

Transforming

Stories of making disciples in the way of Christ

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The Power of the Gospel



Erik Messori CAPTA Al Jazeera



Martina Petkovski

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than rubies** PAGE 4

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The power of the cross



BY AARON KAUFFMAN
PRESIDENT

Each morning these days, my daughter rises early to check the status of the tomato seeds she has sown. She's conducting a kind of experiment. A few of the seeds are planted in pots under a fluorescent light in our basement. Others are in pots in a south-facing windowsill upstairs. Which will sprout first? Which will have the best chance of surviving outside? So far, the seeds under artificial light have a significant head start!

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells of his impending death, using the image of a seed: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me" (12:22-26).

The counterintuitive power of the gospel is that God does not overcome our sin and rebellion with overwhelming force, but by taking their destructive consequences upon himself on the cross. Jesus' sacrificial death undoes the curse of sin and makes new life possible for those who trust in him and surrender their lives in service to his kingdom. Like a seed that dies to be reborn as a fruitful new plant, death is the path to life in God's economy.

Death brings new life to those who believe both now and into eternity. First, in this life, we willingly lay down our old sinful selves at the foot of the cross of Christ, and we rise to a new way of being in and through him. That's what baptism is all about. As Paul famously put it in his letter to the Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Yet this is not merely a one time event. We die daily to self and sin and experience the resurrection power of Christ alive in us by his Spirit.

Second, this life-from-death gospel gives us power to persevere in our walk with Christ and his church until the end of our earthly lives, because we know that after we die we will inherit the eternal kingdom of God along with the saints who have gone before us. I say persevere because walking with the Lord and his church is not easy. If Jesus was ridiculed by the world and betrayed even by his own disciples, can we expect to be treated any better than our Master if we are faithful? Yet the suffering is worth it, not only for the refining effect it has on our character (James 1:4), but because eternal glory awaits those who endure to the end.

My daughter's first attempt at sprouting tomato plants didn't go so well. A couple of seeds came up, but then promptly withered. She was beside herself with disappointment. With some encouragement, however, she tried again. Now she has more tomato seedlings than our small backyard garden will be able to hold! Such is the kingdom of God when we gladly sow the gospel again and again, giving our lives away in pursuit of the glory we will know when we finally see the Lord face to face. Such is the power of the cross.

Cover photo: Solange Tartari (left) with Rudina, a neighbor in the Lezhë, Albania, shelter following the devastating earthquake that hit Albania in November 2019. See article on page 6. Courtesy photo

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Financial Report

Reporting: 09/01/19 to 02/29/20

Special Projects \$824,856	Special Projects \$685,871
Mission Fund 461,220	Mission Fund \$431,466
Revenue Total \$1,286,077	Expenses Total \$1,117,337

Mission Fund: undesignated giving by households and churches, **Special Projects:** giving to specific workers or ministries

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Latino Ministries hosts Training for Trainers event

On March 14, on the cusp of mandated coronavirus restrictions, VMissions hosted 22 of the almost 50 Latino believers who had hoped to participate in *Entrenamiento para Entrenadores* (Training for Trainers), a Spanish-language training with Honduran church planter, Allan Lorenzana.

In the opening session Allan shared his 15-second testimony. Then he asked, "What's your story?" Lizzette Hernandez reports that participants stumbled to respond with a cohesive story within that time frame. Allan then taught a simple and inviting way to do it. After a few times of practicing, participants felt empowered to share their story with others. In the weeks following, participants have been excitedly sharing stories of the impact made within their circles of relationships.

A certified trainer, Pastor Lorenzana brings to his work firsthand experience in La Ceiba, Honduras, where more than 300 churches have been planted in the last two years. The tools he introduced have been developed by the No Place Left International Coalition (www.noplaceleft.net).

The starting point for No Place Left is alignment with Jesus' statement in Matthew 9:37, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few." Thus, their purpose is to mobilize the whole body of Christ toward the work of the harvest, with every member of the body trained to become a disciple maker, until, as



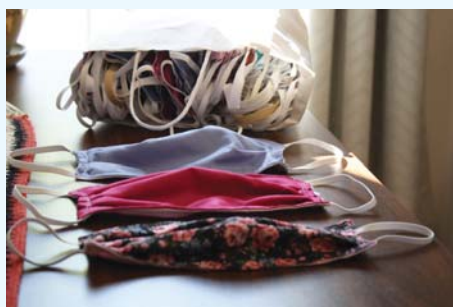
Paul states in Romans 15:23, there is "no place left."

