’t Forget Employer Plans

If you’re still working and have a retirement plan with your current employer, you might be able to delay RMDs until you retire, unless you own 5% or more of the company. This exception can help you keep more money invested longer and grow your savings.

RMDs may sound complicated, but with some planning, they can work in your favor. By knowing your starting age, understanding calculations, planning for taxes, exploring distribution options, and considering employer plans, you can make smart choices for your retirement. Navigating IRS rules often requires professional guidance. Contact our office today to receive a copy of our proprietary RMD flow-chart report, which makes the process clear and simple. Proper planning could save you thousands and give you peace of mind as you enjoy your retirement years.

— Michael Wallin, Certified Financial Planner™. For more information, please see www.panthrex.com or call 615-236-2220.



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About the Host, Dr. Ming Wang, MD, PhD

The Angel Studios’ film “Sight” (FREE LINK: sight.drmingwang.com), starring Greg Kinnear, is based on the autobiography “From Darkness to Sight” of Dr. Ming Wang, Harvard & MIT (MD, magna cum laude); PhD (laser physics).

As a teenager, Ming played the Chinese violin erhu to escape labor camp and came to America with only \$50. He became a world-class surgeon and has performed over 55,000 laser vision surgeries (including on over 4,000 doctors). Dr. Wang invented the Amniotic membrane contact lens which has helped millions.

Wang Foundation for Sight Restoration has helped patients from over 40 states in the U.S. and 55 countries, with all sight restoration surgeries performed free-of-charge. Dr. Wang was named the Kiwanis Nashvillian of the Year for his lifelong dedication to help blind orphan children around the world.

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Stain Treatment 101: Hot or Cold Water?

The basics, Molly Maid explains whether to choose hot or cold water for effective stain removal.

- Always check fabric care labels before treating.
- Rinse and blot stains promptly for best results.

You just spilled a glob of mustard on your new, white blouse. You knew that hot dog was a risky choice, but it was simply irresistible. Fret not! Your new shirt is not ruined — at least not yet. As soon as that stain hits the fabric, the count-down is on. If the stain dries, you might as well make it your dedicated hot dog-eating smock. The most important step is to take off that shirt and get it in water as soon as possible. But not just any water.

Should I Use Hot or Cold Water for White Clothes?

Choosing between hot and cold water can be misleading. Many people assume that the color of the garment dictates water temperature. You wash whites in warm-to-hot water to blast out all of the stains, and you wash colors in cold water to keep the colors from running, right? Well, this logic does not translate to spot treatment. When it comes to stain removal, it's all about the characteristics of the stain. A stained white shirt may require hot or cold water, depending on what was spilled on it.

Should I Use Hot or Cold Water for Blood Stains?

One of the most common stain questions is how to remove blood stains. Typically, cold water works great on blood, as well as food, beverages and

- Stains to Soak in Cold Water:**
- Baby food/formula
 - Milk and Dairy products
 - Blood
 - Paint (Water-based)
 - Cheese
 - Soft Drinks
 - Chocolate
 - Soy Sauce
 - Coffee and tea
 - Urine
 - Jelly and jam
 - Wine and beer

- Stains to Soak in Warm-Hot Water:**
- Dirt/mud
 - Tomato-based products
 - Dye and marker
 - Lotion
 - Egg
 - Mustard
 - Grass
 - Sweat
 - Grease
 - Shoe Polish
 - Oil
 - Vomit

water-based paint, while hot water works best on protein-based stains. Unfortunately, there's no golden rule to stain removal. For example, most food stains should be soaked in cold water, unless it's egg, mustard or a tomato-based product. Another tricky rule: Urine stains get cold water while sweat and vomit stains get warm-to-hot water.

Take a minute to study our cheat sheet. Or better yet, print it out and post it in your laundry room! Yes, the temperature of the water will help treat stains to the best of your ability. But when it comes to treating stains, the most important step is to get the garment in water before it has time to dry and settle. If you're unsure what temperature the water should be, start with room temperature. Then pull out your phone and look up this cheat sheet. You can always move the garment to either cold or hot water once you figure out which temperature is right for your stain.

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— Daron and Maricela Farrar



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Finding His Voice: Derrick's Journey Through Work Readiness

When Derrick entered the Work Readiness program, he carried with him a quiet struggle—shyness and a lack of confidence. Speaking about himself, especially to unfamiliar people, was something he had avoided for years. But everything began to change during the program's interview preparedness segment. With encouragement and practice, Derrick found his voice. He stepped into his interview with confidence, pursued a position he was passionate about, and aced it. He was hired on the spot. Reflecting on the experience, Derrick shared that the program helped him overcome a long-standing fear of self-expression. "I never thought I'd be able to speak about myself so



confidently," he said. That breakthrough will serve him not just in his career, but in every area of his life. Today, Derrick is thriving at KabinArt.

This transformation was made possible through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment & Training (E&T), which provides individuals receiving SNAP benefits with the tools and opportunities to build skills, gain work experience, and move toward long-term self-sufficiency.

As Derrick put it: "SNAP E&T changes people's lives—keep helping others." As a SNAP E&T part-

ner with United Way of Greater Nashville, Men of Valor delivers life-changing programs that restore lives, rebuild futures, and help individuals thrive beyond re-entry. Derrick's story is just one of many examples of the power of this partnership. Derrick was a motivated participant throughout the program, and his success is a testament to what's possible when opportunity meets determination. Way to go, Derrick! Learn more about United Way of Greater Nashville's SNAP E&T program.

— Kris Wiese, Director Communications United Way of Greater Nashville,
www.unitedwaygreaternashville.org



Understanding RMDs: Avoid Tax Surprises For Your Retirement

The financial industry is filled with acronyms and specialized jargon. One common acronym you may encounter is RMD. But what does RMD mean, and what do you need to know? Required Minimum Distributions (RMDs) are the minimum amounts that IRA and retirement plan account owners must withdraw annually, starting in the year they turn 73 (for individuals born between 1951 and 1959).



The rules updated by the SECURE 2.0 Act have increased the RMD starting age for individuals born in 1960 or later to 75. If an individual is required to begin taking their RMDs in the calendar year 2025, it means they have already turned 73 or will turn 73 by December 31, 2025. To ease the process for IRA and retirement plan account owners with late-in-the-year birthdays, the IRS establishes the Required Beginning Date as April 1 of the calendar year following the year in which you reach the applicable age. Except for the first year, when the individual can defer to April 1 of the following year, the IRS mandates that RMDs be made annually by December 31. If an individual chooses to defer their first-year distribution, they must take two distributions the following year: one by April 1 for the previous year and another by December 31 for the current year.

RMDs are calculated using the account's closing value on December 31 of the previous year, divided by the applicable IRS-provided life expectancy factor. The RMD distribution tables are designed to ensure that the account balance is fully liquidated by age 115. One exception the IRS allows for delaying an RMD is for account owners who have a retirement plan at their current employer. These individuals may defer their RMD until they retire, unless they are a 5% owner of the business sponsoring the plan. RMDs are considered

taxable income and are taxed at regular income tax rates rather than at the possibly lower capital gains tax rates.

Individuals have options when it comes to handling their RMDs. If someone needs the distribution to supplement their living expenses, they can choose to have the net distribution, after tax withholdings, sent to them or directly deposited into their bank account. For those who do not need the distribution immediately, they can have the net distribution allocated to an after-tax account, allowing for continued potential growth of the account value for future needs. Charitably inclined individuals can satisfy their RMDs by making a donation to charity through a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD). This process involves sending the distribution directly from the custodian to the charity. The account owner cannot receive the RMD and then donate it; it must be processed directly from the custodian.

Understanding the timing, methods, and implications of RMDs can potentially save you thousands of dollars in retirement and help create a more tax-efficient strategy as you navigate your retirement years. Navigating IRS rules often requires professional guidance. Feel free to contact our office for a copy of our proprietary RMD flowchart report, which illustrates each step of the RMD process.

— Michael Wallin, Certified Financial Planner™. For more information, please see www.panthrex.com or call 615-236-2220.



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God's Gift
Lee Ann Mancini

Why We Should Cancel the Ugly Christmas Sweater

I have reached my breaking point. I cannot believe our society has tolerated this hateful, exclusionary garment this long. Someone must finally say it clearly. For the sake of fairness, unity and true inclusivity, we must ban the ugly Christmas sweater. I am offended every time I see one of these hideous, woolen micro aggressions. They shout “Christmas” and exclude everyone else. It is unconscionable that this bigoted fashion statement has been able to exist under the radar this long. Now is the time to act.

The ugly Christmas sweater is a walking billboard for one, and only one, specific holiday. Where is the acknowledgment of Lunar New Year on that sweater? Where is the tiny, crocheted Kwanzaa candle? This year the Winter Solstice shares the National French Fried Shrimp Day, and there is no acknowledgement of this day! I will not stand for this level of seasonal violence.

A Time for Inclusion

And please do not tell me this is absurd. We all know our recent culture cares deeply about inclusion. So I propose we cancel the “the ugly Christmas sweater” and rename it, “the ugly holiday sweater.” And to make this holiday attire inclusive, the ugly holiday sweater must reference every holiday, because if Christmas sweaters are exclusionary, then we must take the logic to its proper conclusion.

Which means hundreds of symbols. A menorah. A shamrock. A jack-o-lantern. A red, white and blue firework. Lincoln for Presidents Day. Cupid for Valentine’s Day. A Ramadan crescent moon. A cornucopia for Thanksgiving. A groundhog. A pride rainbow for June. A dove for Pentecost. A dragon for Chinese New Year. And more.

If we are going to require inclusion, then full inclusion is the only option. Who would you argue to exclude off of your ugly sweater? The sweater must represent all. Equally. At the same time. Without understanding the ecological impact on global warming, I propose that any ugly sweater that weighs less than 27 pounds cannot possibly reflect true equity.

