

THE LIVING CHURCH NEWS

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The Values of Living Youth Programs

Dear Brethren,

Teens and those new to the Living Church of God probably know very little of my past involvement in the Church's summer camps, and since I plan to take direct oversight of our teen camp in Texas this year, I thought it would be helpful to share some background.

My upbringing was in the world, participating in Boy Scouts, Explorer Scouts, Civil Air Patrol, and organized baseball, tackle football, basketball, and swimming. My wife, on the other hand, was privileged to spend her teen years in the Church. Among other opportunities, she attended the first two summer camps held by the Radio Church of God, forerunner of the Worldwide Church of God (WCG). It was a very different world back then, for both of us. Many leaders both in and outside the Church in the late '50s and early '60s had been in the military during World War II and approached summer camp with that background.

Carol's first camp, in 1962, was more like boot camp. The pioneers of that first Church-sponsored camp lived for eight weeks in small booths without air conditioning in Big Sandy, Texas. They had to get up in time for 6:00 a.m. exercises and go through rigorous dorm inspections. Nevertheless, there were plenty of fun activities and enduring bonds of friendship were formed. It could not have been too bad, as Carol and many others returned for the second year.

My first involvement with the Church Summer Education Program was in 1983 in Orr, Minnesota, teaching swimming and water polo. Even though I had plenty of experience with camping and athletics, I was amazed by how well-organized the schedule and activities were. I then worked at the camp in Big Sandy over the summer of 1986, and in Orr again

from 1987 through 1994. My responsibilities ranged from water sports to Christian Living and overseeing the high school staff.

There were three sessions of three weeks each in Minnesota during those years, with more than 500 campers and staff per session. Working the first session was of great personal benefit, especially under Dr. Kermit Nelson, who put us through a one-week orientation prior to the start of camp. This, along with working under four different camp directors over the years, was great training for the future.

In 1995, I helped organize the first Global Youth Camp at Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri, where I served as Assistant Camp Director and outlined the programs. I continued in the same role for the next two years, near Siler City, North Carolina, before moving camp to a more remote location near Pickford in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Following the disruption that brought about our name change to Living Church of God, Dr. Meredith appointed me as North American Youth Development Director, and I directed the Living Youth Camp in Michigan from 1999 until 2008, where we averaged around 200 campers and staff each year. It was also my privilege to start the Missouri Preteen Camp at Camp Sherwood Forest in Cuivre River State Park in 2000. In 2009, we took 80-plus campers on a week-long canoe trip through parts of Voyageurs National Park, on the border between Minnesota and Canada.

After 25 years of working with the Church's summer camps, I "retired" to focus more on responsibilities with the Work in Canada. However, I occasionally came out of "camp-retirement," taking part in camps in the U.K. and Belgium, visiting the Lone Star Camp in Texas for two weeks in 2017, and experiencing the 2018 Adventure Camp.

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Growing in Our Approach to Camp

Because of this experience and background, I want to share part of an approach that several of us have developed. It involves more than expertise in activities and requires a well-trained staff that understands, teaches, and guides by example the mission and goals of camp. Following our first camp in Missouri, we realized the importance of building a staff that understood and “bought into” the program’s ideals.

It also became clear to me that the approach used in WCG, while excellent in many ways and with the best of intentions, fell short. From the very beginning of WCG’s Youth Opportunities United programs, the fundamental idea was that providing sports opportunities for our teens would keep them in the Church—and it did, with some. That may be an oversimplification, but my point is that many young people still abandoned the Church, regardless of those programs; they were not the stellar success hoped for.

We realized that this dynamic had to change, and knew that people love that in which they invest time, energy, and resources. That is one reason we strongly urge parents to teach their teens to earn money in order to pay for at least a portion of summer camp expenses. They get more out of camp when they have some “skin in the game.” We also try to put more emphasis on our youth and teens being personally involved in the Church, whether through earning their way to camp, contributing special music, setting up chairs, or serving in some other capacity on the Sabbath. They can also help care for the physical needs of an elderly person in the congregation, perhaps by raking leaves, mowing a lawn, or fixing a meal.

