God with Us

I remember my first year of seminary. It was a year of transition from undergraduate to graduate studies. It was a transition from the college dorm to my own apartment. It was a transition from working part time in a college art gallery to searching desperately for employment. I felt called to ministry and felt that I needed to pursue theological study to do justice to that call.

Somewhere, in the midst of transition and assurance, I began to doubt. The workload was different and challenging. I was responsible for my home: the cooking, cleaning, and extermination of mice, none of which I could do expertly. The job search was disheartening as I was consistently rejected for being under- or overqualified. The transition became challenge, and the challenge became doubt. I doubted my call, my abilities, and my relationship with God.

I called my mom in despair, and during our lengthy conversation; she reminded me that God is with us. Doubt became questions. Questions became conversations with God. Conversations with God became comfort, strength, and peace for the journey of life.

In a short time, Church of God congregations across the country will begin celebrating Advent and the Christ’s Birthday Observance. This year as we prepare our hearts for the Messiah, let us remember and rejoice that Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. In our times of transition or comfort, assurance or doubt, peace or turbulence, God is with us on the journey.

God is with us as individuals and communities. As a community of faith, the Church of God is able to demonstrate “God with us” by observing the birth of Christ in a time that is filled with commercialism and busyness. We can respond through prayer, devotion, and by giving generously to the Christ’s Birthday Observance Offering (our goal this year is $1.4 million, an average of $652 per church or $5.70 per person in our churches). The offering supports the frontline ministries of the Church of God. Each dollar given is a tangible way to be God-with-us to a student at one of our colleges; to a listener of CBH, a missionary, a national worker, a participant at the North American Convention or IYC; to a partner of Christian Women Connection; or to a neighbor in your community. Join Christian Women Connection and churches across the United States as we not only remember that God is with us but explore ways to show God-with-us to the world.

Your church will be sent a resource packet to help in the celebration. For more information, check out www.wchog.org or call 866-778-0804.
Cultivating the Church of God in Burkina Faso: A New Phase

Since February 2009, the missionaries and leaders of the Church of God in the West African nation of Côte d’Ivoire have been working to plant their first church in the neighboring country of Burkina Faso. One of the world’s poorest nations, Burkina Faso has a very significant Muslim population. The initial church plant is located in a newly developing neighborhood of Bobo Dioulasso, the second largest city in this land on the edge of the Sahara Desert. Though a number of persons, especially youth, have responded positively and openly to the gospel, many struggle with opposition from family members and find it difficult to become active in the church plant. So the discipleship process is slow and laborious.

Another major challenge has been to find a permanent pastor to serve this new plant. After praying for over a year for this need and sending pastors from Côte d’Ivoire to work with this new group for a month or less at a time, we have seen God’s provision for a permanent pastor who is well suited for this kind of pioneer evangelistic work. Pastor Moise and family from the Tortiya Church of God in northern Côte d’Ivoire have felt led to respond to this call after spending two months in Bobo Dioulasso recently. They have shown excellent adaptability to this setting and are well equipped with a strong knowledge of the Dioula language and culture, which is the common language of this area of Burkina Faso. His church in Tortiya has released them to go as the first Ivorian missionaries of the Church of God to reside in Burkina Faso. Plans are for Moise, his wife, and their youngest daughter, Ruth, to move to Bobo by mid-October to take responsibility for this new work. They have committed to staying for an initial period of one year. Their older children will stay in Tortiya and care for the family home and fields.

We are thankful for a number of pastors who have invested their efforts and time in beginning this new work. Pastor Yassia spent the months of September and October there and began literacy classes with ten persons eager to learn to read and write. Missionaries Larry and LeAnn Sellers have made several trips into Burkina as well to assess the growth and work with these dedicated pastors.

