

Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

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Our Stories

I BECAME AN English major in college somewhat by default. I had wanted to be a nurse since I was a child. I was always fascinated by medical things and read lots of Cherry Ames Student Nurse books, and there didn't seem to be many other viable and acceptable career options. You had to be something when you grew up and nursing seemed like the thing for me. My choice at that point had nothing to do with aptitude.

When I entered Messiah College, I fully intended to do a two-year pre-nursing course and go to nursing school. But then came the brick wall of freshman biology. I had never really had an aptitude for science, so why I thought I could do the science required to be a nurse, I'm not sure. While I was struggling with freshman biology, I was doing well in English composition. Also, the more I got involved in college activities, the more I began to dread leaving Messiah after two years to go to nursing school. So at the end of my freshman year, I changed my major to English.

I made that switch without really thinking about what I would do with an English major once I graduated. If I became an English major by default, I certainly went into teaching English by default. There wasn't any other option at the time that made any sense. With the encouragement of a professor who had far grander dreams for me than I had for myself, I briefly flirted with the idea of going into literary criticism, but gave that up because of how difficult it would have been to establish myself and make a decent living. I took all the necessary educa-

tion courses, did student teaching, and following graduate school got my first full-time job teaching English at the same high school I had attended.

I lasted as a high school English teacher for three years – more than long enough to know this wasn't something I wanted to do long-term. As long as I could work with kids who were well-behaved and interested in learning, I enjoyed teaching. But I absolutely hated and was not good at the classroom discipline part. . . .

So begins "What to Do with an English Major Besides Teach," the most-read post on my personal blog, *Pieces of Peace*. It's one of many stories from my life I've written over the years, some of which have appeared in these pages.

Last year, Lester Fretz, a faithful *Shalom!* reader, suggested I do an entire edition of stories and sent me one of his own as an example (it leads this edition). Many of the other stories are about some aspect of identity formation. There's also a ministry story, a story of forgiveness, and a personal account of a teenager overcoming a brain injury. Stories are powerful and grab people's attention, which is probably why Jesus often taught in parables, one form of storytelling.

I hope you enjoy this change of pace! Oh, and check out pages 6 and 11 for the rest of my story about making a career of writing and editing and not as an English teacher.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

THIS ISSUE OF SHALOM!

<i>Receiving the Reward</i>	2
<i>My America</i>	3
<i>Saving Me from Hatred</i>	4
<i>Fifth Grade Lessons</i>	4
<i>Spiritual Formation</i>	5
<i>Okay is a Relative Term</i>	7
<i>I'm a Daughter of the King</i>	8
MIDNIGHT MUSINGS	9
<i>Yelling at God</i>	
<i>On Becoming Who I Am</i>	10
<i>Forgiving Him Was Right</i>	11
<i>Homelessness to Full Employment</i>	12

Receiving the Reward

by Lester Fretz

THE 1959 SCHOOL year was drawing to a close. Field Day at Jordan Station school was history. The staff was busy preparing for the year's concluding assembly for the many students who would receive awards. With no advance warning, we were informed that the Michalik family, immigrants from Germany, had suddenly moved to California. Both Gudrun and Walter were outstanding sixth and eighth grade students plus Walter had won the most points at Field Day, but he would not be there to receive his trophy.

Several years later, Walter called to tell me he was visiting in the area. I quickly arranged to meet him at the Beacon, a restaurant about a mile from where he had lived as a student. It was very enjoyable to have lunch with Walter and to learn that he had become

an elementary school teacher. I must admit that I felt I could share a bit in his success. He was polite and kind, but he finally got around to sharing one regret.

Because his departure to California happened so suddenly, he was unable to attend the awards program. This was a big disappointment. Walter had won the "Most Outstanding Athlete" trophy. When he left abruptly, the trophy, the school's first, was still being made.

Then in the 1980s, Jordan Station School was one of the many small schools to be closed. On a visit before its closing, my wife Mary, an educational consultant, rescued the dilapidated field day trophy from the disposal bin. It had seen better days! Oh, how I wished Walter could have it.

On my next trip to Southern California in connection with my work, I took the trophy along hoping I could locate Walter. But how do you find someone in a big state like California? Keep in mind that I didn't have his address or phone number, and this was back in the days before the internet with Google, Facebook, and email.

Fortunately, I remembered one significant thing. He taught in Anaheim, in the same area where I was going for my meeting. In that area, when you leave one city, you're immediately in the next one, and driving there didn't discourage me. I've always enjoyed exploring the unknown.

Looking up Walter seemed like a good challenge. Arriving at Los Angeles airport, I rented a car. Traveling down Interstate 5, I kept watching for Anaheim. Eventually an overhead sign indicated the three upcoming exits were Anaheim. I pulled off at the first one. Beside the off ramp was a stand with someone selling strawberries. The congenial salesman was able to direct me to a nearby school.

Checking the system's directory, the secretary gave me directions to the school where Walter taught. She seemed pleased to tell me that he was even the head of the guidance department. In a matter of minutes, I was at Walter's school where the secretary directed

me to his office located in an outside portable building. Walter wasn't in his office, but there was a bright side to his temporary absence. His four assistants became most interested and intrigued as I explained the purpose of my visit. They said Walter would be back in a matter of minutes.

To conceal my presence, I made a spur-of-the-moment request. "May I hide behind one of those desks?" I asked. So excited with my visit, they willingly accommodated this foreigner from Canada.

Soon Walter entered the room. His staff made a bit of small talk, obviously eager for what was about to happen. From my cramped position, I crawled out and stood up. Trying to look and sound like a principal, I said, "Walter Michalik, I'm here to present you with the Jordan Station School Athlete of the Year trophy. I apologize for the long delay. Thank you for your tremendous patience over these many years and miles. This presentation is a most rare and pleasant delight. Congratulations!" Of course, rousing applause and cheers came from his admirers. You should have seen Walter's face!

The Apostle Paul talked about athletes who competed to win a prize bestowed by humans, but he sought to win an eternal crown awarded by Jesus. In Philippians he said, "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." And to Timothy he said, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness." Paul modeled what each of us can also do and say if we are committed to Christ.

Just like those who accept Christ have their names written in the Book of Life, Walter could justifiably claim the trophy because his name was on it!