Experience has taught Allan that while most Christians recognize the responsibility of sharing their faith with non-believers, if asked, he says, "They admit that they don't know how to do it!" Thus, an important part of his work is to empower believers to share their faith with others in a simple and biblical way so they can obey the Great Commission.

While not necessarily uniformly effective, Allan has seen good fruit from this and other simple tools across the globe, both in rural and urban areas. When Jesus' followers are armed with simple strategies, skills and tools and are working under the vision and power of the Holy Spirit, as described in Acts 1:8, not only will new believers be added to the local church, but church planting movements will emerge. And as the participants at this training learned, it all starts with having an answer to the question, "What's your story?"

Cloth face mask drive launched for poultry workers

VMissions became aware of a need for cloth face masks for Latino church members who work in poultry plants and are getting sick without protection. VMissions contacted four area poultry plants, who requested 1,500 masks to give their workers. Many people gave time and resources to meet this need, and a total of 2,075 masks were delivered.



Coronavirus Immigrant Care Fund makes impact

The economic impacts of COVID-19 are being borne disproportionately in the U.S. by immigrant families, many of whom are greatly affected by reduced hours and layoffs. In response, VMissions created the Coronavirus Immigrant Care Fund (vmmissions.org/cicf) to provide tangible help in the form of cash gifts, working with immigrant pastors to identify needs in their midst. The following responses are from several recipients:

A mother receiving help responded, "I was preparing our lunch today with the food we had left in our pantry, the last food we had...when Veronica Sanchez came with the help. Words are not enough when there's so much to be thankful for! God is faithful, thanks to all involved in this blessing."

One family's father has been laid off from his job until further notice, and he is the sole income of their household that includes three children. The mother said, "I want to say thank you to all the donors for helping us out like this, we cannot pay you back for what you have done but ask God to bless you abundantly."

In Winston-Salem, N.C., Veronica has been recovering from a delicate surgery for the last six months. She hopes to get back to work soon, but the company she used to work for is doing massive layoffs due to the crisis. "I say thank you with all my heart to the brothers and sisters who have sent this great blessing that has come to us through Pastor Juan José Lagos. May God multiply his blessings over you!"

One family was so grateful for the help they received, that they went to their pantry and gathered some cleaning items and gave them to Pastor Armando Sanchez. They wanted to give back from what they had. They hope that someday they can also help others in need just as they have been helped.

More precious than rubies

Laura Campbell recognizes that the gospel has the power to confront the cultural attitudes about women that are prevalent in Montenegro.



BY LAURA CAMPBELL

God tells women that we are valuable to him, more precious than rubies. As believers, we know we have worth because God created us in his own image, breathed his own breath into us, and redeemed us with the blood of his Son. But in Montenegro, women are treated as if we are not worth much at all. An acquaintance here told me several times that because Steve and I only have daughters, we are obligated to have a son, someone to carry on the family name, and presumably provide for us when we are older. One result of these long-standing cultural attitudes is the fact that Montenegro has the highest rate of sex-selective abortion of baby girls in all of Europe. Demographic statistics confirm that while the global average for newborns is 100 females for every 102 males, in Montenegro, the average for newborns is 100 females to 116 males.

*“Who can find a virtuous woman?
For her price is far above rubies.”*
Proverbs 31:10 (KJV)

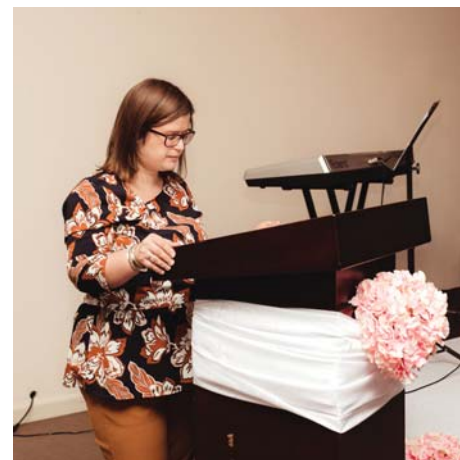
Jesus also lived in a culture that undervalued women, but he never undervalued the women he encountered. Jesus spoke not only to women, but to those women who were especially beneath the notice of society—the Samaritan woman (John 4), the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15), and the woman caught in adultery (John 8) were all treated with disdain by those around them. Jesus treated them with respect. He gave them value. To him they were priceless. It is our desire to have the power of the gospel break the cultural stereotype that women are not as valuable as men. Our desire is to show women their God-given value.