Please celebrate with us this important new phase of development in the cultivation of the first work of the Church of God in this very needy nation of Burkina Faso. Pray for Pastor Moise and family as they move to Burkina and adjust to a new life there as well as for continued growth and faithfulness among new believers. Pray also for those taking literacy classes to keep on learning to read God’s Word.
A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other” (1 Cor 12:7 nlt). A ministry of New Covenant Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania celebrates the spiritual gifts of individuals and then puts these gifts to work. The Crocheting Angels are cultivating the spiritual gifts of its volunteers. The art form is crocheting, but the spiritual gifts are craftsmanship, creative communication, hospitality, mercy, and service—to name a few. While nurturing the spiritual gifts of those within the Crocheting Angels ministry, the group is also strengthening its ministry to reach beyond their church and into the world around them.

“I love to crochet, because I can make items for other people. I make items and I don’t keep anything. I give everything away,” Carol Rowe, founder of the Crocheting Angels explains. For Carol, it’s all about using her gifts and talents for others. Seven years ago, she formed the ministry after expressing to New Covenant Church that she wanted to teach people to crochet and use the skill to serve the needs of other projects and ministries of the church.

The Crocheting Angels now meet on Saturday mornings and make a variety of products, including blankets, hats, sweaters, prayer shawls, and lap robes. Each Christmas season, a local nursing home enlists their help to make gifts for the residents. They have made baby hats for the maternity wards at two area hospitals. As a part of the church’s Comfort Ministry—an organized effort to encourage families that have lost loved ones—the group crochets bookmarks.

Recently, the church approached the Crocheting Angels about making beanie hats to send to children who lost family members to AIDS in Swaziland, an African nation which regularly faces bitterly cold winters. The Beanie Machine, as the project was called, leveraged the talents and gifts of the Crocheting Angels and resulted in the creation of 400 hats. “We got so busy making them, we didn’t count them ‘til the end,” Carol recalls. “We had no idea we had that many!”

Carol recognizes that the Crocheting Angels do much more than provide charitable services. While the number of people who have been blessed by this ministry may be too high to determine, the number of individuals who are continually experiencing Strategic Value Four is twelve—the approximate total number of Crocheting Angels. “Transforming Culture by Being the Body of Christ” includes addressing the health of the body, which includes the spiritual gifts of its members. Crocheting Angels emphasizes Strategic Value Four: Cultivate! Nurturing the spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:1–7) of every individual, church, and agency. They encourage and exhort one another as they listen to each other’s weekly concerns. They cultivate intercessory prayer as they bring each other’s requests to God. It’s a close-knit group, and there is no fear of sharing personal struggles and fears.

As the Crocheting Angels meet each week, the continual cultivation of their gifts strengthens their ministry and prepares their hearts for a harvest of blessing in the body of Christ.

A metal plate, a basket, a bag, or a bucket—in most North American churches, one of these items probably passes your pew or theater-style-chair each Sunday morning. Ever wonder where your money ends up? Sometimes it’s hard to envision the condition of your offering after God has blessed and multiplied it. Your offering, which you may consider small, reaches far beyond what you might imagine. Spread the Word offerings from the International Youth Convention of the Church of God go to support various ministries around the world. On October 22, a group of seven youth leaders and one high school student embarked on a journey to get a firsthand look at how Spread the Word offerings are forever changing the face of ministry in Paraguay.

They toured Radio Alternativa, the only Christian radio station in southern Paraguay. Through funds provided by Spread the Word, this radio station was able to obtain a generator, a transmitter, and part of a radio tower. Julie Kurrle, a director at the station, shared stories of how lives have been changed because of the radio ministry. “Many people have come to Christ, have been saved from suicide, from aborting their babies, and from the vice of alcohol. One man who was suicidal found hope through the radio station, gave his life to the Lord, and now has a weekly program on the

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through much interaction with ministry leaders, it became clear the God has indeed multiplied Spread the Word funds. Mark Shaner, leader of the group, was especially excited to observe the contagious spirit of the beneficiaries of these ministry dollars. “It was awesome to see a relatively young church so vibrant and constantly dreaming new dreams on how to reach people with the message of the gospel,” he explains. “We saw the church in action, alive and vibrant!”