Lester Fretz is retired, having served the Brethren in Christ Church in Canada. Each month he and his wife Mary assist with a dinner for the residents in their retirement complex. After dinner, Lester gives a short devotional, often using one of his stories. This story was one of those, delivered in April 2016.



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My America

by Jennifer Hsu Larrat-Smith

ONE OF MY favorite photographs of my father captures the moment before he boarded the plane to travel to the “golden land” in 1964. In the picture, he stands arm-in-arm with a group of young Chinese men in front of a U.S.-bound passenger jet. His smile is wide, his face beaming with youth and hope. When I discovered the photo a few summers ago, my dad said “these men didn’t know if they’d ever see me again, but all these men are in the United States now.” Then he paused, pensive, before adding, “America has been good to us.”

My father’s story is legend in our family. He grew up in poverty, went without shoes, and ate only rice and sweet potatoes because his family couldn’t afford meat. At nine years old, he escaped by boat to Taiwan, shortly after the Communists took over. When he immigrated to the U.S. many years later, he had \$7 in his pocket. He worked two full-time jobs, cutting strawberries at the World’s Fair by day and washing dishes at a Chinese restaurant by night. From these humble beginnings, he went to graduate school, met my mother, and raised my brother and me in a middle-class (predominantly white) suburb. He even managed to pay for our hefty tuitions at Yale. My brother and I both grew up in full knowledge that the privileges given to us did not come without sacrifice. As my father is so fond of saying, America has been good to my family.

Still, my story is more complicated. On the surface, my family has lived the American Dream, but over the years, I have learned that my Chinese face complicates the picture. I may speak English without accent. I may have grown up in privilege. I may have gone to Yale and Harvard and UCLA, but there’s a hint of ambivalence in my voice that isn’t in my father’s when I talk about the “golden land of opportunity.” There’s a question mark.

Perhaps it is because I remember being a young girl and looking in the mirror at my Chinese face and hating my small eyes, my flat and bridgeless nose, and my full lips. I’d open my eyes as wide as possible and pinch

my nose to see what I would look like with European features. But I knew I looked silly. I would never look like those girls, the ones everyone envied at school with their blond curls and blue eyes, nor would I ever see a heroine with my face on television.

And now I see my daughter, at the tender age of seven, draw picture after picture of girls in frilly dresses. She inevitably colors their eyes blue and their hair a light, fair color. I am an “enlightened parent” and talk to her about how her favorite television shows and movies misrepresent the world as Eurocentric, but her drawings continue to reflect what she has come to think of as beautiful, which is not her.

Recently a peer in her afterschool program told her that she is “half Chinese and half American.” My husband is a white Canadian man, so her friend happened to be right, except that the Chinese half and the American half are one and the same. It reminded me of all the people who asked me where I was from, only to ask me where I was really from after I told them “California.”

And this is only scratching the surface. Being Asian American in the U.S. means you can be an editor for the *New York Times* and still be told to “go back to China.” It means you could be the smartest person in the room but not be seen as “leadership material” compared to a less-qualified white man. It means that, like Vincent Chin, you could be beaten to death in a parking lot a week before your wedding night, and your assailants will be set free and told “these aren’t the kind of men you send to jail.”

My father’s beaming, hopeful face in the 1964 picture captures my father’s love for America as a place to fulfill your dreams. He believed that boarding the plane in 1964, and he believes it now. This is my father’s America. But what is my America? A land of opportunity or a land that excluded and revoked citizenship from my people for over 60 years? Is it a place where a man can come with \$7 in his pocket to build a life or a place where I will bump my head on glass ceiling after glass ceiling? Is it my country and my

home or a place where I will always be perceived as a foreigner? My America is all of these things. My America is an America of contradictions.

Recently, while reading the Old Testament, I stumbled on a story about Isaac, the son of Abraham, who dwelt in the land of Canaan. Canaan was the land flowing with milk and honey that God had promised to Abraham’s descendants, but as Isaac pitched his tent, he was considered an “alien” and a “foreigner.” He dug for wells of spring water throughout the land, but each time he managed to find water, one of the local inhabitants would snatch his claim, and he would have to begin his search again. Finally, after several attempts, Isaac dug a well he could call his own and named it Rehoboth, saying, “Now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land” (Genesis 26:22). This is my longing and my prayer. May God make room for us here in this land,

Jennifer Hsu Larrat-Smith is a second-generation Chinese American. She attends Madison Street Church in Riverside, CA with her husband and two children.

Editor’s Notes

2017 subscription renewals: Please respond promptly to the subscription renewal letter which you have probably already received. The cost for a one-year subscription is still \$15, with extra contributions more welcome than ever.

Upcoming topics: The schedule of remaining topics for 2017 is still tentative, but several are under consideration: religious freedom, being fully pro-life, gender, and peacemaking and protests. Contact the editor if you have additional ideas or would like to write on any of these topics.

Saving Me from Hatred

by Jonny Rashid

I DON'T KEEP a very good record of when I've been insulted, but when I read a story about a teacher's hateful message to her Muslim student, something stirred in my mind. After all, I'm confused for a Muslim all the time. And to be honest, my recent beard doesn't help matters very much.

I grew up in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania. My parents emigrated from Egypt in the early 1980s. If you've ever been to rural Pennsylvania, it won't surprise you to hear that as the cumin-scented family with an accent we were fish out of water. We were among very few Egyptians in the county.

Even though I did not go to the most white-washed high school, it was decidedly not full of Egyptians. Right after September 11, someone likened my appearance to Osama bin Laden. And it wasn't a joke; they were being serious. I remember someone asking me if my family lived in a pyramid (almost too comical to be insulting)! I think they were making a joke, but it was an extraordinary joke.

Several high school students used vulgar epithets to describe me. That was pretty common, and at the time I didn't really know how much it hurt me. I went to great lengths to assimilate into American culture. I was embarrassed by my late grandmother's bro-

ken English (read: nonexistent English), or how she and my mom would speak in Arabic at the mall. I was embarrassed by our food, culture, and uniqueness. I just wanted to be "normal."

It wasn't just shame that made me feel like an outsider. I still remember being accused of "criminal mischief" as I was walking around the employee parking lot of Hersheypark waiting for my ride. The officer thought I had to be up to no good. My friends and I liked cars, but we couldn't drive. So in the evening while we waited to get picked up, we would walk around the parking lot looking at the cars and talking about them. Totally innocent, until the power-tripping security guard threatened to report me to the Derry Township police if he caught me looking around the parking lot again.