One program that will be revived this year is that of having a limited number of high schoolers serve as camp staff. We know that many teens have appreciated this opportunity, and we also know that, when they teach the values of camp to others, they begin more deeply to “buy into” those values themselves. This also provides the camp program with future leaders in various camp responsibilities.

Striving for a Godly Atmosphere

So, what are these values? First, we strive to do all things decently, in order, without confusion, and in peace (1 Corin-

thians 14:33, 40). *Decency* involves right standards of dress, godly language, and proper behavior. *Orderliness* requires diligently planning activities and training the staff so that all are “on the same page.” *Confusion is avoided* by consistency in approach at all levels. When things are done decently, in order, and without confusion, *the result is peace*.

Second, we have three main rules: Don’t hurt yourself, don’t hurt others, and don’t hurt things. This is why “practical jokes” are not tolerated. Due to the escalation factor of such pranks, people and things eventually get hurt. People are also hurt by ridicule, put-downs, or being left out. We introduce traditions that encourage concern for other people and that make sure *no one* is left out. Staff are encouraged to give each camper personal, individualized attention, to “Make someone’s day every day.” We want every camper to feel that all the staff really care for him or for her.

Third, we strive to de-emphasize “cool.” When someone is trying to be “cool” in the way he or she dresses or acts, the focus is on the self, and when everyone is trying to “out-cool” others, you have a camp filled with self-centered individuals where the “un-cool” are left out. That is not outgoing concern!

Will we ever attain a camp where all campers and staff live these ideals perfectly? I think you know the answer—but there are many expectations and traditions we introduce into the program to encourage outgoing concern and discourage self-centered behavior.

We must always keep in perspective the proper emphasis we should give the Living Youth Programs, neither over-emphasizing nor under-emphasizing their importance. We want to work in harmony with the commission God has given us.

Currently, about 25 percent of the Church consists of non-baptized individuals age 25 or younger. That is a significant body of believers who can benefit from focused attention to help them come to real repentance and commitment to doing the will of God. Camp is a major way to spiritually feed and uplift these beloved young people, and with God’s help, we will use it to do exactly that.



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EDITORIAL By Gerald E. Weston

Let Us Not Judge One Another!

We all look forward to the time when life will “get back to normal.” The year 2020 has now passed, but serious problems persist. It was only about a year ago that many of us became aware of a dangerous virus in China that was growing into a more widespread threat. By February 2020, it was a worldwide concern, and by March, almost the entire world began shutting down. How quickly our lives changed!

The effects of the novel coronavirus upon national economies large and small and the psychological impact upon individuals around the world will no doubt continue through this year and well beyond. The virus alone was enough to depress most people, but throw in the lockdowns, the loss of businesses and jobs, locust plagues, droughts, fires, floods, hurricanes and cyclones, protests and riots, a contested U.S. election, Brexit, and—well, we all understand.

Yet the people of God should not be depressed, but should be confident in the fact that God exists and that He cares for us, His beloved children. That is no small thing. Once we come to understand that God is truly a loving Father who watches over us during good times and bad, we can have a peace of mind that the world does not have. As Paul admonishes us, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6–7).

In addition, God truly is our Healer. I have personally heard of several very dramatic healings this past year, healings that cannot be explained any other way than as miracles. Regarding COVID-19, most members who have contracted it have experienced mild or few symptoms and have recovered. Some have had a rough time of it, and a few of our thousands of members have succumbed to the virus or complications arising from it. We must never forget that life is temporary and the end often comes sooner than we want it to. We will all die of something, and even Elisha, whom God used to perform spectacular miracles, died from an unspecified disease (2 Kings 13:14).

One ingredient that sustains us in times of trouble is found in Hebrews 11:6: “But without faith it is im-

possible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” Many professing Christians are aware of John 3:16, where we are assured of God’s love and that if we believe in Jesus, we will not perish but have eternal life. How many have living faith in this promise? Do you? Think about it.

Remember what Jesus told His disciples when they asked, in essence, *What’s in it for us?* Jesus answered, “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29). Do we truly believe this promise?