With this in mind, the women’s committee of our church (The Word of God Evangelical Church of Podgorica) decided to conduct our first-ever outreach event. Our plan was to invite not-yet-believing women to be our guests at a special luncheon and then offer to follow-up with friendship and discipleship for those interested.

Our theme verse was Proverbs 31:10, but because rubies aren’t well known here, we chose the name “diamonds” for our group. We invited all of the women who brought children to the Operation Christmas Child shoebox program, approximately 1000 women! Of those, 178 expressed interest in the

event, which was scheduled for Saturday, March 7, in order to align with International Women’s Day on March 8. We divided the names of these ladies among believing ladies from our church and prayed for them daily. We also encouraged ladies from the church to invite some of their pre-believing friends—as many as they felt they could disciple. We also invited ladies from the other churches in Montenegro, and those to whom they wanted to reach out.

It was our desire to make this event reflect the value that God places on each woman. We rented a large event hall at an upscale local hotel and arranged for a catered meal. Each



Maša Simonović, a woman from the author’s church, shares her testimony at the Diamond Luncheon.

Photo: Martina Petkovski



A billboard in Podgorica, Montenegro, from the UN-WANTED campaign, which aims to raise public awareness of female selective abortion. It says, “Your parents wanted a son and that’s why you did not have a chance to be born. Sorry.” Photo: Erik Messori CAPTA Al Jazeera



Laura (left) and women at her table discuss how their identities as women have been formed. Photo: Martina Petkovski

table was decorated. In addition, each woman was given a gift of handcrafted jewelry made by a man from our church, and a rose. These gifts were well received; I saw several women replacing their current earrings with the new ones, and many others comparing and praising the designs.

We started our time together with an icebreaker which provided for some lighthearted interaction and helped us to learn something about the women we were meeting for the first time, and even learn some new things about our long-time friends.

Maša Simonović, a woman from our church, shared her testimony of times when God has been especially close to her throughout her life, including when she was a young teen who had just lost her father and was afraid her mother was dying as well. She shared how God appeared to her at that time in a personal way and connected her story with the forgiven woman in John 8. I could see many women moved by Maša's story, even to the point of tears. Our committee asked Jelena Vilotijević, a believer with a gift for drama who attends the church in Nikšić, to read Jon Jorgenson's "Who you are: A message to all women." This is a riveting word to women who have not understood their value in the eyes of God.

After Maša's testimony, we sat at our tables and discussed several questions about what has shaped us into who we are today and what might be keeping us from seeing our worth. We had encouraged the believers beforehand to be very transparent and open in their sharing, and this led the new ladies to also share more freely. As this was only a two hour event, and many of these women were new to the concept of Scripture, we were not able to delve deeply into what the Scriptures say about who we are, but our hope and

desire is to develop these relationships and disciple those who are willing.

Two women who serve with Cru in Montenegro, and Izabela, a woman from our church, sang several songs, including translated versions of several contemporary Christian worship songs that remind us of our worth to God.

Reflecting afterwards, we rejoiced to realize that 50 of the 140 ladies who attended were "not-yet-believers," with 25 of those being among the 178 who initially expressed interest. Some had had to cancel because of illness (not coronavirus). But this allowed us to say yes to a few people who asked at the last minute if they could bring friends. We were delighted to have ladies from all different parts of former Yugoslavia—ladies of many different ages, nationalities, ethnic groups and even religious backgrounds. Some had come to Montenegro as Roma refugees from Kosovo years ago, others from Muslim families.

Marijana, and Miruška, two of the women leaders of our church, plan to be in contact with each of the 25 non-believing women who attended from the shoebox program invitation as well as those who wanted to come but were unable to. They plan to invite them for one-on-one coffees or visits that include other believing women. Believers who brought pre-believing friends are expected to disciple those ladies. Of course with the current world situation, going out for a coffee and other normal meeting occasions have to be put on hold. Please pray that we will still be able to do effective follow-up without being able to properly meet with one another.