Another time, when I accompanied my friends to a local convenience store, the attendant asked me to leave the store if I wasn't going to buy anything because he didn't want to have to accuse me of shoplifting. I told him he should leave me alone if he didn't want to be accused of discrimination. It's hard to walk into a store and get accused of theft (or close to it) just because I decided not to buy something. It's worrisome.

I tell these stories because they are the re-

ality for some people in the United States. A lot of other immigrants experience the same trouble. I know some of them. They are afraid, too. People are nervous that the future is grim for them. The world is full of hatred, and a cloud of suspicion looms over us.

Jesus helped me overcome my fear and overcome the true hatred that my family and I experienced. We really did have the wrong skin color, the wrong last name, and lived in the wrong county. The prejudice against us has deeply affected our lives even beyond these stories. But Jesus broke through my fear and broke through the hatred. Circle of Hope was instrumental in helping me feel and experience that. The people in our church were the light in that darkness for me. Honestly, they showed me Jesus in a new way and loved me for where I was and for who God had made me. I've rarely felt like an outsider, like I didn't belong, and wasn't loved. Often, the very diversity that I brought was praised and embraced! They helped me feel included and I am grateful.

Jonny Rashid is pastor of the Broad Street congregation of the Circle of Hope Network of Brethren in Christ Churches in Philadelphia, PA.

Fifth Grade Lessons in Being Different

By Hank Johnson

WHEN WAS THE first time you realized that you were truly different? Different enough that it made a difference? This happened for me when I was still rather young.

I wasn't different enough for it to matter in Monrovia, Liberia, though my tribe included one of the few super-elitist families that controlled all aspects of the country for over two centuries. I wasn't different enough for it to make a difference in Freetown, though I was a refugee on the run from civil war. I wasn't different enough for it to make

a difference in Abidjan, where I was an immigrant lost in another new culture, but now with the wrinkle of a new language mixed in. I wasn't different enough for it to make a difference until I stepped off the plane at JFK International Airport in the United States.

People still often ask me about the biggest difference coming from Africa to the U.S. My answer is almost always the same: white people. Remember when the red M&M and Santa both faint when they realized, "Wow, they do exist," when they saw

each other? That was my early experience every time I would see a white person. I had only known white people on the television screen. But now I could see that they really did exist in real life.

When I came to the U.S., I knew I was different, and it made a difference in how people saw me and talked to me. It made a difference in who people expected me to be. And it made a difference in how I was supposed to interact with my new world.

Never was this more true than when I en-

rolled in school. I arrived in September, so school was already in session. In our little North Jersey town, it took time to get me enrolled into the fifth grade. And honestly, I didn't mind the time off at all – it was like two to three weeks of sick days without being sick. That's a win!

When the day came to enroll, I was excited. I was also a little nervous because I hadn't picked up a book or had any homework to do. I feared that everyone else was already learning new things. Still, none of my worries matched the reality I walked into. Sitting in a meeting with all the grown-ups, I couldn't escape this funny feeling and something wasn't right. Before long, I learned that the school thought the best fit for me would be a class for kids with developmental disabilities. The decision was made without any testing – other than the eye (or skin color) test that this refugee and immigrant from Africa obviously failed.

I remember family members trying to plead my case, to no avail. And I remember my fifth grade teacher trying to plead my case; this too, was to no avail. (It took her all of five minutes to know I was wrongly

placed.) I was young but not clueless. I knew this was not the class I belonged in. I proved this every day by doing all my work for the day within the first 5-10 minutes. Then I would spend the rest of my days tutoring classmates and running errands for Mrs. P. who rewarded me with stories about baseball history and her beloved New York Mets (who I naturally came to love as well). This went on for my entire fifth grade year. I knew something was terribly wrong but it wasn't wrong enough for my family, my teacher, and certainly not me to be heard.

Nevertheless, God is faithful, good, and true. In this class and with these my first real friends, I learned patience. I learned the importance of love and genuine friendship in all of our lives. I learned how to be a leader. I learned how selfish and privileged I was – and how being a servant and serving well matters. I also learned that all of us who can must work hard for all people who society leaves behind.

Towards the end of fifth grade, there was a general student standardized test. Even though I didn't do all the classwork that most fifth graders were doing all year long, I

did very well on the test. In fact, I scored so high that I was transferred from the developmentally disabled class into the gifted class for sixth grade. Years later, I am still waiting for any kind of apology and mea culpa from the school!

While I wait, I am thankful to God. The fruit of patience that I started to cultivate in Mrs. P.'s class has made me a better husband, father, son, brother, pastor, and friend. The fruit of love and genuine relationships led me to value those I hold dear; it has also challenged my witness and spurred in me a willingness to try to find common ground with those I encounter every day. Much of my current ministry is loving and knowing the many our society, our church, and even we ourselves consistently leave behind. I learned this from Jesus, but I think he started teaching it in Mrs. P.'s class.

Hank Johnson is associate pastor for youth and discipleship at Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

Spiritual Formation at Campmeeting

By Mary Jane Fair

A HORSESHOE, ALMOST a circle, of little white cabins, identical in almost every way, sets the boundary for the Cleona Campmeeting grounds in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania. The campmeeting has been in existence for 120 years, sponsored by the United Christian Church, a small evangelical group with roots in the pietistic movement. Hundreds of tall trees provide a covering for most of the inner circle with a chalky white tabernacle placed strategically in the center. The sun's rays peek through the green covering, providing spotted bright light around the grove. Large shutters hang open in the circular front of the tabernacle with the other three sides completely open, welcoming all to come in and find a seat on the wooden pews. Years ago the cold, cement floor of the tabernacle was covered with sawdust and wood shavings, but now it is bare. On the

semi-circular benches facing the crowd are the pastors of the 10 or so churches that make up this sect of Christians.

At the open end of the horseshoe of cabins is the large white-sided building referred to as the "boarding house." The large room can be set up with long rows of tables and chairs for campmeeting folk to file in for family-style, Pennsylvania Dutch lunches and dinners of chicken pot pie, meatloaf, turkey and stuffing, as well as scrumptious made-from-scratch sugar and molasses cookies, and shoo-fly, coconut cream and peach pies. A shiny metal building sits on the same site of the old wooden boarding house where I served as a waitress for four summers when a teen. Each meal still begins and ends with the entire group of diners singing a praise song and praying together. On the outside of the boarding house is a snack shop where you

can purchase sandwiches, homemade soups, ice cream cups and popsicles, candies of all kinds, soda, milk, and chocolate milk. As a kid, I saved change all summer to be able to purchase orange drinks in small glass bottles, orange creamsicles, bags of penny candies and, of course, boxes of Cracker Jacks – mostly for the prizes that were in them.