A Non-Specific Power That May or May Not Be “Higher”

We are a not a nation of laws anymore, but a nation of social rules. And if the rules are that Christmas language must be neutralized, then we must do this consistently. We say ‘Happy Halloween’ and ‘Happy Thanksgiving’ freely as specific, independent holidays—immediately transitioning to the vague ‘Happy Holidays’ grouping—only to go back to celebrating a ‘Happy New Year’ all over again on December 26th.”

I believe Christmas forces a question, namely, “What exactly are we celebrating?” And the answer is not winter or sentiment. The historical center of this holiday is the birth of Christ. That is why the name Christmas makes modern people uncomfortable. Not because it excludes them, but because it reveals something true that they would rather not discuss. This is why we blur the name with Happy Holidays. Not to include more holidays. But to avoid one specific one.



And so the satire lands. If we are so offended that we cannot say “Merry Christmas,” then we must be equally offended by sweaters that say it visually. Ban the sweater. Remove it from society. Burn it in the public square. At least then we will be honest about what we are doing.

But here is the non-satirical conclusion.

Christmas has a name. And it matters. I do not say “Merry Christmas” to exclude anyone. I say it because I refuse to erase the meaning of the holiday. We have a holiday in December that celebrates the birth of Christ. And if we lose the name Christmas, we lose the right to publicly acknowledge the reason for it.

So yes, the ugly Christmas sweater is “exclusionary.” And I refuse to pretend that is a problem. I will wear mine proudly. And I will say Merry Christmas while I do it.

— Peter Demos is the author of three books, including *On the Duty of Christian Civil Disobedience* and the host of “Uncommon Sense in Current Times.” Demos uses his biblical perspective and insight gained from his own struggles to lead others to truth and authenticity in a broken world.

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A Smile Reborn: How Dr. Romero and Solace Implant Center Transformed Stacie Jensen’s Life

At 37 years old, Stacie Jensen has endured more hardship — and more grace — than most experience in a lifetime. A wife, a mother to three miracle children, and a woman of unshakable resilience, she has fought through her life story with determination, faith, and heart. Last year, that journey led her to Solace Implant Center & Oral Surgery, where a new smile became the beginning of a new life.

A Childhood Marked by Survival

Stacie’s fight began early. At just 13 months old, she accidentally ingested concentrated drain cleaner — a tragedy that left her with catastrophic internal injuries. Thirty-three abdominal surgeries followed. Two years spent hospitalized. Slim survival odds. Yet she lived.

But survival came with a cost. She developed Short Bowel Syndrome, requiring her entire life to be managed around cautious eating, nutrient absorption, and digestive fragility — challenges that would later impact her dental health as well.

Dental care was not prioritized in her childhood home. Embarrassment, stigma, and lack of access followed her into adulthood. Her first dental visit came only after an advanced abscess at age 15 — a painful and traumatic event that cemented lifelong fear.

Talent, Joy, and Dreams Interrupted
And yet she excelled.

Stacie found her voice — literally — through performing arts. She earned admission to Indiana University’s BFA Theatre Program, later training at the Moscow Art Theatre School in Russia. When she sang, she felt alive. When she performed, she was powerful.

But life shifted again.

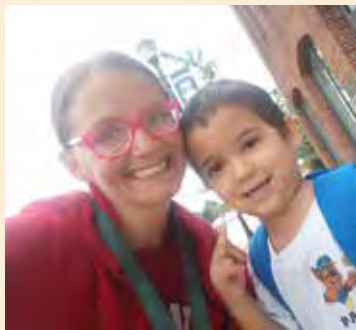
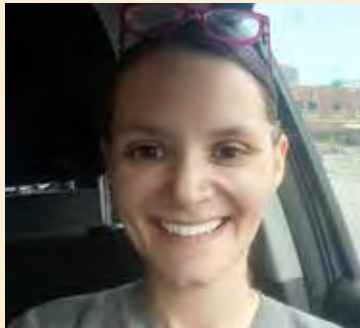
After the loss of her mother at age 19, Stacie continued pushing forward. She returned to the U.S., served her community through AmeriCorps, built a career, and prepared for marriage. Instead, she found herself blindsided — an eleven-year relationship ending abruptly, leaving her homeless, uninsured, and heartbroken. Her dental health, already fragile, declined rapidly.

Love, Loss, and Miracles

Then came a blessing: Dilan, the man who would become her husband. The two shared pain, built strength, and built a family. Their journey into parenthood was marked by infertility, traumatic loss, high-risk pregnancies, medical complexities, and the eventual diagnoses of their children’s special needs. Through every setback, Stacie continued forward — therapy appointments, medical management, grief, exhaustion, repetition — all while carrying a broken smile she feared others would judge.



BEFORE



She stopped singing.
She avoided mirrors.
She hid from cameras.
She hid from life.

Solace Restored More Than Teeth — They Restored Her

When Stacie walked through the doors of Solace Implant Center & Oral Surgery, she carried decades of weight — medically, emotionally, and spiritually. Dr. Romero and his team saw past her damaged teeth. They saw her. They saw the mother, the artist, the survivor, the woman who never stopped fighting.

With advanced implant treatment, compassion-based care, and world-class surgical skill, Solace rebuilt her smile from the foundation up. The transformation was physical, but the impact reached far beyond appearance.

She can eat safely.
She can speak clearly.
She can smile in family photos again.
She can look in the mirror and recognize herself.

Most beautifully — she can sing again.

Stacie said, “Solace didn’t just rebuild my smile. They gave me my voice, my confidence, and my life back.”

Smile for Christmas 2025 – Submissions Now Open

Every year, Solace Implant Center offers the gift of a restored smile to one deserving person through our Smile for Christmas Giveaway — because we believe confidence, dignity, and joy can be rebuilt. We believe God redeems stories. We believe smiles can be restored even after years of loss.

If you, or someone you love, has a story like Stacie’s — a story of courage, struggle, faith, and hope waiting to be renewed — we invite you to share it with us.

To Apply:

- Written story describing your journey
- Why a new smile would change your life
- Current photos of your smile + face
- Contact information

Email submissions to: smile4christmas@solacesmile.com

Because a smile is not just teeth. It is identity. It is confidence. It is hope reborn. And this Christmas, one more life will change — just like Stacie’s did.



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The Christmas Truce

In April of 1944, 12-year-old Fritz Vincken was living in the German city of Aachen when a bomb destroyed his home.

“My mother and I were sitting in the basement when the bomb went off and our home collapsed,” he said in a 1997 interview. “Suddenly we were homeless. I was twelve years old when the heavy bombing raid on the city of Aachen left my family homeless. My parent’s bakery had burned like a torch and together we were all evacuated out of the smoldering ruins to a village near the river Rhine, where we found shelter.”

Not long after, his father -a baker for the German Army- acquired a military transport truck and drove through the night to move his wife and son to a lonely hut atop a wooded mountain in the Belgian Ardennes Forest.

On a bitterly cold Christmas Eve, Fritz and his mother, Elisabeth, were eating a makeshift Christmas meal of rooster and potatoes when they heard a loud knock at the door.

Answering the door, Fritz’s mother suddenly stood face to face with three American GIs of the 8th Infantry Division, one badly injured.

“My mother knew the penalty for harboring the enemy, but when she looked into the young Americans eyes and saw that one was badly hurt, she opened the door and let them in,” Fritz recounted. “We did not speak English, but one of the Americans spoke French to my mother and she could converse with him in French. We learned that the stocky, dark haired fellow was Jim; his comrade, tall and slender, was Ralph. Herby was the wounded one. We added more potatoes to our dinner and made extra places at the table.”

Suddenly, a tense situation became potentially deadly as the family heard a second knock at the door.

Fritz held his breath, fearing that the second wave of guests were his own countrymen. Upon answering the door, his fears were confirmed- there were four German soldiers at the door.

Taking the initiative, Elisabeth stood firm and spoke to the German soldiers. As it turned out, they were lost and were seeking shelter from the sub-zero temperatures after days of wandering. She agreed to let them in, but under two conditions: accept her American guests and leave their weapons outside.

Agreeing to her terms, both the American and German soldiers were temporarily disarmed and permitted to stay in the shack.

The icy demeanors inside the cabin began to thaw when one Wehrmacht soldier -a medical student before the war- began to patch up Herby’s wounds.



Sitting down for dinner, Elisabeth said a prayer, asking God for one night of peace and that all those seated at the table would survive the war. By the end of the prayer, all the soldiers were quite emotional.

From then on out, things were different. For one night, there was no war. Only seven men and a family in a cabin, trying to stay warm, eat a hot meal and get some sleep.

By the time morning rolled around, the soldiers were re-issued their weapons, but not a shot was fired. The Germans helped created a makeshift stretcher for Herby, handed a compass to the Americans and gave them directions to get back to their lines.

Knowing they couldn’t stay, Elisabeth and Fritz went back to the German lines with their fellow Germans, eventually reuniting with Fritz’s father.

When asked what kept him alive, Fritz gave full credit to his mother.

“The inner strength of a single woman, who, by her wits and intuition, prevented potential bloodshed, taught me the practical meaning of the words: ‘Good will Toward Mankind,’” he said.

“Now and then, on a clear tropical winter night, I look at the skies for bright Sirius and we always seem to greet each other like old friends. Then, unfailingly, I remember mother and those seven young soldiers, who met as enemies and parted as friends, right in the middle of the Battle of the Bulge.”

Fritz eventually took his story to Unsolved Mysteries, a syndicated show that ran from 1987-2008. Thanks to assistance from the show, Fritz was eventually reunited with Ralph Blank, who was a Sergeant at the time of their first encounter. In 1996, the two were reunited at Blank’s retirement home in Maryland, one day after Blank’s 50th wedding anniversary.

“When he told me, ‘Your mother saved my life,’ it was the high point of my life,” Vincken said at the time. “Now, I can die in peace. My mother’s courage won’t be forgotten, and it shows what goodwill will do.”