We must not live carelessly. We must take proper precautions, whether crossing the street in heavy traffic or avoiding an unseen enemy—but we must also walk in faith, knowing that we have done our part and that God will take care of the rest. Even if we do get sick, we trust that God is our Father, that He deeply cares for our well-being, and that He is our Healer. And if we do succumb to *any* health trial, our next waking moment will be as a Spirit-born child of God at the resurrection. A hundred years could pass, but for us, it would seem less than a split second. How comforting that thought!

Why Masks?

A few things have come up over the past few months that I wish to address. Some individuals have allowed the subject of wearing masks to distract them from being part of the Church that is doing the Work of God, and they have vainly tried to find scriptures to justify their rebellion to God’s clear instructions on how the Church is to deal with controversial issues (Deuteronomy 17:8–13; Acts 15). Everyone is aware that wearing masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is controversial. However, while no decision on a controversial matter will ever make everyone happy, there are very good reasons for the decision we made.

Most medical experts believe that masks give some level of protection from the spread of disease, and that is why they are widely used in hospitals. We are far from alone in mandating wearing them in our services. In fact, we could not hold services in most locations if we did not mandate them. Masks make it possible to

secure halls all over the world because they are required by many local governments and venues.

We want to meet in person on the Sabbath wherever possible, and *we want the most vulnerable among us to feel safe* in doing so. While masks have certainly become a political divide in the United States and some other Western nations, *most nations around the world require them*. But, more importantly, to be divisive by misrepresenting scriptures and questioning the faith of others is simply wrong.

Part of the problem with masks is that people often do not wear them properly. Wearing them with one's nose exposed is more comfortable, but defeats much of the purpose for them. Constantly touching and adjusting a mask spreads whatever germs or viruses are on the mask to the fingers and then to everything they touch. Wearing the same mask for several days in a row is probably unwise. And mini-shields or half-shields are designed for food service—they provide almost no protection from the spread of this virus and should not be used in our services. Full shields are not as effective as cloth or disposable masks but may be good for those who genuinely have trouble breathing. There are rare cases where a mask or shield should not be worn, but that is something that should be discussed with one's local pastor to work out other precautions, such as sitting behind a plexiglass shield or social distancing.

What About Vaccinations?

In the context of COVID-19, questions have now arisen over vaccination. The Living Church of God has not changed our stance on this, which goes back decades: *Vaccinations, like other medical procedures, are a matter of personal choice*. The Church does not give medical advice. There are risks and benefits with all medicines and medical procedures, and some decisions are matters of life and death. Our responsibility is not to criticize or judge, but to encourage faith and support members as they deal with these heavy decisions. *Members should not debate and throw stones at one another, over social media or otherwise, for their choices*.

The biggest issue for some is the potential for employer- or government-mandated vaccination. There is already discussion of travel cards. Then there is the problem of forced vaccination for children, and some countries requiring vaccination for the elderly and those otherwise vulnerable. Some countries, states, provinces, or territories allow for religious exemption, making it possible for members to opt out of vaccination for themselves or their children as a matter of personal faith. In countries where this is an option, the Church has for decades supported members with a letter affirming that an individual is a member in good standing and that we believe his or her faith is sincere. This usually takes care of the problem for members whose consciences dictate

that they do not want vaccinations for themselves or their children. This continues to be the case, and your minister will provide such a letter upon your request if you are in a country where this can be done.

Some jurisdictions do not allow for religious exemption and some do not allow children to be homeschooled. As I have seen firsthand, if parents go against a doctor's wishes, the child can be removed from the home and whatever medical procedure was refused by the parents will be done anyway. This is then followed up by a legal battle to get the child back in the home, which can take days or weeks.

Some of us recall that Mr. Herbert Armstrong submitted to vaccination in one or two situations where he could not otherwise enter a country to do the Work of God, and other faithful ministers have faced the same issue while working in parts of Africa or Asia.