Before every morning and evening service, there is a short time of prayer and praise when folks can stand and give a testimony to how God is working in their lives and commit to serving God. When the worship services are in session, during the mornings and afternoons, the powerful voice of the speaker reverberates throughout the grove, enabling everyone in and out of the tabernacle to hear. The speakers are men from the UC Church and other brethren from like-minded denominations. I first heard power-

ful Brethren in Christ speakers like Bishop Henry Ginder, Rev. Arthur Climenhaga, and Rev. Henry Hostetter when I was a youngster at camp.

The preacher opens his Bible on the large white pulpit that is center stage, a Scripture passage is read, and then the speaker elaborates on his understanding of what it means for our lives today, using many stories and illustrations. One thing that has changed very little over the years is the discourse and content of the preaching. The male pastors – women are not permitted to preach – come to the pulpit with limited preparation and few notes and share the Word of God spontaneously as the Spirit leads. Some speak for an hour and others for longer as the congregation sits on the wooden pews, fanning themselves, listening intently with an occasional “Amen” or “Hallelujah.” The service usually begins and ends with acapella singing. Except for the benediction, when the pastor leads the campmeeting congregation in a closing prayer, everyone kneels by the wooden benches on the cement floor during prayer times. Every evening there is a passionate evangelistic message and a bold invitation for those who do not know God as Lord and Savior to kneel at the altar and pray repentantly, supported by the elders of the church.

Sixty-plus years ago I remember anxiously waiting for the large silver bell atop the tabernacle to clang eight or nine times at 1:00 p.m. every day, announcing the children’s service. Kids of all ages came clamoring into the center of the grove; older ones racing and shouting while little ones clung to their parents as they were ushered into the seats that usually held adults. Two women, one usually my mother, were ready to mesmerize the young crowd with songs, prayers, and an exciting Bible story. The leader asked for a favorite song as hands flew up all over the tabernacle, children shouting out their choices. My choice was always “You’re a Sermon in Shoes.” Then my mother would set up a large easel and with brightly colored flannelgraph figures enthusiastically tell the stories of Noah, Jacob and Esau, Ruth and Naomi, or one about the life of Jesus. We sat spellbound as she related the story, sometimes inviting one of us up to move the flannel figures across the easel. After more

exuberant singing and a prayer, we were excused to meet up with our parents, only to return to the tabernacle for a long afternoon of preaching – but not before we were handed a picture of the Bible story we heard that day.

Girls once wore long, conservative skirts, pigtailed streaming down their backs, and most women wore head coverings. Today around the grove, you can see a variety of styles from long skirts and head coverings to shorts and jeans, and short and multi-colored hair. I even saw a few of the younger pastors wearing shorts in the hot summer heat.

Reflecting on almost 70 years, I see campmeeting as one of the most formative aspects of my spiritual growth. Reverence for the Word, prayer, and commitment to God, the community, and family molded my understanding of church, God, and who I am as a “child of God.” In the early 1980s, after I became a member of the Palmyra Brethren in Christ Church, I attended Missions Sunday at Cleona Campmeeting. Rev. John Graybill, a United Christian pastor serving with the Brethren in Christ in Japan, ended his missions message by challenging those in attendance to hear God’s calling on their lives and to respond by going forward for prayer and support. With my heart pounding so hard I could hear it in my head, I wove my way to the front, affirming God’s call on my life.

At that moment I did not fully understand what that might mean for me as a woman in the Brethren in Christ Church. Within a few months I was asked to serve as the Christian Education director at the Palmyra congregation. The following year, 1984, I was encouraged to apply for a full-time ministry position at Grantham where I was blessed to serve for 19 years. As an educated professional in my 30s, I was challenged to search the Scriptures and to follow that personal calling into full-time ministry, do seminary work, and complete the requirements for licensing and ordination as a pastor in the Brethren in Christ Church. I am blessed by the faith formation that occurred through the many hours and years of participating in campmeeting: preparation for the work of teaching and preaching and serving others in the church.

Campmeeting is a retreat from the out-

side world where Christians gather to worship, enjoy the common life together and where one can hear the voice of God gently but firmly calling her to a life of service!

Mary J. Fair (MJ) served as an associate pastor at the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church from 1984-2003. She also served on the denominational Board of Congregational Life and Board of Administration in the 1990s. MJ and her husband David, both retired, now split their time between Shamokin Dam, PA and Mims, FL.

What to Do with an English Major, continued from page 1

Following the birth of my first child, I stayed home for a while but then started looking for other employment to supplement our income. During the years between the births of my two children, I worked part-time as a grading assistant at Messiah College and manager of the college post office. I liked working in the post office and enjoyed interactions with students and faculty, but I also became restless, feeling like I was underemployed and not making good use of my master’s degree in English. As I wrestled with what I might do instead of continuing to manage the post office, I consulted with the chair of the English Department at Messiah. He loaned me a book with the hopeful title of something like *What Can You Do With an English Major Besides Teach?* While the book didn’t launch me immediately into an exciting new career, it did open my mind to other possibilities.

I had already been serving as the editor of *The Prayer Challenge*, and wondered whether there might be other writing and editorial possibilities in the church, so I wrote to John Zercher to ask for his help. He referred me to Carlton Wittlinger, the academic dean at Messiah, who was finishing his comprehensive history of the Brethren in Christ Church and needed someone to compile the index. I took a partial leave of absence from my job in the post office to do the work – painstakingly creating separate 3 x 5 cards for every entry and then sorting the cards to create the index.

continued on page 11

Okay is a Relative Term

By Carissa Weaver

WITH TWO BRAIN injuries in the last two years, I've had enough neurological damage to last a lifetime. I'd like to share how much my concussions affected my life spiritually, mentally, and emotionally.

It has been a very long journey, but I am better. I hardly get headaches anymore, the dizziness has left completely, my grades are back to normal, and I can go to just about any activity I want without worrying. It's such a blessing! I tried just about every solution to fix headaches: physical therapy, pain medication, sitting in a dark room for hours, icing my head, essential oils, prescription medicine, just to name a few!