— *Larry L. Crain, Crain Law Group, PLLC, www.crainlaw.legal*



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SPECIAL FEATURE

Family Friendly Stories with a Message of Faith: Five Peaks Animation

In a world with competing voices, it can be difficult to find family friendly videos to watch with the whole family. Five Peaks Animation saw a need for clean entertainment and created several video series for families including Milo’s Currents.

Meet Milo. Milo the Manatee is a smooth-voiced crooner whose songs lift hearts with hope, grace, and faith thirty feet beneath Jupiter Inlet at the Manatee Blues Club. Co-Founder and Managing Partner of Studio Central and Five Peaks Animation, Monte Young, explains that Milo’s Currents is the most recent project his team has released. How did they come up with the name of the series and character? “Milo the Manatee just kind of flowed together. It had a warm, friendly ring that felt perfect for the kind of show I wanted to make,” Young explains, adding, “Currents came from a deeper place. That part was inspired by faith and the idea that, like the ocean, life moves in unseen ways. Sometimes the current is calm, sometimes it’s rough, but it’s always carrying us somewhere with purpose.” A new episode in Milo’s Currents is released every week, and each video is filled with joy, warmth, wit, and spiritual truths when Milo and his friends share spiritual boosts during their underwater jam sessions. “The goal with Milo is simple. We want people to see it, smile, and feel a little lift from it. It’s really about showing that faith can make you laugh just as much as it makes you think,” Young says.



Meet Milo the Manatee and friends by watching Milo’s Currents on YouTube @Milo’s Currents.



Other series released by Five Peaks Animation include: BookEnds, Inspector Specs, and EmergenSea. These animated adventures are both entertaining and educational. Young explains that the team is also working on a show for adults. Cosmic Signature “centers on a scientist who discovers a message coded into his DNA that reads, “Find the others and spread the light,” he shares, adding, “It explores where faith meets science and shows how the two aren’t as opposed as many people are led to believe.”

Watch & Learn More. You can watch Milo’s Currents episodes for free on YouTube @Milo’s Currents. You can learn more about this special series at www.milos-currents.com. To stay up to date on all of the series from Five Peak Animations, visit www.fivepeaksanimation.com. ➦



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Nashville’s Urban Core: A Strategic Investment Class for Second-Home Buyers and Long-Term Wealth Builders

Nashville has entered a period of sustained growth marked by increasing population, national visibility, and a notable shift in residential demand. For many, this city is a top leisure and cultural destination. For investors, however, it represents something more: a strong opportunity to build equity in a market that continues to appreciate.

Over the past decade, Nashville’s real estate landscape has expanded dramatically. Unlike sprawling metro areas that stretch outward, Nashville is beginning to rise upward. This pivot toward vertical development is shaping a new class of investment opportunity—particularly for buyers seeking a second home, pied-à-terre, or long-term wealth asset in the urban core.

For the investor who looks ahead rather than behind, this is worth examination.

Why the Urban Core Matters for Wealth Growth

Strong cities tell their story through the skyline. Nashville’s continued growth in hospitality, corporate relocation, tourism, and entertainment is generating sustained demand for centrally located housing. When interest increases while land availability remains fixed, value tends to rise over time.

Urban-core investments are seeing interest because they offer:

- Limited land supply and vertical scarcity
- Walkability to dining, sports, and entertainment
- A lock-and-leave second home without maintenance requirements
- Strong long-term appreciation potential due to ongoing migration

A second home downtown serves practical use today, while positioning the buyer for tomorrow’s value.

Two Developments to Watch: PRIME and PARAMOUNT

Within the downtown luxury market, two projects are drawing particular attention among investors and high-net-worth second-home buyers.

PRIME — Present Opportunity

PRIME on Church Street is fully active, visible, and already changing the skyline. For buyers who want immediate acquisition rather than pre-development entry, PRIME represents a tangible opportunity to secure placement in the market now rather than later.

The building appeals to those who want:

- A second home within walking distance to Nashville’s cultural core
- A modern, maintenance-free residence with security and amenities
- A long-horizon appreciation asset in a limited-inventory zone

This is a building you can step into today—an important factor for individuals who prefer to see, feel, and evaluate an investment firsthand before purchasing.

PARAMOUNT — A Forward-Looking Position

PARAMOUNT is still in development, but early interest is already strong. Buyers who favor entering ahead of market maturity often gravitate to projects like this due to the potential for value escalation as construction progresses and demand intensifies.

Eva Angelina Romero

Host of The American Dream: Selling Nashville
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With developer Tony Giarratana’s history shaping downtown Nashville’s skyline, PARAMOUNT is positioned to become one of the city’s future architectural anchors. Early-stage entry can offer long-term advantages as completion approaches and inventory tightens.

Together, PRIME and PARAMOUNT represent Nashville’s present and future. One stands ready for immediate acquisition; the other invites strategic early participation.

What Investors Should Consider Before Purchasing

Second-home buyers and investors evaluating the urban core should consider the following:

1. Current supply relative to projected demand over the next decade
2. Walkability and amenity access, which impact generational desirability
3. Long-term equity potential versus short-term use value
4. The pace of Nashville’s ongoing population and tourism expansion

The strongest returns are often realized not by following the market at its peak, but by entering during its climb. Nashville remains in that upward movement.

A Window of Opportunity

Nashville’s growth trajectory shows no signs of slowing, and vertical development will continue to define the next chapter of residential investment in the city. Those who secure placement in the urban core now may benefit most from the compounding value that occurs when demand meets scarcity.

PRIME offers a foothold in the present.

PARAMOUNT offers a pathway to what Nashville is becoming.

Both merit serious consideration from buyers seeking long-term value, second-home usage, and an investment that matures over time.

For those evaluating Nashville not just as a destination, but as a strategic asset, the moment to lean in is now.

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If you don't do mail, then hop on your computer beginning October 1st; you will be able to log on to Medicare.gov and check out your plan there. You may also see your plans info in the 2026 Medicare&You that will be mailed to you. It's available on their website but does not have local information on plans/carriers.

The open enrollment signing period is October 15th through December 7th. If you decide to make any changes, your new plan will start January 1, 2026. If you don't make any changes then your current plan will roll into 2026, and you don't have to do anything!

Suggestion – call your Medicare Rep and discuss next year's plan with him or her! Every year we must get recertified with Medicare and the Carriers to be able to offer suggestions as to what would be the best route for you in 2026. We are blessed to have such a great healthcare system in middle TN and that attracts many companies that want to do business here. Remember this is about your healthcare coverage for next year. It's worth taking a look!

And this time next year – we get to do it all over again!

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Megan Alexander:

Her New Book and Movie

about the *True Meaning of Christmas*

For actress, book author, and tv personality Megan Alexander, the act of creating quality entertainment is rooted in a desire to represent a Christ-centered culture.

Alexander, who moved to the Nashville area 12 years ago and today lives in Franklin, stars in the new faith-based movie “The Best Thing about Christmas” and is the author of the new book *The True Gifts of Christmas*. Both projects are illustrative of how she’s trying to provide Christian content in today’s culture. “You can only complain about entertainment and culture for so long until you have to do something to combat it,” Alexander said. “I want to change culture for the better and, as a mother of three, I want to watch quality material with them.”

The Best Thing About Christmas

In “The Best Thing about Christmas,” which premieres on Dec. 20 on the UPtv network and then streams on the UP Faith and Family service, Alexander plays a wife and mother named Kara Hunt who faces tragedy and then finds hope during the Christmas season. When her husband Dylan (played by the film’s writer and director Derek Hinckley) signs a country record deal and moves to Nashville, the family looks forward to their dreams finally coming true alongside their oldest daughter Molly who also signs in the band. “When tragedy happens, the family has to decide what they’re made of,” Alexander said. “It’s about the miracle of Christmas, but it’s also an intense movie with great acting. It’s about faith and family and how God is there for you.”

Alexander responded to a casting call for the movie a little over a year ago and, after getting the part, decided she wanted to be further involved. She became a producer on the movie and used many of her connections in the Nashville entertainment community to bring other performers like country

artist Mark Wills and bluegrass musician Rhonda Vincent onto the project. “I really wanted to get behind it with my connections in the industry. I knew I could support it financially and also in promoting it in many ways,” she said.

She also got to use her musical gifts in the movie—which features 16 original songs, two of which Alexander wrote. While she’s acted for most of her life and has taken acting classes in Austin, New York City and Nashville, this was her first opportunity to sing on screen. “Growing up I sang in the church choir and in high school, so it had been a minute since I’d done it, but I was excited about it,” she said. “I wrote ‘In His Dreams,’ which is my solo in the movie and ‘The Baby’s Lullaby.’ Most of the other songs in the movie were written by Derek.”

The movie had its premiere in early November in Franklin, and she was excited to see the response from audiences. The cast and crew received a standing ovation at the premiere, and Christians told her how refreshing the film’s message is. “People like that this is a story about a ‘real’ family. It’s a couple that’s been married for 18 years and who have four children,” she said. “It represents Christian families, and gives an inspiring message about realistic problems and how God can be there with you through it all.”

Reflecting Christ Throughout her Career

Alexander has worked in the entertainment industry for most of her career and was a national host for CBS Television for almost two decades, seen regularly on “Inside Edition” and “Thursday Night Football.” She executive produced the holiday travel show, “Small Town Christmas,” which appeared on the Fox Business Network and UPtv. Her book, *Faith in the Spotlight*, discussed how she stayed true to her Christian faith while thriving in the industry.

That desire to stay true to her faith is driven by her Christian background and her current family life. She and her husband, Brian (a real estate developer) are the parents of three children aged 14, 10 and 6. “Life is full, with lots of activities,” she said of her family life. “We have to juggle everything, and be there for our kids.”





Megan Alexander and her family.

Alexander said her family is forefront in her mind when considering projects. “In my 20 years in the industry, I was offered parts on popular shows but I wouldn’t want my kids to watch them,” she said. “Being a mother makes you focus on what you’re putting out into the world.”