To further the development of church leaders in Paraguay, these representatives of the Youth Ministry Team and the Youth Network Team taught the Five Principles Training. This teaching program, designed to prepare leaders in any country to effectively accomplish the ministry work of the church, has been translated into Spanish to serve the needs of the region. Mark reflects, “When we taught the Five Principle Training to fifty to seventy people each time, those in the audience took down scrupulous notes and had very engaging questions on how to put it into action. The non-christian schools were very open to hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ!” The Youth Ministry Team hopes to take the Five Principle Training to other parts of the world in the coming years, including Russia, India, and Africa.

On the trip, which began on October 14, the group also delivered ministry supplies, spent time with children at a soccer clinic, visited local schools, met with missionaries, and took advantage of a variety of teaching and evangelistic opportunities.

Since 2002, youth in the Church of God have given more than a half million dollars to spread the gospel around the globe. Through Spread the Word, teenagers have helped to supply tools for evangelism in twenty-eight different countries on six continents. More than ninety missionaries and national ministry leaders have been grateful recipients of funds that Church of God youth raised.

A Different Kind of Adoption

By Carl Stagner

Chandler Elementary School in Goshen, Indiana, was labeled as failing by the government in early 2008. Troy Scott, pastor of First Church of God in Goshen, Indiana, first heard this report after reading an article about it in the local newspaper. The school was indeed struggling on a variety of levels, but Troy was deeply moved by the plight of the school. He concluded that an entire group of people should not be given a label, particularly one that seemed to leave them with no hope. Perhaps the label ignored the inherited living environments of the students, a lack of resources, or an absence of spiritual counsel. Troy saw the potential for good and the chance to realize success among the faculty, staff, students, and parents. There was much work that lay ahead.

First Church of God set the adoption in motion with sixty volunteers ready to assist the school with anything that was needed. “We saw the needs as encouraging the teachers and staff, supporting them with the extra work they faced, and offering a tutoring program for the kids,” Troy recalls. Each church volunteer was assigned a teacher, staff member, or administrator to encourage through prayer and notes of encouragement. Many in the church commit to
Did you know that martial arts can reinforce lessons of Christian education? At Cornerstone Church of God in Anchorage, Alaska, that’s exactly what they’re doing. For some, learning martial arts may be just about learning self-defense or developing confidence. At Cornerstone, martial arts are a thriving ministry of the church. Paul Griffin, Anchorage Christian Taekwondo instructor, teaches classes twice each week at the church. Though in its infancy, Anchorage Christian Taekwondo is creating quite a stir in the community and providing both physical and spiritual exercise for its students.

Paul Griffin’s history with taekwondo stretches back at least fifteen years. From the beginning, he recognized similarities between martial arts and Christianity. He and his wife began attending Cornerstone Church in Anchorage and expressed interest in developing a martial arts ministry through the church. Anchorage Christian Taekwondo has become one of Cornerstone’s premier ministries.

Anchorage Christian Taekwondo is all about instilling core values of the Christian faith into the hearts of its students. Paul Griffin regularly uses teaching techniques to illustrate integrity, perseverance, self-control—all while emphasizing the love of Christ. They also pray before and after each meeting. “Where other martial arts programs teach the power of the person, we teach the power of God,” Griffin comments. The ministry’s Web site further explains the program’s purpose: “As a student learns about taekwondo and the attributes of martial arts, they also learn about God, and how we can use the attributes of martial arts in our lives as Christians.”

Scott Russ, administrative pastor at Cornerstone, says, “Paul has removed the Eastern culture out of taekwondo and injected Christianity into it.” Though the program has not been around for long, Griffin has already seen how it has made an impact on the community. As the ministry continues to expand its reach and influence, Griffin hopes to involve more of the community. Ross sees the ministry as an evangelistic tool: “I’ve enjoyed seeing them reach out into the community around us. They work with several families that aren’t members of the church, and Paul now has an influence on their lives.”