Laura Campbell serves in Podgorica, Montenegro, with her husband Steve and daughters Ruth and Esther.

● Sharing the best we have

BY CAROL TOBIN, AS SHARED BY SOLANGE TARTARI

A celebration in heaven is taking place, even though on this earth the situation is sad!" This is Solange's testimony as she sees God working powerfully in Albania among people who are encountering the gospel for the first time. Sanie and Monda are two women who have accepted Jesus and are being disciplined by Solange.

Solange's friend Sanie grew up in the time of communism. Throughout that era, she could not confess any kind of faith. But today she is happy to be following Jesus. She is thirsty for the word of God, and with great joy, she comes to study the Bible. She has had an extraordinary experience in this life with the Lord.

Sanie exclaims to Solange, "Why did I waste so much time and not make this decision before? I feel a transformation in my life from the inside out!" She has already finished the first study, which is the basics of the basics, called "Kush është Perëndia?" [Who is God?]. Next, Sanie, Monda and Solange started reading the book of John together, writing down and memorizing the key verses. This was a beautiful thing for Solange to see. Sanie began to understand that people who do not believe in Jesus will not be saved, so she began to pray seriously for her atheist son. Sanie is the first candidate for baptism next summer at Guri I Themelit, the Mennonite church in Lezhë, Albania.

Likewise, Monda, after beginning discipleship, experienced a miracle testimony in her life through prayer. She began to understand that God is not limited and can bless all who believe. With hope in her heart, she then brought together for discipleship her aunt, Bardha, and her co-worker, Flora. They also accepted Jesus, and have been disciplined.

Flora in particular has a very sad story. Her interest in the gospel was piqued as soon as she heard that the Tartaris were involved in prison ministry. This was because her husband is in prison, serving a sentence for a murder. As trying as this is, serving the court-mandated term is but a small component of the far more demanding, centuries-old system of retribution called "gjakmarrja" [blood-taking]. According to this system of justice, outlined in the ancient



Solange (right) with her friend Sanie. Courtesy of Solange Tartari



Women from the Lezhë church attend the first conference for women in Albania's north.

Courtesy of Solange Tartari

Albanian Kanun code, because blood has been shed, the family of the victim considers themselves justified in seeking blood for blood, typically targeting either the perpetrator himself or another male from the family. Indeed, the honor of the deceased demands it.

Thus, none of the men in Flora's family can go out on the street—at any moment one of them could be killed by someone from the other family. For this reason, her oldest son has fled to another country; the youngest cannot leave the house. In an effort to enhance the safety of her sons, Flora moved to Lezhë and is living with her sister; she works hard to support her children.

Solange shares that the first day she met with this group of women for discipleship, Flora's countenance was very dejected. Now, it seems she is a different person. The strength she has found in Jesus has been supernatural in her life! Solange says, "We have faith that God will transform her family situation! Her prayer is that her husband will seek forgiveness and be forgiven."

As Solange concludes, "We all have challenges in life. The least we can do is simply share the best we have in love for others: Jesus! He makes all the difference in us! May God continue to work in hearts for his glory in Lezhë."

Solange Tartari serves with her husband Rafael and two children in Lezhë, Albania.

● Tracing the trail of forgiveness

God is calling Bethany Tobin to both teach and walk out Jesus' humble yet powerful message of forgiveness as she serves in Thailand. She shares these glimpses.

BY BETHANY TOBIN

I. As my kids yell and chase their friends around the field, my friend Duang and I walk with our toddlers around the dirt track. I love being an older sister to this 18 year old mom. Hungry for a listening ear, she eagerly shares her dreams with me: To be able to raise her son instead of having to leave him with her grandmom while working in Bangkok. To have stable jobs and a loving marriage. To share her feelings with her husband and talk through conflict. We talk about how God shows us what to do when we argue, when we fail. We talk about the powerful words, "I'm sorry," and "I forgive you." I have seen over and over that people in Thailand go through their whole lives without saying these seemingly shameful words.

II. One Sunday morning, I was sitting in the shade with a handful of older ladies, waiting for enough folks to arrive so that we could begin our worship celebration. I have been discipling one of the aunties and know her to be emotionally unstable and to have severe financial challenges. She was excitedly telling another grandmother about her get-rich-quick scheme selling unregulated medicines, complaining that she'd had to sell medicines on credit. My big mouth got the better of me, and I said forcefully, "You shouldn't sell your merchandise on credit!" Then I made a bigger mistake and thoughtlessly walked away, seeing someone I wanted to talk to.