Alexander said that Christians are called to be “salt and life” in the world—reflecting God’s heart, not the world’s culture. That’s something, she said, that you can teach your children. “We have conversations with the kids and challenge them to consider who they represent,” she said. “And for us, we ask ourselves who we’re promoting to the world. Every job can be a ministry, and we can do our part.”

She’s excited and “super grateful” to be able to provide some of the family-friendly options in entertainment that Christians need today. She added that she’s always available partner with other entertainers and creative people to spread that good news. “I’m always looking to partner with like-minded people,” she said. “I want to work with other Christians in quality projects, And I want to be able to help and mentor young filmmakers as well.”

A Christmastime Witness

Alexander’s children inspired her other newest project—a coffee table book titled *The True Gifts of Christmas: Unwrapping the Meaning Behind our Most Treasured Traditions*. The book, which was published by Loyola Press and just came out this Fall, was influenced by her family’s Christmas traditions and her own children’s questions during the holiday season.

“Like so many mothers, I dread the question, ‘Is there really a Santa Claus?’” she said. “When my 10-year-old was starting to ask, I wanted to have a better answer.” That question led to her research into the real Saint Nicholas, who she found to be an inspiring example of Christian love, charity, and giving.

“I pitched the idea, and they said, ‘what if we research all the other traditions and find the deep Christian stories?’ It goes all the way to the 25th of the month and breaks down Advent calendars, the Christmas tree, poinsettias, candy canes, and more” Alexander said. “It bridges the gap between the Christian and secular sides. There’s so much deep spiritual meaning behind even our secular Christmas traditions. She hopes that the book will inspire others to continue on with a family tradition—or to start a brand new one.

Along with her new book, “The Best Thing About Christmas” movie, and a prior children’s book titled *The Magic of A Small Town Christmas*, Alexander is adamant that the holidays can be filled with plenty of opportunities for Christian families to represent their faith well. “We are called to represent Christ in everything we do,” she said. “We can affect culture for the better, at all times.”

To learn more about Megan Alexander:

Visit her website,
www.meganalexander.com

Visit the film website,
www.thebestthingaboutchristmasmovie.com

Find her new book,
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PARENTING POINTS

Sibling Rivalry: "But That's Not Fair!" Why Equal Isn't Always Right

After dinner, your four-year-old daughter runs over to you with tears streaming down her face and yells, "Mommy, it's not fair! Why did Jason get a larger piece of cake than I did? Meanwhile, your six-year-old son is happily munching away, completely oblivious to the cake scandal.

Sound familiar? If you've got more than one kid, you've probably lived through countless versions of this scene. Here's what I've learned after years of parenting: Fair doesn't mean equal. We need to help our children understand this truth at an early age. It's a game-changer because, after all, life isn't fair.

This is how kids think: they count, measure, and compare everything. It seems logical that love should be divided equally like slices of cake. If it's not fair, this can cause sibling rivalry, which can plant the seed of jealousy in their hearts.

How does God do "Fair"?

Think about Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). Some worked all day, others just one hour, but everyone got paid the same. The all-day workers were furious! "That's not fair!" Sounds like jealousy to me. But the vineyard owner said something powerful: "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" God gives us what we need, not necessarily what others get. He looks at our hearts, circumstances, and unique needs, then responds accordingly. When we parent like God does, we're teaching our kids something beautiful about His character.

Real-Life "Unfair" Moments (and How to Handle Them)

• The Homework Helper Dilemma

Your 4th grader needs 45 minutes of help with math every night. Your 6th grader finishes homework independently. Guess who complains? "Why does Jake get all your attention?"

Try this: "Sarah, I'm so proud that you can do homework on your own! Jake needs extra help with math right now, just like you needed extra help learning to ride your bike. When you need me, I'll be there too."

• The Bedtime Battle

Your teenager stays up until 10 PM. Your eight-year-old's bedtime is 8:30 PM. Cue the protests: "Why can't I stay up as late as Jessica?"

Try this: "Your body is still growing and needs more sleep than Jessica's. Right now, I'm giving you exactly what your body needs to be healthy and strong."

The Magic Words That Change Everything

Instead of scrambling to make everything perfectly equal, try these conversation starters:

- "I'm not trying to make things equal. I'm trying to give each of you what you need."
- "Tell me why that feels unfair to you."
- "Can you trust that I love you both, even when things look different?"



Use words of wisdom. Children can understand more than we give them credit for. When 7-year-old Amy needed glasses, her 5-year-old brother Brian was jealous. "I want glasses too! Why does Amy get something special, and I don't?"

Instead of buying glasses to keep things "equal," Brian, you need to understand that Amy's eyes need help to see clearly. Your eyes work perfectly! God made Amy's body to need glasses and your body to have strong eyes. God provides us with what we need. Through reasoning, Brian understood that his sister needed the glasses. It wasn't a matter of fairness. It was a matter of necessity.

A Peaceful Outcome

When we teach our kids that fair doesn't mean equal, something wonderful happens:

They stop competing for our love. Instead of fighting for identical treatment, they start trusting that we see their unique needs.

They develop empathy. They begin noticing when others need extra help or grace, just like they sometimes do.

They understand God better. They see that God's love isn't measured in equal portions but in perfect provision for each person's needs.

Let's practice

This week, when you hear "That's not fair!" try this approach:

- **Pause.** Don't immediately defend your decision or rush to even things out. Ask them why they think it isn't fair. This helps them to become critical thinkers.
- **Explain your heart.** "I gave Tommy extra help because he was struggling. You're doing great!"
- **Affirm their uniqueness.** "God made you so capable and independent!" What a Blessing!

God gave you wonderfully different children, each with their own personality, strengths, and needs. What a blessing! You get to discover what makes each one unique and love them in the way they need most. That's the joy of parenting. Just like God sees each of us with perfect love and provides exactly what we need, we can parent our children the same way. Some days that means extra hugs for the sensitive one, firmer boundaries for the strong-willed one, or more patience for the one who's struggling, helping them to see their individuality as something to praise and not become the cause of sibling conflict. It's the kind of love that changes hearts and builds strong families.

— Lee Ann Mancini is the author of *Raising Kids to Follow Christ: Instilling a Lifelong Trust in God*, founder of *Raising Christian Kids*, adjunct professor at *South Florida Bible College & Theological Seminary*, and executive producer of the animated series *Sea Kids* on *Right Now Media*, *Pure Flix*, *Answers.tv*, *Minno*, and *Yippee*.

Lee Ann is the mother of two adult children and lives with her husband in South Florida, where she passionately pursues her calling to help parents raise lifelong Christ-followers.



Supporting Local Non-Profits

Swanson Companies has been blessed to have the opportunity to sponsor local non-profit organizations for several years. We find it important to help in our community in this way because of fundamental teachings in the Bible.

• **God's Grace and Love:** John 3:16 says "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life". We are to be like Christ, he died for our sins, showing grace and love, so we should show grace and love by giving, helping, serving others.

• **Spiritual Discipline:** 2 Corinthians 9:7, states "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver". This means that we should not feel obligated to give but should give from a cheerful heart. Romans 12:3-8 tells us not to think of ourselves more than others, but that we all come together to form the body of Christ and each one of us has a spiritual gift that the body of Christ needs to be complete. So, to quote verses 6- 8, "We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give



generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully."

• **Act of Love:** In Matthew 25:35-40, Jesus tells us that what we do for others, we do for him. Every time we give, every time we feed someone that's hungry, when we look after others who are sick, we are showing love for others which in turns shows love for Christ. Verse 40 says, "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

• **Act of Worship:** Giving of any form (financially, your time, resources, etc.) shows compassion and trust in God's provisions which demonstrates one's faith. Hebrews 13:16 says, "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God". Proverbs 3:9 states, "Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce".

As fellow members of the body of Christ, we would like to encourage you, that if you are not yet giving to your home church or local non-profits, that you would consider praying about it and doing whatever the Lord leads you to do. Giving back and being apart in our community in this special way has been a true benefit not only as a company, but personally and spiritually in our lives.

PARENT WITH PURPOSE

Christmas Books for Kids

Giving the gift of a book takes a thoughtful approach. You want to give a book that will interest the recipient. Knowing your child's habits and hobbies will go a long way in picking the just-right book. The same is true for an adult. Below are a few ideas to guide you in your Christmas gift selections.



Just Enough Room for Christmas by Robin Currie

In a tiny barn in Bethlehem, Old Hannah the cow lives alone until the cold wind drives other animals to seek shelter. One by one, they

squeeze in. But surprise guests arrive, and the baby makes an unfamiliar sound. This delightful picture book shows that there is just enough room for the newborn King in our hearts and homes.



All Creation Waits: An Advent Mystery of New Beginnings by Gayle Boss

The picture book welcomes the Advent season, all centered around the theme of "The dark is not an end. It's a door. It's the way a new beginning comes."

Meant to be read one day at a time, the book intro-

duces twenty-four animals and illustrates how they uniquely survive the dark, wintry season. Christmas Day presents the birth of Jesus and ushers in the reason for the waiting. This lovely, poetic book will kick off your next Advent season in a creative and profound way.



Children's Advent Stories for Bedtime by David and Julie Lavender

This may be an Advent story-book, but the authors skillfully guide children through God's grand story — from the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve's original sin to Jesus' death and resurrection to His second coming. Each story connects the dots to the reason behind Jesus' birth. The husband-and-wife team support their stories with scripture and solid research, keeping the text kid-friendly (not an easy task) while maintaining the focus on God's plan for Jesus' birth.



One Night in Bethlehem by Jill Roman Lord

This board book features a young child imagining what it might have been like to be present at Jesus' birth. If he

had been a lamb, he would have kept Christ warm. If he had been an angel, he would have announced Jesus' birth. And if he had been a shining star, he would have eagerly led the way to the newborn babe. Charmingly illustrated, this book is a great way to introduce children to the incredible story of Christmas.