Anchorage Christian Taekwondo is perhaps most influential on students themselves, in practice and in competition. “Students compete in local tournaments and represent Christ while they are there,” Griffin explains. “We will soon have uniforms with our name and logo on them. We stress the importance of self-control during tournaments, due to the fact that many secular schools look at us and look for any opportunity to point out if we act inappropriately.” And when Anchorage Christian Taekwondo students display the fruit of the Spirit, the community sees Jesus Christ in them.

“Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come” (Phil 4:8 NLT). Cornerstone Church is training disciples for a life of godliness, preparing Christian soldiers for spiritual battle, and surely giving Satan a black eye.
Church Softball Revisited

By Carl Stagner

Churches in the United States have had softball teams for decades. It’s nothing new. A close cousin to America’s favorite pastime, softball has been a mainstay in churches and has offered regular opportunities for fun and fellowship. Many churches still have softball teams today because of longstanding traditions and a sense of ownership and achievement. Great Lakes Church in Amherst, Ohio, uses softball as a ministry, but has redefined the term church league.

The Great Lakes Church softball teams do not play teams from other churches. Instead, they play teams that make up the city league. It may be true that they do not have the necessary skill to contend with their opponents, but their focus is elsewhere. Karson Collins, pastor at Great Lakes Church, remarks, “We knew we would lose fairly often, so we created ways to get moral victories. This seemed like a great chance to thrust ourselves into the community.”

The teams’ goals are to serve others first, have fun while demonstrating Christlike attitudes, and then win games if possible. More than a chance to have fellowship and meet other Christians, the softball teams of Great Lakes Church are showing God’s love to the community and reaping results. Lead pastor Rich Johnson said in a report to the Ohio Ministries of the Church of God that in 2009, the softball ministry “became the primary reason that we grew as a church through the summer.” The softball teams give away hot dogs and bottled water to their opposing teams and to the fans. It’s obvious to the public that Great Lakes Church softball is not about winning games. The purpose is to reach the community for Christ. “We are intentional about all of our programs. If they aren’t meeting a part of the church’s mission, we don’t do them,” Karson explains.

That mission, “Honor God, Serve Others,” is indeed being accomplished through their softball ministry. When visitors come to a worship service at Great Lakes Church, they are supplied with information about church-sponsored activities that are not explicitly Christian. Softball is one way the church relates to society. “It was also a way to connect Easter visitors. We had more than three hundred people at our Easter service, and we made sure that we had non-Christian activities to inform them of,” Karson says. The church participates in many other events that are designed to draw people who may not otherwise be comfortable with church.

Great Lakes Church is growing in size and in heart. Karson reflects on this healthy growth: “I believe that Jesus simply met the needs of those he came in contact with, and that simple act drew unparalleled crowds. At Great Lakes Church, we choose to serve those around us, and we have found that people love to talk about how they were served and want to share with others the love of Christ that we shared with them.”

On October 10, the Great Lakes Church will “hit one out of the ballpark” with the opening of a second location in nearby Avon, Ohio.
MACU Names Reid-Martinez VP for Academic Affairs

Mid-America Christian University has named Dr. Kathaleen Reid-Martinez as its new vice president for academic affairs.

Reid-Martinez joins MACU from Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, California, where she was vice president for nontraditional and experiential learning. She also served at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia, where she began as an associate professor and became director of the Center for Leadership Studies. She guided the leadership center to full school status and saw it grow from 32 students to more than 525 students in five years. During this time, she was named dean of the leadership school while concurrently serving for two years as the dean of the School of Government. In addition, Reid-Martinez is a former executive vice president for administration and a professor at the Church of God Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee.

She is also a presenter and consultant regarding leadership and faculty development and higher education administration. She has worked with numerous organizations, including the Office of the First Vice President of Peru for leadership development of the National Youth Congress; NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium; NATO Defense College in Rome, Italy; the Joint Forces Staff College, Norfolk, Virginia; Asbury Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky; the Bureau of Education, The Hague, The Netherlands; and the Federal Degree Granting Institute, United States.