Soon, we settled ourselves on the floor in a large circle for worship. When testimony time came, this particular Auntie began to criticize me in front of the whole gathered group! Joy was vacuum-sucked out of the room; we stumbled on through the motions of the service. During communion I made my way across the circle, stooping respectfully until finally I knelt in front of my auntie and asked for her forgiveness.

She left before our lunch was laid out on the floor. Since few had witnessed my offending behavior, I chose to speak up, explaining how I had been thoughtless and disrespectful to an elder. Most people could barely meet my eye. In this culture, open conflict is extremely upsetting and shameful. I had been up since five mopping the church floor, making food, helping with worship, doing Sunday school for the kids. And now, my moment of glory: a highly public apology, met with silence.

III. Full of hope I skip up the road to my friend Duang's house. We are going to start studying the Bible together! But when I get there, all is not well. Sales are down.

The motorcycle payment is unmet. April 5 looms—the day her young husband will have to face two years of mandatory military service. Festered desperation turns into an open sore of conflict with relatives next door. Grandma has arrived to "help," but brings instead divisive words. In the stressful swirl of advice and pressures of relatives, the thin veneer of harmony is ripped off the shallowly buried offenses and the litany of failures.

Later in the week, relatives pressure the couple to break up; brokenhearted, I help Duang move her stuff out of the apartment.

IV. While the kids holler and splash water in our backyard blow-up pool, four parents sit—sweaty and tired—on our living room floor, tackling our next lesson on how we are forgiven by Christ, and yet how if we don't forgive, we leave our hearts open to destruction. I want so much to convey the hope that God can give us heaven's eyes for those that have failed us. I want so much for their identities to be so rooted in God's love that they can humble themselves to apologize for failures without being paralyzed by shame. I believe that if my Thai friends could hear and speak those words, God's love would break bondage in their hearts. How, Lord, can they, when no one has seen it before?

These are battles that cannot be hurried. I think ruefully to myself that before I can see reconciliation birthed in my friends, I will most likely need to offer myself up to public humiliation many more times. So I pray, "Use my mistakes Lord – make a fool of me – so that the power of your gospel can be revealed. In your humiliation, Lord, we see your love. And in order to pray that others will forgive, I will trace the obscure trail of forgiveness myself. You, Lord, know the way." This is the power of the Gospel.



A Thai style painting of the Prodigal Son story. Courtesy of OMF Publishers, Bangkok, Thailand, Good News Made Visible

Bethany Tobin serves with her husband Steve Horst and three children in Nam Yuen, Thailand.

● A front row seat to the gospel's power

A campus ministry leader at Bridgewater College, tranSender Kyle Glenn is confident that God is working through him to bring gospel transformation into the lives of college students.

BY KYLE GLENN

The power of the gospel is this: that the unlovable are loved, the irredeemable are redeemed, the disinherited are adopted, the faithless are made faithful, the wicked are made pure, and the unqualified are made participants. This is my story. With every breath there is a constant reminder that it is only the grace of God poured out on me that allows me to walk forward in the purpose he designed for me. Ministering at Bridgewater College, I have had a front row seat to the power of the gospel working in the lives of college students. He has taken students who are broken, hurt, and complacent, and as a loving Father, gently removed the brokenness and brought restoration.

One such student who encountered the love of Christ is my good friend Reese. She came to Bridgewater, jaded and ready to dismiss the idea of God. As she came to Bible study week after week, I couldn't help but think, "I love that she's coming, but what is making her come back?" In hindsight, I see that she had tasted the water that truly quenched the thirst of her soul. Alone in a hospital room at Sentara Rockingham Memorial Hospital, she decided to give her life to the Lord. She was ashamed of the mental health issues she was having and didn't want to tell anyone she was there. Praise God that he meets people at their loneliest and most broken. He didn't just give her mental healing; he also gave her new life and formed a community to walk beside her.