Wild Faith by Valerie Ellis Although it's not a Christmas book, this devotional makes a wonderful gift. The author features unique animals like a glass frog (who knew?), as well as more familiar ones like dogs and lions. Each devotion includes a "Make it Stick" and a "Live it Out" challenge.

Give the gift of a book this Christmas.

— Sally Cressman is the author of "The Dance of Easter." Sign up for her email list to receive "Holiday Conversation Starters." She'd also love to connect on Instagram.

ALL CHRISTMAS

THANKSGIVING
TO CHRISTMAS



88.7

Santa by Calling: A Ministry in Red

I wasn't supposed to be Santa. I was a school photographer—just filling in when the scheduled Santa didn't show up. I put on the beard, told my other photographer she'd have to take all the pictures, and stepped into the role. It was meant to be temporary. But God had other plans.

The next year, I grew my beard and used theatrical makeup to color the red white. Then something remarkable happened—around age 40, my hair and beard turned white naturally. I often tell others, "God saw I was doing good, and He helped me by turning my hair white." Now, with all-natural white hair, I'm recognized as Santa all year long.

For the first few years, it was just a role—something to bring a little joy to the children in school. Then a friend asked me to join him at the mall, where four of us rotated shifts around our full-time jobs. That's when the ministry began to take shape.

Groomed for Something Greater

The mall's marketing director, was instrumental in encouraging me and the others. I didn't realize it—but God was using her to groom me for a lifelong ministry in the red suit.

One day, Santa Tommy was running late. I was visiting with a family when the parents began talking to me as if they knew me. I was subtle—careful not to break the illusion for the children on my knee—but I had no idea who they were. As they left, they saw Tommy in his street clothes. They looked back at me, confused. Later, Tommy told me they were his neighbors—they thought they'd been talking to him the whole time.

That moment stuck with me. I began to realize this wasn't just a role. It was a ministry. Even when they didn't know my name, they saw something familiar—something comforting. That's when I knew God was working through the suit.

Ministry in the Margins

Over the years, I've seen how God uses Santa to reach places few others can. There are moments I'll never forget—each one a reminder that ministry often begins in the margins.

A first-grade girl at a school wouldn't come near me. Something—maybe the Holy Spirit—prompted me to ask the teacher about her. The teacher was blunt: "She's a loner. Doesn't talk much. Doesn't have friends." When I asked about her family, she said, "I don't know. That's not my job."

After the photo session, I went to the principal—a man I knew loved the children. I didn't know the girl's name but with my description, he said he knew who I meant. Months later, he told me the child had been removed from an abusive home and placed in foster care. That teacher didn't return the next year. "I don't want anyone in my school who has so little concern for the well-being of the students," he said.

Another time, I met a 13-year-old girl at the mall who shared something that needed investigation. She was with a parent, so I had to be cautious. I didn't

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18



have a name, but I reported what I could. Authorities were able to identify her, and she too was placed in foster care.

Moments That Matter

One day, as I was walking through the mall to my post, I met a gentleman and asked, "What's going on?" He teared up and said, "Santa, I have cancer." I asked him to step aside with me, and we talked and prayed. After Christmas, he called to say his faith had been restored through that encounter. His cancer was gone, but what stayed with him was this: "Whether I die today or many years later, I know God is with me now."

Another time, I met a family of children who had just lost their granddad—crushed while working under a car. I asked them to tell me about Papa. We laughed and cried together, ending with a prayer and a gift: each child received one of the small crosses I carry in my pouch.

Those crosses have become part of the ministry. Years ago, a gentleman began making small wooden crosses and giving them to me each season. After he passed away, another friend connected me with a metalworker who now sends me small aluminum crosses—refusing payment, even for shipping. "It's for your ministry," he said.

Some don't see the significance. But many look for the Santa with the cross. And many, many more stories could be told.

Closing Reflection

I've laughed, I've prayed, and I've cried with children and parents. What started as a costume became a calling. What began as a role became a ministry. God can use anything—a beard, a sleigh, a moment at the mall—to plant seeds of hope. I didn't choose this path. But I'm thankful He did. "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." —Matthew 5:16

How has God used an unlikely role in your life to bless others—or reveal His purpose?

A Call to Shine

This Christmas, I invite you to consider your own calling—not just your career, but your Kingdom role. Whether you wear a uniform, an apron, a name tag, or a red suit trimmed in white, you carry the presence of Christ into places pastors may never go. The Gospel doesn't wait for a pulpit—it walks into break rooms, classrooms, checkout lines, and hospital rooms. You don't have to be a preacher to proclaim hope. You just need to show up, listen well, and love deeply. You never know who's waiting for light to show up in your lane. The world is aching for light. And if you belong to Christ, you carry it with you.

— Durward Blanks is a Christian Life & Relationship Coach, legacy-minded travel consultant, and professional Santa Claus. With over 40 years of ministry through storytelling, seasonal service, and spiritual encouragement, he blends lived experience with biblical insight to inspire others.



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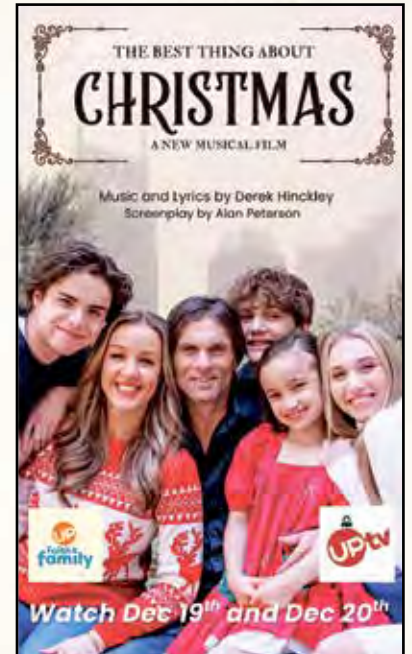
Megan Alexander

**produced and stars in a
beautiful holiday movie called**

The Best Thing About Christmas

Megan plays Kara Hunt, Mom of four and married to singer-songwriter Dylan Hunt (played by Derek Hinckley). When Dylan finally gets his big break - a record deal, the family moves to Nashville to pursue his dream but life takes a tragic turn. They must lean on their faith to make it through, and learn the true meaning of Christmas.

The movie is filled with original music all written by Derek Hinckley, and Megan penned a few songs, too. It features a talented cast including newcomers Cheyenne Grace, Evelyn Kite, Sam Waugh and Graham Sexton. Also featuring cameos by country superstars Rhonda Vincent and Mark Wills. Megan says "this is a special movie that will touch hearts this Christmas season. You'll laugh, cry and rejoice alongside the Hunt family, and hopefully, warmly feel that Christmas magic for yourself".



**Watch THE BEST THING ABOUT CHRISTMAS
streaming Dec 19th on Up Faith and Family
and on the cable channel UPTV starting Dec 20th.**



**Megan Alexander's new
book, THE TRUE GIFTS OF
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www.MeganAlexander.com



Unwrapping Grace: How Flexibility Reveals Christ in the Holidays

The holiday season arrives each year wrapped in expectations—traditions to uphold, gatherings to plan, meals to prepare, and memories to recreate. Yet life rarely stays the same from one year to the next.

Children grow; loved ones move, and circumstances shift in ways we don't always expect. Through these changes, I've learned that flexibility is not only helpful for enjoying the holidays—it's a spiritual posture that keeps our hearts centered on Christ.

Flexibility helps us hold onto what matters most: our faith in Jesus, our connection with others, and the gratitude that flows from knowing God's goodness. When we loosen our grip on how everything must go, we free our hands to receive what God is doing right now. As a recovering "control freak," I didn't learn this easily. But after hearing many of my Bridges guests share how flexibility helped them find joy in the holidays, I began to see that letting go can draw us closer to Christ.

The true heart of Christmas remains unchanged

When we approach Christmas with rigidity, we may unintentionally create stress or disappointment. Trying to recreate past celebrations can leave us disheartened when things shift. But when we release the pressure of perfection, our hearts are more open to the presence of Jesus—the One who brings peace that isn't dependent on circumstances. Maybe this year's dinner is store-bought, or the kids split time between two households. Perhaps you're celebrating early to accommodate travel. These changes may feel unfamiliar, but they don't rob the season of its meaning. The true heart of Christmas remains unchanged: Christ has come.

Flexibility also becomes a way of loving others as Christ loved us. It recognizes that everyone around us carries their own responsibilities, challenges, and hopes. When we adjust a tradition, change a plan, or try something new, we communicate grace. We say, in essence, "You matter more than my expectations." That kind of love reflects Jesus—gentle, understanding, oth-

ers-centered—and those gestures often become the memories that linger the longest. And if we think about it, many of our most cherished holiday memories didn't unfold perfectly. They were shaped in the moments when life forced us to improvise: the year dinner burned, and everyone spread a picnic blanket on the living-room floor, the night the power went out, and the family played games by candlelight, or the Christmas when illness or distance left everyone connecting through video calls—and laughing more than expected. Those imperfect moments often become sacred ones, reminding us that God's joy isn't fragile.

He Invites Us to Welcome New Expressions of Grace

Most importantly, flexibility helps us honor how God shapes the meaning of the holidays throughout our lives. What once felt magical in childhood may, in adulthood, become a season of gratitude for time with aging parents, or a season of wonder as we see Christmas through our children's eyes. As our lives change, Christ remains the same—and He invites us to welcome new expressions of His grace. Ultimately, the holidays are about celebrating the birth of Jesus—the Savior who stepped into our world with humility, hope, and redeeming love. Everything else is secondary. When we choose flexibility, we make room for Christ to lead our hearts, our homes, and our celebrations. And in doing so, we keep the true meaning of Christmas alive.

Today's Secret from the Studio: "Blessed are the flexible, for they shall NOT break—especially when their hope is anchored in Christ."

— Monica Schmelter is the host of Bridges. You can watch Bridges on Christian Television Network, ROKU, and on demand at bridgeswithmonica.com. When Monica isn't in the studio – she enjoys spending time with family.