Reid-Martinez is the author of several peer-reviewed publications and chapters of a number of academic books. She is a frequent speaker at national and international conferences pertaining to leadership, technology and innovation within higher education. She has promoted excellence in education and leadership on five continents.

For more information about MACU, visit www.macu.edu.
monthly monetary gifts to needy staff members. Others contribute their time and skills to the school by volunteering in the office and the classroom.

On Wednesdays, the church provides a tutoring program to assist students in their studies. About half of the students who take advantage of the tutoring program come from families in which English is not the primary language. These students receive a tremendous benefit from the volunteers who patiently offer assistance. Troy believes that the adoption has “built a bridge between First Church of God and the Hispanic community.” The teachers have nothing but enthusiastic praise for the tutoring program. “They can send an e-mail to our tutoring coordinator, Rachel, letting her know what one of their students needs to work on,” Troy explains. The tutors know what to expect and can care for the students accordingly.

The list of services that First Church of God has provided to Chandler Elementary continues to grow. A celebration service was held at the church that included Chandler Elementary administration, staff, and students. One of the assistant superintendents in the district attended and thanked the congregation for their dedication to the school. With tears in his eyes, he pointed to the church’s vision statement, which hangs at the front of the sanctuary: “Becoming a community of transformed hearts and lives.” The administrator exclaimed, “Your church gets it! You’re sharing that transformation with others!”

First Church of God has truly taken hold of Strategic Value Two: Permeate! Engaging every individual, church, and agency in the Great Commandments (Matt 22:37–39). Troy insists that other Church of God congregations can permeate culture too. He says, “Find the problem in your community that God has uniquely positioned your church to address. Let him guide you to that issue. Then get to work!”
A recent survey, released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, suggests that many Christians know less about religion than do atheists and agnostics. Ignorance is not necessarily anything to be ashamed of. All of us are uninformed about something. I, for example, know next to nothing about how an automobile engine works (though I suspect it has something to do with steroid-enhanced hamsters on treadmills).

But ignorance is nothing to crow about either. It is certainly questionable when it relates to an area we say is particularly, even supremely, important to us. Unfortunately, in some quarters of Christendom there’s been a longstanding tendency to act as though cluelessness were next to godliness.

To be sure, there is biblical backing for a measure of skepticism about how far learning can take us. As the writer of Ecclesiastes put it, “There’s no end to the publishing of books, and constant study wears you out so you’re no good for anything else” (Eccl 12:12, msg). And the apostle Paul warned about people who are “always learning but never able to come to knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim 3:7).

But engaging in a lot of anti-intellectual humbuggery can be just as tiresome, pride-inflated, and injurious to true spirituality as the pointy-headed, puffed-up pontificating of intellectual elites. People who embrace “the dumber, the better”—for fear of overdeveloping their brains at the expense of their souls—endanger themselves as surely as individuals who fight obesity by putting themselves on a weekly diet consisting of a parsley sprig and three saltines. Extremism in either direction can be deadly.

In an increasingly complex and nuanced world, can believers really afford to fall behind unbelievers in understanding the history, theology, and biblical narratives of their faith? Is it really okay to run the risk of eventually producing a generation that might find it difficult to pinpoint the flaws in a Bible story in which Abraham furiously pilots the ark through the divided waters of the Red Sea in order to reach the Isle of Patmos in time to deliver two lions to be used to devour Daniel for refusing to worship a golden calf fashioned from nose-rings Delilah received as Passover gifts from Charlton Heston?

Given those who consider Christian faith to be a matter of the emotions to the exclusion of the mind, perhaps it should come as little surprise that religious and biblical literacy are waning among some believers. But I think we should find it disturbing. After all, when Jesus talked about how we should love God, he specifically stressed that we should do it with our hearts, souls, and minds (Matt 22:37).

The views expressed in this column are not necessarily those of Church of God Ministries or, at points, even the writer, but are written with tongue firmly planted in cheek to hopefully provoke a leavening bit of laughter and a smidgen of thought.