Restoring the biblical concept of community, represented in the Trinity of God and the fellowship of believers in Acts, is very meaningful to college students. It is an avenue for the love of God to be released to the world. God's love really does flow through our lives and others see it and want to experience it. This is why I feel the urgent call to step out of the comfort zone of my Christian community to pull the lost into it, so that they might experience the love of Christ as well. As Jude 23 says, "...save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy."

We must be willing to get our hands dirty as we reach out. James 2:14-17 states the harsh words that if we do not help a brother or sister out of their situation, our faith is dead. When a person sees a costly kind of care and concern, they see a love that can only come from God. They no longer see the distorted or perverted love that is required by society for intimacy.

Sharing—and living—the gospel was never meant to be easy, but it was also never meant to be complicated. I remind myself to keep it simple; I give what has been given to me and allow God to be God. I know for myself that releasing control goes against the very fabric of our humanity. There



Kyle Glenn, a tranSender in college ministry. Photo: Jon Trotter

is no better example of loss of control than what the world is currently facing with COVID-19. What is ultimately driving this threat is the fear of death; it has, in a sense, made the world stand still.

Despite the fear, we must still be willing to advance the gospel. Now that college students have been sent home, our ministry has shifted gears to having online Bible studies and sermons. During this time, it can feel like the power of God is being limited; I can succumb to a fear that the gospel won't connect as well since we are no longer meeting face-to-face. The hope I am clinging to during this time is found in Isaiah 55:11, "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

I believe that as I faithfully continue to preach the word—regardless of the method—it cannot return empty. God's purpose will be completed in each and every season, regardless of how we perceive it. Even in times when we experience disappointment, we must continue to cling to the truth that God's ways are higher than our own. God is doing a new thing in the body of Christ and I believe that as we remain steadfast to the purpose God has given us, it will not only change the campus, but it will change the world.

Kyle Glenn is a tranSender serving in partnership with Divine Unity Community Church in local college ministry at Bridgewater College, Bridgewater, Va..

The gospel seen on the canvas of a life

Jason Wagner's USA Ministries assignment as chaplain in the local jail has given him the opportunity to witness this beautiful story of transformation in the life of his friend Nathan.

BY JASON WAGNER

What does the power of the gospel look like when it is released in our local jail? It is most clearly seen etched onto a living canvas. One portrait that is particularly close to my heart is that of Nathan.

Nathan's story begins with elements common in the jail: absent father, troubled childhood, early drug addiction, and many broken relationships. But Nathan's story is also unusual. Upon the recommendation of Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church, Nathan requested a visit from me. Mt. Clinton was his mother's church. Members had been writing letters; one of the church elders had been visiting him. It's clear that before I even met Nathan, God had a hold of him.

While detoxing in his cell, Nathan listened as a fellow inmate read the Scriptures out loud for his pod to hear. The Word of God began to sink into his heart. During our first meeting Nathan described a sleepless night of deep anguish in which he felt the weight of his sin. Not knowing what to do, he cried out to God for mercy. After praying fervently, he felt a sense of peace and found that he was able to go to sleep. What happened in the following days and weeks is truly miraculous.

Nathan began to come out into the light of God, sensing deeply that God was calling him to make a change. He wrote to Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church asking for forgiveness, confessing to them his struggles and naming his gratitude for their support. He began to study scripture with a deep hunger and brought question after question to our one-on-one counseling times. Through much study and counsel, Nathan grasped the cost of becoming a follower of Jesus.

Throughout this time, the stress of pending court dates and the possibility of 20 years behind bars was hanging over him. But at each court appearance, Nathan could look out into the public area and see a group of members from Mt. Clinton attentively listening for his outcome. Mercifully, he was able to get out on bond for three months.



Jason Wagner (left) with Nathan.

Courtesy of Jason Wagner

He was a different man. His eyes were clear, and his heart was hungry for change. During those three months, he became a sign of God's redemption and hope in many places. Nathan became an integral part of Celebrate Recovery, a Christ-centered recovery program. A small group from Mt. Clinton gathered bi-weekly around Nathan, offering encouragement and accountability.

Nathan was finally given a miraculously light sentence of seven months in prison. During that time of incarceration, Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church paid his rent and cared for his dogs. Nathan, for his part, read the whole Bible and worked through a 52-week Bible study. When he was released later that year, he stood before the Mt. Clinton Mennonite congregation, gave his testimony, and was baptized. Friends from all over the community whose lives he had

touched were present, witnessing the miracle.