ENCOURAGING WORD

God is Good All the Time (Part Two)

It is understandable how we have allowed Religion to explain away God's goodness and attribute "bad" things to God. As mentioned last month, we are in a battle. Satan is coming for our souls and in the meantime, he will, "steal, kill, and destroy" us any way he is allowed.

If we do not realize we are in a battle, we will lose every time. We become passive even though God has equipped us to fight. We take everything Satan throws at us instead of resisting. The Bible clearly tells us that, "the weapons of our warfare are not carnal" meaning that spiritual battles are not won with physical or worldly methods, but with spiritual power given by God. This is referred to as "warfare."

"Carnal" is our human, flesh, or worldly body, yet we fight and win the battle in our spirit. So how are we to fight back? First, we must change the way we think and acknowledge what Christ has already

done for us. The Bible refers to this as "renewing our minds." We are transformed by renewing our mind." (Romans 12:2).

As we renew our mind, we acknowledge what Christ has already done for us and how He has equipped us. Philemon 1:6 (KJV) "That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus." This is when we will begin to experience victory. We have the power to "resist the devil and he will flee from us" – we do not have to embrace what he throws at us. (James 4:7).

Finally, another part of our mindset that needs renewing is the belief that because God is Sovereign, nothing can happen on this side of heaven that He doesn't allow. Again, a lie Satan has weaved. God is Sovereign; however, He has given us dominion



over the earth. God will allow what WE ALLOW.

The dictionary states that sovereign means, "a supreme ruler" – which God is. As ruler, God established the earth and put man in authority, but because Adam

forfeited his birthright, God sent His Son, Jesus to restore what was lost and to redeem us back. (Galatians 4:1-7). God will not overpower our will.

This season, as we celebrate the birth of Christ and all that He has done for us, take back what the enemy has stolen from you! Change your way of thinking and utilize the tools Jesus has equipped you with! Begin to experience the goodness of God – all the time!

— Rhonda L. Smart, rhondalsmart@gmail.com



Trevecca Climbs in National, State Rankings on Wall Street Journal’s 2026 Best Colleges List

Trevecca Nazarene University has again earned elite classifications at the local, state and national levels, including the distinction of Middle Tennessee’s top Christian university, based on its ranking in the Wall Street Journal’s Best Colleges in the U.S. list published in late September.

Ranked second only to Vanderbilt among colleges and universities in Middle Tennessee, Trevecca earned a national ranking of 348, making it the highest-ranked Nazarene school in the U.S. and fourth among all schools in Tennessee.

“This ranking is an indicator of our growing success in preparing students for service and leadership,” Trevecca Provost Dr. Tom Middendorf said. “Difference-making factors like holistic student development and a supportive campus community can be difficult to measure, but alongside great value, we believe these intangibles help us compare favorably with other institutions even at the national level.”

According to the rankings, Trevecca is also the fourth-highest-rated institution in Tennessee. A total of 16 Tennessee schools were among the 584 colleges and universities on the Wall Street Journal’s Best Colleges list. Nationally, Trevecca is also ranked among the top 10 among the member schools of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU).



The rankings are presented by The Wall Street Journal (WSJ), College Pulse and Statista, the leading statistics portal and industry ranking provider.

The Best Colleges in the U.S. ranking evaluates undergraduate institutions based on the value they provide to their students. This value is assessed using multiple factors: the quality of the learning environment, the number of years required to pay off the net price, degree completion rates, the likelihood of higher salaries post-graduation and diversity of college environment.

The results are based on official data from the U.S. Department of Education and the Census Bureau, supplemented by a nationwide survey of undergraduate students and recent alumni who graduated within the past five years.

Statista publishes hundreds of worldwide industry rankings and company listings with high-profile media partners. This research and analysis service is based on the success of statista.com, the leading data and business intelligence portal that provides statistics, relevant business data, and various market and consumer studies and surveys.

— Brian Bennett, Communications Director,
Office of Marketing and Communications, www.trevecca.edu

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Santa is Real, Truth or Myth

The question about Santa is really a question about meaning: is he a historical figure, a cultural myth, a vessel for truth, or a spark alive inside each of us? Each answer carries its own kind of life. When we unpack these options, we should not find contradictions but a layered invitation, to a spirit filled with wonder, of selfless giving, and to becoming the very person that once brought us tremendous joy.

At the surface, the person we call Santa Claus traces back to a fourth century Catholic bishop named Nicholas, famous for secret generosity toward the poor. That historical figure reminds us that human kindness has long been the seed of this seasonal character. Knowing the biography behind the legend can deepen our gratitude: the gestures of one life multiplied into centuries of giving.

As a myth, Santa is a cultural shorthand for something the heart recognizes without needing proof. Myths that encode values such as joy, abundance, generosity, and the reversal of ordinary expectations (the small giving to the great). These myths thrive because they tell a truth larger than facts: that the world can be kinder than we expect and that miracles sometimes come in wrapped, unsecured, and unexpected packages.



Peeling the layers further, Santa carries moral truth. The child's hope for a gift is not just about toys; it is about being seen, being loved, and receiving undeserved grace. We tie this to the birth of Jesus for this very reason. Santa teaches the truth that generosity is restorative and selfless: reconnecting us to one another and to our better selves. When we celebrate and embody Santa, we deliver charitable miracles; the capacity to act as selflessly as Jesus did, when He chose to die on a cross all of humanity, in small ways, making that love felt in modern times.

The most profound answer to the opening question is that Santa “lives in you.” This is not magical thinking but a call to an identity: to actually make changes to ourselves. To become the anonymous giver, the midnight deliverer of comfort, the person whose small acts of kindness shift someone's winter toward spring. When parents sacrifice sleep so a child will smile; when strangers pay for a meal, without thought of payback; when a neighbor shovels a driveway without being asked, Santa is alive in those moments. The transformation is real, practical, and spiritual. What we think, we believe, and is ultimately, what we become.

Let Santa Live in You

- Choose anonymous generosity: small, unwanted

praise; quiet gifts; unseen acts of service.

- Practice imaginative abundance: give time, presence, and attention as freely as money.
- Tell the Christmas story with integrity: preserve wonder for children, and model how the tale becomes a living virtue.
- Make a sacred ritual a family tradition: a yearly deed that stretches your compassion and trains your heart toward delight in others.

Whether you call him history, myth, or truth, the figure of Santa asks one plain question of each of us; “Will you be the answer to someone's hope?” That is the highest test of any story's worth. When a legend stirs you into a new selfless person, it has fulfilled its deepest purpose. Let the season move you from believing in Santa to becoming him, not as a person in a costume or playing a role, but as a settled habit of your heart. In that way, the miracle of Christmas lives not in a sleigh but in every cross observed, every hand extended, every light kept burning, and every life made warmer by quiet generosity.

— Anthony “Tony” Boquet, *Certified Professional Business Coach, A Modern Solutionary, the author of “The Bloodline of Wisdom, The Awakening of a Modern Solutionary” and “The Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, A Devotional Timeline”*

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God's Word Builds Real Men

There's a lot of talk about masculinity today: what it is, what it isn't, and why so many guys seem unsure of who they're supposed to be. You can see it in school, sports, relationships, and online. Many young men drift through life with little direction, unsure how to carry themselves or what it actually means to be a man. Somewhere along the way, the idea of real masculinity got blurry.

Among all the confusion about what masculinity should look like, Christian men often stand out because their model comes from a different source entirely. They don't base their mindsets on trends or whatever the culture decides is acceptable that month. Instead, it comes from Scripture. And that difference builds an entirely different foundation of who these men are.

I have personally seen men in my generation and above avoid responsibility. They dodge leadership and commitment. They choose comfort over challenge. It's not that they're incapable; it's that the world encourages ease and self-focus. You see guys who never make decisions, never take initiative, or never step into hard situations. Strength becomes optional instead of expected.

Christian men are rooted in something different. They're called to a type of strength that isn't loud or aggressive. They don't ignore responsibility because they are called to a higher purpose. Ephesians 5:25 (NIV) gives one of the clearest expectations: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Even for guys who aren't dating, this sets a standard that love should involve sacrifice, not convenience. That kind of responsibility shapes a man.

While many guys operate on shifting values and doing whatever feels right in the moment, Christian men follow principles that stay the same. Galatians 5:22-23 (NIV) lists traits they're expected to grow in: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These traits aren't about being perfect. They're about choosing character over impulse.

Leadership is another key difference. The world often teaches men to lead by being dominant or impressive. But Jesus flipped that idea completely when He said, "The greatest among you will be your servant" (Matthew 23:11 NIV). Christian



leadership means stepping up when things are tough, not when attention is available. It means helping others instead of waiting

for recognition.

Purpose might be the biggest separator. Many young men drift because they don't know what they're moving toward. Christian men are taught to trust something bigger than themselves. Proverbs 3:5-6 (NIV) says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart... and he will make your paths straight." That sense of direction shapes how they handle anger, pressure, temptation, and relationships. It gives them a backbone.

This isn't a claim that non-Christian men lack value. Plenty are strong and reliable. But the Christian man has a blueprint that asks more from him. He is called to be like Christ and exhibit the fruits of the Spirit. His foundation is in likeness to the perfect man. If Christian men live out these principles consistently, they won't have to argue about masculinity. They'll demonstrate it.

— Karys Demos is a recent Auburn graduate. She writes about faith, character, and what it means to navigate today's culture as a young Christian.

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Finding Meaning And Purpose Part Two

Captain Larry D. Cripps of Gallatin, now retired, found meaning and purpose with God's direction while on a meaningful journey as a Navy and Marine Corps Chaplain for over 32 years. Drawing from a deep wellspring of his Christian faith, Larry believes that being an author, inspirational speaker and an encourager to others is now his calling.

This article is the second of a two-part series about him providing spiritual guidance during some of the most challenging times for brave men and women in their need for hope. He remembers, "I learned what Jesus meant when He said: 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.'" (John 15:13)

The following is a continuation of my interview with questions/comments and his responses.