My first concussion was so much more severe than my second one. The physical therapist helped with the balance problems and the dizziness. The prescriptions acted as a preventative for headaches. Sitting in a dark room worked very well too; it just always ended up damaging my psyche. It was exhausting trying all these new things and experimenting with what worked best. Eventually though, something did work. I can do physical activity again and loud music doesn't hurt!! I cannot be more grateful for the blessings that the Lord has given me and that he has taken away my pain.

Concussion #1

But let's back up to the beginning: April 15, 2015. That day I took a hit to the back of the head during a lacrosse game and suffered my first concussion. Immediately, I was emotionally unstable; I couldn't stop crying, and the idea of interacting with people drained me. My pediatrician told me that I should be fine soon. As long as I had three symptom-free days and was cleared by my trainer, I would be able to finish out the season. I went home and was optimistic about my chances of being able to play again. Little did I know that I wouldn't ever go back to playing lacrosse, and three symptom-free days would not come for months. My entire life had changed.

The next two weeks I was not in school. The noise, light, and thinking would have

been far too much for my poor brain. During that time, I did what the doctor said would help: complete brain rest. However, for someone like me, brain rest is not something easily accomplished. Complete brain rest is exactly what it sounds like. No electronics, no thinking, no reading, no music, no light, and limited talking. Basically, sit in a dark room and stare at the ceiling (being bored out of your mind). That was incredibly difficult, but I did it! I felt a little better after those two weeks, so I returned to school for half days for another two or three weeks. I would come home and retreat into the darkness of my room. I hardly communicated; the idea of talking exhausted me. Social interaction hurt, and I withdrew. I lost the motivation to have friends over, talk to people at school, and be around my family. I just wanted to wallow in my misery and try to ease my pain.

When I received the concussion diagnosis, I didn't know that I would become depressed. I googled the symptoms of depression: anxiety, apathy, general discontent, guilt, hopelessness, loss of interest, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, mood swings, or sadness. I experienced seven of the nine symptoms. I felt as if my identity had been taken from me. I lost friendships, I was constantly angry, rude, and tactless. I hated the way I was acting, but I didn't know what I could do to change it. I felt lost.

The depression eventually went away, but the anger and the bitterness was still very evident. I couldn't (or didn't want to) fix the friendships I had lost, and I just kept imagining what my sophomore year would have been like had I not been whacked in the back of the head. I was angry with God. Everyone else seemed to be having such a great school year and I was miserable. I blamed God for the obvious mistakes I was making.

By the end of the school year, however, I had given up the anger and bitterness. I was hanging out with friends again, I didn't feel angry, I accepted my circumstances and attempted to learn everything I could from them. I was ready for a summer full of fun

(and no headaches). The physical symptoms had nearly subsided at this point, which was awesome.

Not being in school for the summer helped a lot. My headaches were manageable and I knew my limitations. I was still frustrated that I couldn't just live the life, but those moments came and went. I was happy. Then school started again.

During the fall of my junior year, I struggled. I had to drop to a lower math class because I would get severe migraines any time I went to math. I started going to physical therapy and I was told I couldn't play tennis. The same thing happened again as in the spring: I lost friendships and felt angry. I had forgotten God in my confidence and needed to return to the only one who could actually take away my pain. Once more, as soon as I focused back on Christ, my emotions leveled out. I was coping with my circumstances and tried to stay positive. Eventually, I healed. I can't pinpoint when it happened, but I stopped wearing sunglasses at school and could honestly tell people that I was doing better. By the time summer came around once more, I was free. I had been cleared by the doctors and was off medication. Physical therapy was over and I was free. I could live my life again!

Concussion #2

In August 2016, I was cleared to play tennis again. Life was back on track and everything was going as planned – until I had my second concussion. I took a tennis ball to the eye and received what my trainer called a “whiplash concussion.” Since my brain was already fragile, it didn't take much to set me back again. I was a mess. I sat with my trainer and cried my way through the conversation with him. I went home from practice that day and started over. The dizziness and imbalance were back, and the headaches were in full swing.

The thing about the second one was that I knew more this time. I remembered how poorly the first concussion affected me and I swore to myself that I wouldn't let that hap-

pen again. This one was not nearly as severe as the first. I was determined to just bounce back and finish out my senior tennis season, but in reality, my high school tennis career was over. I was frustrated, but didn't let myself fall back into the depression that rocked me so hard the first time. I refused to go back on the prescription medication and was extremely reluctant to do anything to damage myself further. And I healed! I got better much faster. By November, I was almost fully "normal." I had a lot going on that month, and that would be the test. I passed with flying colors. My emotions were intact and my headaches were all but gone. I was so overjoyed.

As of this writing (January 2017), I am fully recovered and better than even my April 14, 2015 self. I learned so much through this journey. As strange as it seems, I wouldn't trade it for the world. It's allowed me to develop relationships with new mentors, guide friends as they experience similar troubles, and connect with those suffering from mental illnesses. My faith grew so much over these months. I learned to trust the Lord's plan, even when I couldn't see the end result. He blessed me with so much and I would not have managed to get through this without him.

All this is to say that I was dealt a bad hand. According to the doctors, I fit all the

criteria for recovering more slowly. I was "an intelligent young female who suffered from headaches previously," and apparently those characteristics all contributed to a longer recovery time. But Christ molded me. Some relationships were lost. Others were strengthened. My relationship with Christ was revolutionized, and I am so thankful.

Carissa Weaver is a senior at Northern York County High School, Dillsburg, PA. She and her family are members of the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church. This story is adapted from Carissa's blog.

I'm a Daughter of the King!

By Julia Johnson

THE FALL 2016 sermon series at my church on "Aliens and Exiles: Being Christian in a Post-Christian World" transformed me. Two sermons in particular pierced my heart as a Marine Corps veteran: "When Kingdoms Collide" and "The Triumph of the Lamb." I remember Pastor David [Flowers] saying, "Jesus was careful not to confuse his Kingdom with those of the world by refusing to identify with any particular group." These words stung and I immediately thought about how I cling to the title "U. S. Marine." Pastor David shared Revelation 18:4-5 about coming out from empire. He asked, "In what ways should we be setting ourselves apart from that which opposes the Kingdom of God?" Those words played over and over in my head and the idea of exploring these truths scared me a great deal. I would have to let go of the security I felt in one identity to grab hold of my identity in Christ. To truly grasp it with my whole heart, meant letting go of my worldly identity. The Holy Spirit was gently leading me in a new direction.