It is not easy to trace the work of God's salvation within the jail. Within Nathan's story I see many threads of God's intervention. The presence of an active church. The word of God permeating Nathan's heart from the voice of a faithful believer behind bars. The Holy Spirit bringing conviction, peace, hope, and forgiveness in Nathan's night of anguish. Nathan's soft heart that was willing to confess, seek help, and rely on those God had put in his path. All these culminate into a picture of the power of the gospel, salvation made visible on the canvas of Nathan's life. One last picture of Nathan's redemption that has brightened my heart: one evening after hosting Nathan for dinner, he rushed off to a worship service. During the worship time, Nathan accidentally "pocket-called" me. When I picked up my phone, I quickly realized what had happened and listened in for a moment. What I heard was Nathan loudly singing, "God, You are good!" May God receive the glory and the praise!

Jason Wagner serves as a chaplain at Rockingham-Harrisonburg Regional Jail, Harrisonburg, Va.

Call to Prayer: Listening in the Hard Times

Grace and her husband Yugo serve with Servants to Asia's Poor in a slum in Southeast Asia. What she shares provides a glimpse into a life of listening to the promise of good news in the midst of great challenges.

BY GRACE

My six-year-old son is strapped to my back, using the Ergo baby carrier that he used years ago in infancy. I hold an umbrella in one hand and a flashlight in the other. Next to me, my husband carries two backpacks and our four-year-old son, with a rain jacket covering them all. It is five in the morning, still dark and pouring down rain, and we are wading through flood water.

It has been raining on and off for over a week. With each big rain we wake up at night, to check on whether or not our street is flooding. And this morning at 2 AM, our fears become reality: our neighborhood is flooding. Again.

The Lord called me to the slums nine years ago. I knew serving in slums would not be easy. In my first year, the slum community I faced a devastating fire that destroyed 200 homes, and then evictions and demolitions.

But in the eight years since we moved to this new slum community, we have had relative stability. I am confident that the Lord has called us to serve this community for a reason, and that we still have so much to learn from God here.

But these last two months have been a blur. At the beginning of January, we returned from six months of comfortable furlough in the USA. A week before arriving home to our slum, our city flooded. Our neighborhood was flooded—in some places chest deep, in our house and school just knee deep. Our homecoming was overwhelming—filled with culture shock, mourning lost possessions, and setting up our house again.

Less than a month after our homecoming, we all got typhoid. Typhoid

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

Habakkuk 3:17-19 (ESV)

is an awful food or waterborne illness that can be summed up in a few words: Fevers. Bloodwork. Hospitals. Exhaustion.

Now, just a short two weeks after recovering from typhoid, here we are, trudging through flood water to try to get to higher ground. I cannot see where I place my feet. Our roads are not paved anyway, just an uneven accumulation of mud and rubble. With each step through the dark, brown water, I wonder if I will twist my ankle in a pothole and envision myself falling into the water along with my son.

But that does not happen. After a half mile walk, we make it out of the slum and onto higher ground.

I remember the prophet Habakkuk crying out to the Lord in 3:17-19. Perhaps I can make the prophet's song my own: "Though the rains do not cease to fall, though the flood waters continue to rise, though sickness and typhoid may

ravage our bodies, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places."

Being sure-footed does not mean we can see each step of the journey ahead of us. In fact, it seems to me that following Jesus often means the opposite; we cannot see where we are going. Sometimes, we are wading through filthy flood water and cannot see where to put our feet. But even then, we know who we are following. And that He will lead us to high places.

Do I dare to continue to believe that this is where Christ wants our family? Yes.

Will you join in singing Habakkuk's song, too, even when life-as-you-know-it seems shaken? Can you trust that the Lord will make you sure-footed even through the floods of life?

Grace serves with her husband Yugo and children in a slum in Southeast Asia, in partnership with Servants to Asia's Urban Poor.

Editor's Note: After writing this, Yugo and Grace were able to leave the city for respite at Yugo's seminary, enabling him to work on his thesis. A local teammate staying with them became very ill, and due to COVID-19 concerns, they were abruptly told to leave the premises. While settling into their team "Sabbath apartment" in the city, four-year-old Simeon became ill with dehydration and fever, and needed to be hospitalized. He has since been released. How much they have needed this word from Habakkuk!