Please give some highlights of your service as a Navy and Marine Corps Chaplain.

"The tragic bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut on October 23, 1983, was a pivotal moment in my journey as a Navy Chaplain. That afternoon, a large truck packed with explosives was detonated just outside the barracks, resulting in the devastating loss of 241 U.S. military personnel, including Marines, sailors and soldiers, also injuring more than 100 others.

"In the days that followed, I was among the chaplains assigned to the difficult task of informing family members of their loved ones' tragic fate. Each notification was a hefty burden, as I shared heartbreaking news with spouses, parents and children, many of whom were left in shock and despair. My role went beyond just delivering news. I provided pastoral care by offering comfort and support, helping families through their overwhelming grief, and connecting them to their community and faith."

Desert Shield and Desert Storm:

"The Persian Gulf War was a conflict in the early 1990s between Iraq, under President Saddam Hussein and a coalition of 42 countries led by the United States. This coalition formed in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, due to concerns of regional security and oil supply stability. I deployed to the arid landscapes of the desert with the Naval Mobile Construction Battalion Twenty-Four, which officially arrived in Saudi Arabia in early December 1990. Once on the ground, I served as the Command Chaplain for the 3rd Naval Construction Regiment. This role meant that, beyond my responsibilities to my battalion, I was also tasked with coordinating spiritual support and guidance for the chaplains of three other battalions operating in the region. One pivotal chapter of my journey unfolded as the Division Chaplain for the 4th Marine Division amidst some of Iraq's most intense and harrowing combat."

NATO Joint Tour in the Balkans after the 1995 Dayton Accords:

"The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe led to the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, resulting in the Yugoslav Wars and ethnic cleansing. This situation escalated in 1992 when Bosnia declared independence, igniting the Yugoslav War. In November 1995, the Dayton Peace Accords was signed among the various combatants in Bosnia.



"Peacekeeping was to be done by NATO involving approximately 20,000 U.S. troops. I had the privilege of leading three Navy Religious Ministry Teams, collaborating with the Army to deliver spiritual guidance and morale support to personnel stationed in Bosnia-Herzegovina. With the support of NATO forces comprising 19 nations, we organized humanitarian efforts with food and medical supplies.

9/11 Terrorist Attack on the Pentagon:

"I vividly remember the haunting images of smoke rising, alongside the overwhelming determination we all felt to respond decisively in the face of such tragedy. My colleagues and I navigated through the flood of information grappling with shock while working to restore order amidst the chaos. This experience deepened my understanding of crisis management on a large scale and highlighted the importance of unity during adversity.

standing of crisis management on a large scale and highlighted the importance of unity during adversity.

"From personal experience, I now understand that war transcends a mere clash of armies; it is a harrowing, soul-crushing experience that alters lives and leaves profound scars on both sides of the battlefield... with haunting memories to those who endure its ravages."

My interview with Chaplain Larry D. Cripps was historically and spiritually rewarding for me...providing more information than I could write even in this "Two-Part Series". He and wife Charlene have seven wonderful children between them, 12 grandchildren and two great grandchildren. I personally congratulated him for being a talented author of his book THE HOPE OF WAR, a chaplain's journey to abiding faith, enduring hope and love under fire. There will be many more books, in my opinion, that should evolve from his creative mind while providing inspirational messages with the pen... and from the speaker's platform. I even expect there will be a few novels.

— Ralph E. Vaughn

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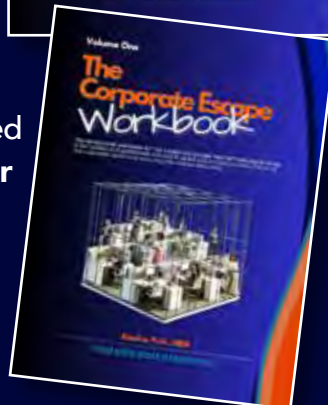
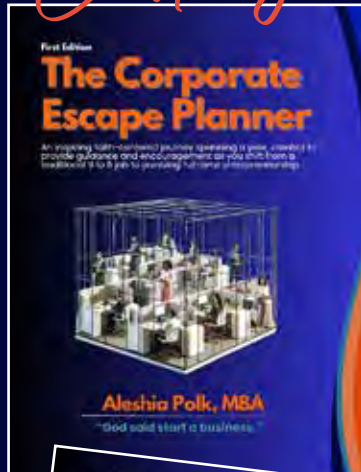
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Aleshia Polk, MBA, is the founder of Hustle On Sunday®, a boutique faith-based entrepreneurship consultancy focused on guiding purpose-driven individuals into impactful business ownership.



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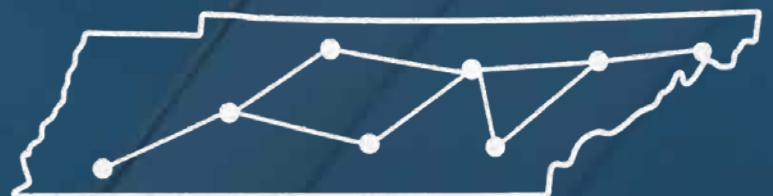
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The Power of Beliefs and the Ripple Effects Within Our Thinking and Behaviors

Our thoughts and beliefs significantly influence our lives. Tragedies, often violent, occur frequently around the world, yet they rarely surprise us anymore. We sometimes remark to friends that more bad events seem inevitable. This raises a question: does our shared mindset contribute to these ongoing incidents?

If we were to study these extreme occurrences systematically, we would notice a persistent pattern of violence and unresolved rage that seems to escalate, sometimes even appearing to occur hourly across the globe. To make sense of it, imagine mapping each tragic event with a small flag marking the country and location where it happened. Enlisting the help of like-minded friends, the exercise becomes reminiscent of assembling a massive puzzle, where each piece represents a separate act of violence or tragedy. Over the long weekend the group experiences conflict and shock at the seemingly endless cycle of violence and lack of resolution. A historian quietly observe that such patterns have existed for as long as history and he reminds us of the prophetic warning: “if we don’t learn from history, how to get along with each other, we are doomed to repeat it”.

Similar mapping of tragic events in the United States, using different colored pins for each state, city, and town, would be overwhelmed by the sheer number of events and would require a huge map. However, no map is large enough to contain all the pins that would be required.

No doubt these couple of examples rather quickly reminds us of the presence of violence with the recent assassination of Charlie Kirk, who embodied the attributes of a bright passionate young man who got his energy from people because he loved them and was not afraid to initiate other debates, which would usually result with a deeper understanding of life with meaning and purpose. Charlie was an unusually dedicated human being, whose goal was to “wake us up” and sometimes stir us a little so that we would grow first in our truth (we no doubt now live in the world which often has an absence of a moral conscience), and truth is so fundamentally necessary because it sets us free and allows us to have hope with limitless understanding of life which exponentially continues to grow in our quest for meaning and purpose in our lives .

My teacher and friend, Dr. Victor Frankle profoundly discovered this and found his greatest happiness in the most vicious and violent place on earth, Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland during WWII. In my research and review of Charlie Kirk, I am cognizant of over 100 topics Charlie shared with his audiences in the context of always being pleasant and genuine, with an engaging and respectful smile (a smile is the universal language of love) as I share my goal/wisdom so you have truth and understanding.

As a youngster growing up in the hustle, bustle of the city of Chicago, I occasionally met a “Charlie Kirk”, often in an academic environment, where this person was very bright, unusually alert to all that was going on, and incredibly had an assertive posture in contrast to the aggressiveness with hatred and a distorted belief that’s ok to be irritated and ultimately violent. In the world I grew up in this was called “debating” and it was an honorable way to intelli-



gently and passionately express one’s opinion. However, if the individual happened to believe they were entitled, perhaps a prince or princess, their belief of themselves was distorted. Their thinking would often be irrational and their behavior filled with anger.

What truly begs the question and perhaps is screaming inside of each of us is what is the answer to this frightening dilemma that we find ourselves within? This dilemma has been paramount in my thinking for sometime, and I have arrived at a three part response. The first is known as cognitive behavioral thinking (CBT), which I describe in the following. However, I ask

you to please be patient because the last two gems, which along with CBT are my most profound understanding when applied well, and will forever change ourselves and our world.

Cognitive Behavioral Thinking and Believing:

May I begin with a story of a hard-working middle-class father who, after a long week of overtime, arrives home early on Friday to help his nine-year-old son build a birdhouse in their garage workshop. In a tragic accident, the son injures his eye, and the frightened father rushes him to the nearest ER which happens to be next to a professional office building with designated parking spots. The father parks in the closest available spot and carries his injured son inside where he is greeted by an ER MD who is a skilled ophthalmologist covering the ER for a friend and his expertise saved the day for this youngster! Simultaneously, the designated owner of the parking spot, where the father parked his car, feels intense rage, believing his spot has been wrongfully taken. But through the lens of CBT:

- **A (Event):** The parking spot is taken by someone in a crisis.
 - CBT Reframe: This is the closest spot for a parent facing a horrific emergency. There were no other parking places, and now there is hope for the injured boy.
- **B (Belief):** The belief that no one should ever park there, and violators must be punished.
 - CBT Reframe: Perhaps an exception can be made for a seriously hurt child.
- **C (Consequence):** initial response is rage with a history of lifelong injustices.
 - CBT Reframe: The new response is gratitude for having the opportunity to help a child in need, resulting with a feeling of goodness and blessing.

CBT shifts our beliefs as it transforms our emotional responses, leading to more compassionate and constructive outcomes. Now our rational thinking/beliefs, break the cycle of irrationality and violence in behavior.

(Editorial Note: next month Part 2 will contain my understanding of the final two profound understandings which will change ourselves in our world forever).

— To speak with Dr. Tim Lynch, PhD., you can call him at 615-504-4357, or email him at tdlynch@bellsouth.net If you want to know more about Dr. Tim check out Psychology Today Practice Directory, or his web: www.thelynchgroup.net.