I'd be lying if I said this process has been easy. It's bringing up old insecurities, guilt, hurts, and disappointments – things I had tucked deep down inside and covered up with my identity in the Marine Corps. I've cried over things I thought were healed a

long time ago, but this time, I cried to Jesus, asking him to transform the deepest, darkest parts of my life.

My mother left me just before my 13th birthday. Within one year, drugs and alcohol consumed her. With her new lifestyle also came criminal behavior. It was hard to dodge the judgmental glares and the "loud" whispers as folks in my small home town began to gossip about my family. Eventually that turned into insults directed at me personally: "Oh, she'll never amount to anything." "You're just like your dope-head mother." "Did you hear what her mom did now?" "I feel so sorry for her, she's going to end up a waste, just like her Mom." As hard as I tried to ignore the chatter, it was breaking my heart. If only they would remember my mom before the drugs took over.

Months and sometimes years came between visits with my mom. When I did get to spend time with her, I knew it would be short-lived so I pushed all the hurt down and pretended to be okay. We'd laugh, talk about "the good old days" and pretend she wasn't an addict. Then, she'd be gone again and I would pick up where she left off.

My father found himself as a single parent, raising a teenage daughter and a five-year-old son. His job required him to travel throughout the week so we lived with my

grandma, until my step-grandpa told her we had to leave. My dad made arrangements to be home as much as possible but at 16, I was left alone a lot. Our relationship was strained and we didn't spend much time together. A new girlfriend, her son, and my little brother consumed the little time he did have.

By age 19, I felt completely abandoned and quite worthless. I was searching for love in dangerous places and making choices that were not pleasing to God or healthy for me. I became pregnant by a boyfriend of three years. He placed blame and guilt on me. I was told I would ruin his life and devastate his family – the only family I had known for the past three years. How could I keep this baby and lose him? I begged him to tell me it was okay to keep our baby; I needed his approval. He drove me to an abortion clinic three hours away and told me if I didn't go through with it, he'd leave me there. The thought of being alone again crippled me. Then after doing what he had asked, I found out he had been dating someone else and his family knew it.

I remember that broken girl like it was yesterday. I was shattered and lost, just wanting to be loved and valued. Why did everyone keep leaving me? Why did people find it so easy to hurt me and betray me?

Around that time, I went to see the movie

“A Few Good Men” and was completely captivated by the loyalty, honor, and pride in those Marines. I wanted THAT, a brotherhood that would withstand anything. People would have to respect me then. I’d be a Marine, One of the Few and the Proud. I enlisted the next week. United States Marine is a title that for the first time in my life gave me a sense of purpose. No matter what happened I had that to claim as my own. Nothing anyone would do or say could ever take that accomplishment from me. The title Marine had been ingrained in me and it brought a sense of security. It made me special. People were still talking about me but now it went like this :“WOW!! Can you believe she did that?” “Great job Jule.” “Julia, we are so proud of you,” and they were.

Many people in the military are searching

for a place to belong, a family, a purpose, and security in their identity. They are searching for the things only Christ can provide on a real, true, eternal level. The truth behind “The Triumph of the Lamb” is something they are simply missing.

I’m grateful for the message Pastor David delivered. Although challenging, it sparked an even deeper transformation in my heart through Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.

The battle he has prepared me for is not one of the flesh, but a spiritual battle, one where my sword is his Word and my weapon is love. The love as shown by the Lamb that was slain is more powerful and effective than any weapon made by man. When I leave this earth, I do not want to be known as a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, but as Julia Johnson, the daughter of a King!

As I continue to work through this part of my transformation, I welcome and want conversation. An understanding of where I was as a Marine and where I am now, with my identity in Christ, is very important to all of us. My reasons for going into the military had nothing to do with wanting to fight but everything with wanting to be loved.

Julia Johnson is operations assistant at the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church where she attends with her family. She told her story as part of a testimony time following the fall sermon series.

Yelling at God

By Zach Spidel

IT HAD BEEN an awful year for me, the second of my three years in seminary. I was working three part-time jobs in addition to taking a full course load and was beyond exhausted. I felt out of place at my seminary, had made few friends, and had no time, anyway, to develop new friendships. Simply put, I was the loneliest I have ever been.

I had broken up with my girlfriend just before Christmas that year, and was emotionally torn up. But, worst of all, in the midst of all these difficulties I had let go of God. I had a nearly nonexistent prayer life, read scripture through purely academic and intellectual lenses for my course work, and was spiritually dry. I trudged through each day, growing more and more sad, and not just a little bitter. I had come to seminary spiritually well, excited to enter a new stage of preparation for the vocation God had laid on my heart, but now, just over halfway in, I was a lonely, miserable, exhausted, and spiritually hollow man, unable to do more than trudge unreflective and unfruitfully through the motions of my life.

No one can go on like this for very long without something breaking or bursting inside. One night that spring I found myself,

for the third or fourth night in a row, totally unable to sleep. As I lay there, spent but unable to rest, it all seemed too much to bear. Something in my heart snapped and I became furious with God.

“People ruin their lives by their own foolishness, and then get angry at the Lord” (Prov. 19:3). I was just this sort of fool. Some of the difficult circumstances of my situation were my own fault; many were not, but all of them would have been bearable had I not abandoned God in the midst of them, and attempted to stoically face them without him. But fool that I was, I blamed God.

For the first time, maybe in months, I spoke to God. “Spoke” is charitable. I read him the riot act. I cussed at him. I had not cussed since becoming a Christian at age 13, but I cussed at him that night. He had led me to this awful situation, he had abandoned me in it, he had hung me out to dry. What I had thought would be a grand adventure and spiritually edifying preparation for a life of ministry turned out to be a desert wasteland with no relief in sight, which had left me manifestly unfit and, honestly, totally uninterested in ministry. I went on this way,



yelling at God, for only a few minutes. Something started to happen the minute I started to yell at him. I didn’t quite realize it at first, but very quickly the sensation grew in me. God was listening to me.