● Worker profile: **Elena Buckwalter de Satalaya**

Service program: tranSend

Assignment:

My husband Freddy and I are working with the Iglesia Cristiana Menonita, in Iquitos, Peru, focusing mostly on bringing young people on an island community along the Itaya River to a personal relationship with God. Since the community is quite poor and has very little access to quality education, my husband Freddy and I teach basic, very interactive classes such as English, choreography, reading, and math to the children. On weekends we have children's ministry and youth group.

Biggest challenge:

Teaching in a way that is both educational and exciting enough to keep children who are often quite undisciplined intrigued for the full hour to two hours of class! As in many other river communities in the area, the concept of time and time commitment here are quite relaxed. In school, children are accustomed to going in the

morning and staying as long as they feel like it, before leaving class to go fishing, play soccer, or help their parents work. Lately we've been working on the concept of class as a one hour commitment. If children want to take part in the games and activities at the beginning of class, they must stay for the hour of class unless their parents call them to go home or there is some sort of emergency. It's slow going because we're challenging a long-standing mindset, but we see encouraging glimpses of progress.

Biggest joy:

At the beginning of our assignment, we made a list of goals for our 18 months in Iquitos. Among the concrete, measurable goals, we wrote down one that was a bit more abstract: "establishing relationships of trust with the kids and youth so that we may know their lives and share deeply with them in their joys and difficulties." We've found that one of our greatest joys has been carrying out this goal. As we've grown in our relationships, they've begun sharing snippets from their lives with us.

And, of course, after sharing with us about their worries for a sibling who is traveling for work, or a parent who is having a baby, they'll frequently have questions for us: who fell in love with who first, if we fight at home, what we think of each other's families, etc. There is such beauty in these relationships that are being built!

A typical Saturday:

Despite it being hectic and stressful, Saturday is our favorite day. In the mornings we have children's ministry, which first involves several hours of going door to door inviting kids to come for the singing and dancing to praise songs, the group games, and a Bible story. In the afternoon we come back to the island for youth group. These kids, ages 11 to 16, understand scripture more deeply and can grapple—often over popcorn or sandwiches—with how it applies to their lives. We are so privileged to walk alongside the kids and teens in their everyday lives, and to see the ways God is capturing their hearts.

VMMissions mourns the loss of Steve Leaman



Left: Steve Leaman welcomes board, staff, and workers to the Board, Staff, and Worker Brunch in 2019, one of the Centennial events that he was involved in planning. *Center:* A 2018 staff photo of Steve. *Right top:* Steve enjoyed singing and participated in the 2019 Festival of Praise in November. *Right bottom:* Steve enjoyed being active and getting exercise. He loved golf and biking and rode in a number of Bike Shenandoah events. VMMissions photos

We grieve the sudden passing on April 5 of our dear co-worker and brother, Steve Leaman. Steve had served on staff at Virginia Mennonite Missions since December of 2015, most recently as Director of Advancement. He was a hard-working and caring colleague, a lifelong learner, a devoted family man, and a faithful follower of Jesus.

Steve left us those of us who worked with him a treasure of memories: his warm interest in our lives beyond work, his words of encouragement, his earnest prayers for our mission workers and donors, his meticulous attention to detail, his effort to do his best at everything he did, the twinkle in his eye, and his office pranks.

We are stunned and filled with sorrow. However, we do not “grieve as others do who have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13), because we know that Steve walked faithfully with Jesus and is now at rest in glory.

Just over a week before his death, it was Steve’s turn to share a devotional during our staff prayer time. He shared from Psalm 146, which proclaims, “Praise the Lord, O my soul. I will praise the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live” (vv. 1-2). We celebrate the ways Steve exemplified a life of praise to God.


Steve also recorded the following 15-second testimony just a few days before he died, as part of our effort to share good news in this time of global pandemic:

As a middle child, I wanted attention. I became a selfish braggart. My best friend prayed for me until I gave my heart to Jesus. I was changed! Now, God’s Spirit abides within me. Through God’s love, mercy, and forgiveness, I now have eternal hope. In these times, accept Jesus! What is your story?

May Steve’s story challenge and inspire us all to turn to Christ and place our hope in Him.

We covet your prayers for all of us at VMMissions, and especially for Steve’s widow, Doris, and their children and grandchildren.

Grace and peace,


Aaron M. Kauffman
President