Three Ways to Make Education Better

Declining test scores are in the news. Kids can't read, can't write, can't reason, we hear yet again. It's so easy to feel overwhelmed, especially when we see the problems for ourselves. What do we do?

Let's start with some good news! Recently, I watched 12 and 13 year olds successfully reading, understanding, and writing about Sherlock Holmes mysteries – the original 1892 texts, not watered-down summaries. I'm seeing a new generation of kids learning how to construct sentences, sift through facts to find evidence, frame their thoughts into arguments, stand up in front of others, and communicate. Perhaps the most encouraging thing I see is curiosity. Learning done well should often lead to a desire to learn more.

So what do we really need most to learn? Here are three essential strands that pull together:
Purpose: When we're teaching and learning, we need to keep asking ourselves one question: Why are we doing this? Lots of important questions come from that one. What's our goal for today? How is learning this going to help me in the future? Purpose should be a strand connecting everything we do, and we must communicate it every day (What purpose looks like varies a lot

with the child's age, though! I wrote the questions above with 10-14 year olds in mind.) When we simply hand kids an assignment, we're communicating to them that their education has no real purpose, so we can't really be surprised when they believe and act like that.

Process: Learning does take time and effort, and learning a skill takes repeated effort. Kids need both a meaningful challenge and a clear path. Along the way, it really helps to be able to see how we're doing so we can ask questions and learn more. If all kids are doing is turning in work, why should they keep doing that?

Relationship: If we don't build trust first, we can't share purpose and work the process together. If you don't see and believe that I am personally committed to you and your learning, why should you trust me with your time and put in the work? When parents get curious, kids are doubly encouraged!

If what I'm saying is true and helpful, it probably won't be original! Jesus Christ, the greatest teacher ever, has offered us the deepest commitment in re-



lationship that anyone ever could: His life for ours, to be with Him forever, if we trust Him. Through the Bible, He communicates His purposes for us and tells us about the process of following Him. He knows our weaknesses and the help we need, and He has sent His Spirit to remind and encourage us. Unlike Sherlock Holmes, we may not solve all the mysteries of the mind and heart, but together we can navigate them wisely in the fear of the Lord.

— A classroom veteran, George Rietz encourages teachers, teaches homeschoolers, and invents new tools to reshape education. Contact him through www.ExploreMyWriting.com.





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Seven Traits of a Thriving Congregation:

A model for fostering hope, innovation and collaboration within the church

We get up on Sunday morning and head out to our local church. We see friends and often family. We gather for bible study, lift our hearts in praise, and listen to the proclamation of God's Word. It is healing. It is renewing. It prepares us for the week ahead.

Churches take almost every imaginable form. From small country congregations to huge multi-site congregations spread over wide areas of cities, from deeply ingrained in denominational identity to intentionally non-denominational, from theologically progressive to markedly conservative, local gatherings of believers come together to worship, learn, and grow.

The last fifty years may have been the most tumultuous period for the church since the Reformation. Coming out of the social and political conversations that deeply impacted our culture in the 1960s, the Church was challenged to reinvent itself in many ways to reach what we now refer to as the Boomer generation. The church growth movement, purpose driven and seeker driven models for church ministries, and changing worship styles swept across the church confronting long held practices. The changes were not always easily absorbed.

Twenty-five years ago, we began to see noticeable declines in church participation and new terms surfaced like the “nones” which tried to describe people who had no interest in religion of any kind and the “dones” who are done with organized religion even while they hold to their faith. Throw in a pandemic and the onslaught of social media, and a pastor trying to shepherd a congregation wakes up each day with plenty of challenges to meet.

We should remember, though, that the Gospel is the power of God saving all who believe (Rom. 1:16). No pastor or member of a church is all alone. The work of the Church is the work of the Gospel that has changed communities and cultures across the world for two millennia.

We have work to do and a Gospel to empower us through the work of the Holy Spirit.

About six years ago some colleagues and I visited six major American cities to learn from pastors and churches who had reinvented and repurposed themselves as their communities changed around them. Out of those conversations with twelve churches we identified seven traits common in their thriving congregations that were not tied to denomination, location, or theology. They are the Gospel at work in local churches. Since then, we have been working with churches to identify one or more of these traits as a point of focus for achieving the life of the Gospel in their congregation. It is an effective way to bring life and ministry to local congregations.

These seven traits are not surprising. They are practical. They are mission-oriented and fit any size congregation. We have learned to focus not on what is broke in the church but on the strengths of the church, of the Gospel alive and at work in the congregation. We have seen pastors and congregations take any one of these seven traits and build good leadership initiatives around them.



Look at this list. Where do they suggest you can do new work with your congregation?

- 1.** A missional fervor born out of hopeful imagination rather than fear-driven urgency.
- 2.** A spirit of creativity, innovation, and imagination.
- 3.** Mutually dependent partnerships with outside organizations.
- 4.** Meaningful engagement with community through carefully curated relationships.
- 5.** Non-traditional leadership modeling that allows adaptability, passion, and vision.
- 6.** Expanded understanding of Christian

Practices and Sacraments.

- 7.** Abiding church identity and missional focus.

You will find success not in attempting to fix what appears to be broken, but to affirm what is working or what has the potential to work. Someone else's success story or program has no guarantee for your congregation because it reflects their work and ministry. Look at where the Gospel works among you. That is the best place to start.

These traits point to serving out of hope and imagination and the creativity that builds on relationships and strengths in the church and the community. These traits remind us that non-traditional leadership and innovative approaches often offer new solutions to old problems. Among all things, though, the key is a focus on what makes the Church the Church—worship and proclamation of the Word with a focus on mission.

After some time in prayer asking God to lead your heart and spirit, choose any one or two of these traits, write them out on a whiteboard or clean sheet of paper, and then begin brainstorming how they might point you to new opportunities to experience thriving. What goals rise up to meet you? What opportunities for fresh conversations?

Which trait gives you hope for new ministry? How can you be innovative and take new approaches to Gospel opportunities? Who can be a new partner to collaborate with you and join your work? All of these are good questions that can bring energy and thriving to your ministry in your congregation.

The Moench Center for Church Leadership at Belmont Universities does this kind of work with pastors and congregations out of our commitment to our communities and the local church. We are always glad to walk alongside congregations in our Healthy Congregations initiative, and we would be glad to walk with you. I would want each pastor to remember the Gospel empowers all you do and these seven traits of thriving congregations offers a great place to start the new work God calls you to bring new energy to your congregation.

— Dr. Darrell Gwaltney, executive director of the Moench Center for Church Leadership at Belmont University. Dr. Gwaltney has dedicated over four decades to strengthening local congregations and cultivating thriving pastoral leadership as pastor, educator and thought leader globally.

The Secret Place

But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. Matthew 6:6

Let's be honest. Musicians can certainly live what most of us would consider a "normal" life, but you clearly possess a talent that really does set you apart from the rest of us. My Mother was one of the finest musicians I have ever known. As a child, her passion for music and her talent on the piano just didn't "take" with me. Looking back, I missed an amazing opportunity to learn to play from one of the best. There was a basic problem with that idea of course—I simply wasn't a musician.

I didn't realize it at the time but being raised by a musician was God's way of training me for a lifetime of working with amazingly talented people. My entire career has provided a front row seat when it comes to the highs and lows that you experience—for more than 50 years so far.

In my earlier days in the Christian Music Industry, I developed a close friendship with one of the top Christian rock artists of all time. Our personalities and life experiences were completely different, but we both truly enjoyed working together. One day I began our conversation by complaining about



the difficulties of working with talented musicians like him.

Very quickly, with tears in his eyes, he said these words to me, "You have no idea what it's like to go to the secret place, where only you and God can go, and He gives you a song—one of His precious jewels. Then you prayerfully shape that lyric and melody and hiding them in your heart, fully knowing that at some point, you have to share it with people like you who will decide if it's worth hearing."

I could see his sincerity, but at the time, I didn't really understand the creative process he described. Of course, after writing a few books, I now understand much better.

So, let me be blunt: Don't give up even when "we just don't get it." Go and do all that God places in your heart. Take the time to perfect those lyrics and melody. Then sing and play what you have found in that secret place in every place you can. Deploy those gifts and talent that only God could have placed in you and don't worry about our response. We just might need to hear what He has to say through you after all.

— Dr. Byron L. Spradlin, Founder and President, Artists in Christian Testimony, www.actinternational.org



PLAN OF SALVATION

Has something in the magazine or something you have discussed with someone or some thoughts that you have had or something that you have heard, brought you to a point of realizing that you want and need to know Christ in the truest and personal sense?

If so, below is a simple outline for someone of any age who is not a Believer to act on their desire to accept Jesus Christ into their heart as their Savior.

God's Plan of Salvation

God created us to honor and serve Him

Revelation 4:11: "You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist[b] and were created

Each of us has sinned against God

Romans 3:10: As it is written, "There is none righteous, no, not one" Romans3:23: For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

The penalty for sin is eternal separation from God and Heaven

Romans 6:23: For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Good works cannot ever earn God's forgiveness and Salvation

Titus 3:5: not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us.

God loves each of us

John 3:16: For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Jesus Christ died on the cross in our place, paying the penalty for our sin

Romans 5:8: But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

We each must accept Jesus Christ as our personal Savior

Romans 10:9: that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

Romans 10:13: For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."

To accept Christ into your heart and life, pray a simple prayer along these lines -

"Dear God, I know that I am a sinner and I am sorry for my sins. I know that Jesus died for my sins and the sins of the world. Right now, I ask Jesus into my heart and receive Him as my personal Savior. Forgive me of my sins, thank you for saving me through the blood of Jesus. Please Lord, help me live for you. In Jesus name, amen."

All scriptures are taken from The New King James Version of the Holy Bible. If you do not have your own Bible, email publisher@nashchristian.com and we will make sure you receive one.

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