Quietly, gently, lovingly, God was listening to my foolish and angry heart. My verbal blows landed ineffectually upon him. He raised no angry fist to strike back, nor did he shield himself from me. He was somehow, unbelievably, happy that at long last I was speaking to him. I knew this because his Spirit, which had not abandoned me, though I had abandoned him, let me know it. My Abba, was listening to me, and he would listen as long as I spoke. Now that we were speaking again, he was waiting for me to finish (though I had no right to speak at all), to tell me what I needed to hear.

My angry rant dissolved, all the sudden, into tears. I felt the love of God wash over me in an almost physical sensation. Words of

apology poured out of me – “Oh, I am so sorry, God. Jesus, I am so sorry, I’m so sorry I yelled at you. I’m so sorry I left you.” I wept so hard that snot-mingled tears ran into my mouth. I wept so hard, I had to gasp for breath. I wept for a long time. His quiet, steady love had shown me the fool I had been, and at first I wept for that. But as God held me in his love, my tears, though falling just as fast, were transformed. I began to weep for joy. My God had forgiven me, he

loved me, he had never left me, and he was here now, despite my sin, to deliver me.

“Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Here’s my heart, oh take and seal it. Seal it for thy courts above.” I pray the truth of this old hymn quite often now. And whenever I realize that my heart’s begun to wander, I marvel at God’s faithfulness. Though I am the worst of sinners, though my heart wanders all too often, he has indeed sealed it. The Good Shepherd has placed his

mark upon me, and when I wander he comes and finds me. I love him so much for that, and I pray that I’ll get a little better at loving him every day. I pray that I’ll learn to stick close by him, within reach of his rod and his staff – right beneath the shadow of his wings. There is no better place.

Zach Spidel is the pastor of The Shepherd’s Table congregation in Dayton, OH.

On Becoming Who I Am

By Ann Bodling

I THINK IT might have begun when I was about six years old, in the Hundred Acre Wood, most probably with Christopher Robin, who lived in a tree. Piglet and Owl also lived in trees and Pooh lived in what appeared to be a sand bank just next to a tree, but they were animals, and so the impact was not as great. Still, they were all friends and lived their lives mostly outside, and often together – a boy, bear, pig, owl, rabbit, donkey, tiger, and kangaroos. So, the seed of possibility was planted at an early age.

The natural world has been my natural home for most of my life and was the anchor I didn’t recognize I had in childhood, as I lived in 20 different places, for different reasons, over the course of my growing up years. I played house under tree boughs and made soup from bits of bark, leaves, and dirt, dreaming of life as the Swiss Family Robinson lived it. I explored snails that trailed around our yard and seals that climbed onto rocks, out in the bay. I climbed trees and read favorite books in their branches and, when it rained, I sat under an umbrella, beneath the huge pin oak in the front yard, watching the drops fall (much to the embarrassment of my father). I read all the animal books I could get my hands on: *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *Big Red*, *The Incredible Journey*, *Champion Dog-Prince Tom*, *Misty of Chincoteague*, the Black Stallion books. Each of them, in their own way, opened to my imagination a world that was entirely the opposite of the tame, suburban one in which I lived. They took me on adventures with creatures who, though for-

eign in my experience, seemed as natural as the human friends I had to keep leaving behind.

The one constant was my maternal grandparents’ home in the Kentucky Appalachian Mountains, the home place to which I was allowed to return, year after year. There, my friendship with the land was born and nurtured. I rambled the familiar hollows and hills with my uncle, one time surprising a flock of guinea hens who seemed like something right out of a book. I helped hoe, harvest, and eat from from the large vegetable garden my grandparents depended on. I collected eggs (when I could find them) from the chickens that ran wild around the house and fed them cracked corn and the few scraps left over from our meals. I gathered rotten wild apples and threw them over the fence and down the wooded riverbank, hoping I would hear them plop into the Tug River. I gathered zinnias, sweet peas, and tiny pink floribunda roses from my grandmother’s garden, feeling like I carried the sum of all beauty in my child-sized hands. In the morning, the grass was heavy with dew, and birds called as the mist rose between the mountains across the road. In the evening, songs of crickets and katydids permeated the darkness and the sweet fragrance of golden-rod and cut grass drifted through my bedroom window. How could I have not fallen in love?

I ramble on my own now, seeking out creaturely companions, becoming familiar with their language and habits, needing the

connection with the land that feeds my soul. I garden for wildlife. I plant flowers in my vegetable gardens so that pollinators will have something to eat there. I let fallen leaves lay so toads might have suitable home sites and so I can watch eastern towhees and brown thrashers searching for insects. And, I write.

I write about the natural world, and my aims are three-fold. I write to present the outdoors as an accessible invitation, full of wonder and mystery, for those who are not yet acquainted with it. I write about our human responsibility to care for the land and its creatures, and present easily implemented steps that people can take in their own home landscapes. And lastly, I write for people of faith who need the reminder that we are called to be stewards and co-laborers with God in caring for Creation. My hope is that, as a result, people will become intrigued and be drawn into the practice of noticing, thereby entering into the more sacred practice of caring for and loving this wondrous place in which we live.

Ann Bodling, formerly a member of Elizabethtown (PA) Brethren in Christ Church, currently lives with her husband in southern Maryland, along the Potomac River. She is a private gardener and spiritual director, and writes about the intersection of God, Creation and people for her blog, “Earthy Blessings” at earthyblessings.blogspot.com.

Forgiving Him Was the Right Thing to Do

By Kimberly Tucker

THE TELEPHONE RINGS - the old kind: princess style, rotary dial, landline. It was after midnight on Wednesday, January 16, 1991. The birthing center needed me. The primary midwife was out on a home-birth. An older midwife was attending a woman at the center and asked for my help. I was in training to be lay midwife.

I arrived to find a Mennonite woman in labor with the older midwife at her side. An hour or two passed and a phone call came – a third woman was in labor! I jumped at the chance to assist the father at my first home birth as the attendant.

Fast forward a few hours: after I arrived back home around 7:00 a.m., my husband left for work and I began my day with little sleep, homeschooling our three children. It was above freezing and the snow was melting, creating slush. Our neighbor up the mountain had a tractor and had plowed us out a few days prior. To thank him, I baked banana nut bread, put it in my daughter Dulcimer's backpack, and sent her and her brother, Seth, on a little hike up the logging road to deliver the thank you gift.

A few minutes later, Dulcimer came running home yelling, "The dog is eating Seth!" I ran out of the house, instructing Dulcimer to stay with her little brother, Isaac, in the house. At our closest neighbor's house, I found a blue tick coon hound dragging Seth by the right side of his face around in the snow. I grabbed Seth, picked him up, and began to walk home. The dog kept jumping up on Seth as I held all 42 pounds of our just six-year-old son in my arms. I scraped the ground with my bare hands to grasp stones, dirt, and snow to throw at the dog to try to dissuade him from attacking Seth in my arms.

It took me 15 minutes to get Seth from the neighbor's house to the top of our driveway. I yelled to Dulcimer to let our springer spaniel, Pokey, loose – hoping that at the very least, a conflict would ensue, and I could get Seth in the house. In my head, I thought that I was sacrificing our beloved pet for the life of our son. That turned out to not be the

case; Pokey chased away the coon hound and Seth was safe inside.

Seth's injuries were life threatening – he had been scalped down to the bone on the top of his head, no right ear was visible, and we later found that his right jaw bone and facial nerve had been eaten, causing right facial paralysis.

Our neighbor raised blue tick coon hounds, a breed that is not known to be vicious. As it turns out, Seth was in the wrong place at the wrong time. There were several puppies running around and a female dog was in heat. The male dog was loose. The puppies and the male dog smelled the banana bread and knocked Dulcimer down trying to get it. Seth pushed the dogs away. We suspect that the male dog responded territorially and attacked him.

Ultimately, Seth spent many hours in surgery, two weeks in Children's Hospital in Washington, DC, and a year to recover. He remained "bald" for 16 years until he decided to have the necessary reconstructive surgery. But I'm getting ahead of myself: the first night at the hospital, our Mennonite pastor came and visited. He asked me how I was going to respond to our neighbor. He had been mean to us from the first day we began building our house. He even threatened to kill my husband, Paul. He was very unlikeable. In the flash of a second, I said I forgave him and I knew it would be wrong to sue him to pay for the medical bills. I can't explain how I could forgive him so quickly. I just did. It was the obedient thing to do.

After 11:00 p.m., the surgeon came and reported what they found and what they didn't. Now that I knew that Seth was stable, I asked, "What did the United States do in the Middle East?" I thought I could handle the answer, knowing that Seth was alive. We had attacked Kuwait – the first day of the Gulf War!

Every Christmas after Seth's dog attack, I would bake some cookies for our neighbor with the dogs. The children and I would sing Christmas carols and give him the cookies. And every January 16, I would pray that

somehow God would make himself known to our neighbor.

We moved three years later from our geodesic dome in the woods. I don't know what happened to our neighbor with the dogs. I do know that forgiving him was the right thing to do.

Kimberly Tucker attends the Dillsburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

What to Do with an English Major, *continued from page 6*

I never did another index, but the job marked the first of many paid and volunteer denominational editing and writing assignments, and helped to launch me on a viable career other than teaching that made good use of my English skills. In 1981, I was asked to edit a quarterly denominational peace and justice newsletter, and 35+ years later, I am still the editor of *Shalom!*

In 1992, I was hired part-time to develop two children's mental health newsletters for Pennsylvania. That position morphed over the years, and from 1997-2012 I worked full-time as a communications specialist with the state. I formally retired in 2012, and shortly thereafter succeeded one of my favorite Messiah professors as editor for the Brethren in Christ Historical Society.

I have not missed my teaching career one day since I resigned more than 40 years ago. Over the past 25+ years, I have found my niche in editorial and writing work, with enough opportunities and creative challenges to stimulate my mind and keep life interesting. If I were entering college now to prepare for an editorial and writing career, I might not major in English, but I think I am proof that a good basic education as an English major is excellent grounding for something other than teaching.

Condensed from "Pieces of Peace," the editor's personal blog at harrietbicklser.wordpress.com.

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From Homelessness to Full Employment

By Ana Preciado

THE CHURCH OF Second Chances (at Ontario Brethren in Christ Church in California) strives to provide for the local homeless in Ontario through its Healing Waters Ministry. This ministry provides hot meals, showers, clothes, and a weekly devotional for the attendees. There is an equal mix of men and women as well as familiar faces and new faces every week. Members of the church take turns cooking the hot meal and the church receives plenty of donations from congregants and outside sources.

Many men and women have been helped beyond the ministry's scope. The Healing Waters Ministry serves as a stepping stone to providing more help outside the ministry to those who need it. Our mission to reach out to the local homeless population and to serve the needy through our ministry comes from Matthew 25:35-36. We want to show people that everyone needs second chances and that we are there to introduce them to a God who gives second chances.

Jose Perez (not his real name) started attending weekly about two years ago and shortly after developed a good relationship with Pastor Frank. He asked for help and started coming to Bible studies and church services. He had a friendly personality and instantly got along really well with the mem-

bers. Since he had nowhere else to stay, we would find him sleeping outside the church waiting for the pastor to arrive. The pastor mentored him, and Jose helped out with anything that was needed. After Jose had been hanging around with Pastor Frank and the church for several weeks, the church decided to let him stay temporarily in a room at the church. He showed a deep desire to leave behind the life he once knew, which was drugs, alcohol, and trouble. He wanted change in his life.

Pastor Frank worked with him directly and helped him mend his broken relationship with his family, and go to court and deal with a driving-under-the-influence (DUI) arrest he had on his record. He was assigned community service hours and was mandated to attend a DUI class. The church helped him pay his fines and pay for his DUI class. After he completed the class he started working temporarily through agencies. At the same time, the church was working with a nonprofit organization to start a community garden at our church. The organization was promoting an internship for anyone who wanted to learn about gardening and landscaping as well as help start up other community gardens in the area. We shared this with the congregation and sure enough, Jose

showed interest in the program and signed up. Shortly after, he started attending the classes and landed a job with the organization. He was also volunteering at the Healing Waters Ministry weekly as a way of contributing back. He soon became a full time employee with the nonprofit organization where he is still working.

Jose is one of many who have been helped through the Healing Waters Ministry and have experienced God's transforming power in their lives. We at Second Chances are honored that God is using us to proclaim his kingdom and allowing us to be a light that continues to shine in the darkness.

Ana Preciado is the administrative assistant for Bishop Perry Engle of the Pacific and Midwest Conferences. She attends the Ontario (CA) Brethren in Christ Church, where she serves on the leadership group.