There are, of course, several reasons why a member may not want a vaccination. Without going into them all, some vaccinations contain tissue derived from a fetus electively aborted back in the 1960s. However, there are vaccines that are not derived this way, and this is true of some COVID-19 vaccines. Each person who chooses to be vaccinated needs to do his or her own homework on this—which, frankly, is not too difficult with the Internet, as there are reputable sources that explain the differences and one's healthcare provider will no doubt be able to help. But please note—*none of this should be taken as endorsing or condemning vaccinations*. There are many medical conditions and treatments, and it is not for the Church to exercise faith for you or make decisions on your behalf. Brethren, let us not judge one another!

As mentioned in my sermon that was broadcast live on December 26, we are no longer forbidding singing in services at a reasonable volume as long as a congregation is properly socially distanced, wearing masks in an appropriate manner, and within state and venue regulations. We all pray that this coronavirus will quickly disappear, but whether it does or not, we should show outgoing concern for one another—especially those most at risk, many of whom step out in faith to attend services each week. It is important not to become distracted.

God's Church Remains the Same

Despite this coronavirus and the disruptions that come with it, nothing has truly changed about God's Church. We have not changed any doctrine. We still believe in healing, and we still anoint the sick in person or by way of an anointed cloth where time and distance is a problem. We keep the Sabbath, the Holy Days, and the laws of clean and unclean meats. We preach the Gospel of the Kingdom to the world, and carry on as we did prior to COVID-19.

LET US NOT JUDGE ONE ANOTHER! continues on page 23

Are You a Bigot?

By **Mark Sandor**

One of Satan's primary devices for attacking the faith of God's firstfruits is that of presenting two wrong "solutions" to a problem in such a way that they appear to be the *only* two options. This is a snare to cause us to look at two different pieces of fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and then debate over which one is better. As a carefully laid trap, it can lure us into arguments and decisions before we ever question whether we are even looking at the right tree! Before looking at a modern example of this device of Satan (2 Corinthians 2:11), let's look at how Jesus Christ dealt with it during His earthly ministry.

Matthew 22:15–22 records that the Pharisees attempted to trip up Jesus Christ with a choice between two bad options: paying taxes to the hated Romans or not paying taxes at all (which could lead to Roman reprisal). The Sadducees, in their trick question, tried to maneuver Jesus to either deny the resurrection or judge which of several husbands a woman would be bound to after all of them were resurrected (Matthew 22:23–33). In both cases, Jesus showed that an argument with two bad "solutions" usually lacks understanding of God's mind.

His answer to the Sadducees' resurrection question contains some clues to guide us in dealing with this satanic tactic. In verse 29, Jesus begins His answer by saying, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God." As we turn our attention to a modern example of seemingly being trapped between two bad options, we will use Christ's answer to help us determine the truth that Satan is trying to hide. As Christ points out, when Satan and his world present options, they frequently do not respect the Scriptures or the power of God.

The modern example we'll examine concerns the incredible explosion of the LGBTQ+ movement in recent years. Leaders pushing this agenda have very effectively

shaped and controlled much public conversation about the issues at large, and one technique has been to present only two possible positions: *You either agree with us or you are a bigot.*

None of the Above

Where do these two options leave members of God's Church? In *both* Testaments, the Bible clearly condemns homosexual thoughts and behaviors as sin (Leviticus 18:22; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10). Paul points out that the design of biology itself should help clear up any confusion (Romans 1:18–27). Therefore, the Living Church of God does not support the LGBTQ+ movement. Does this mean we are bigots? Is that truly our only other option? Thankfully, we have the Bible to guide us, and Jesus' response to the Sadducees gives us some clues for how we can deal with being accused of bigotry.

But before we examine how Christ's response applies here, we have a question to answer: What actually *is* a bigot? The word is currently wielded like a sledgehammer because no one wants to be a bigot—even if they don't know exactly what it is. As a label, it's very effective, since society teaches that you can safely refuse to take seriously anyone labeled a bigot. Thus, *bigot* has become an easy way to win an argument with no valid support—just label your opponent a bigot and your position must be correct. But, again—what's a bigot?

Adding to the confusion, different dictionaries will give you different answers. *Bigot* is defined on *Wikipedia* as "someone intolerant of others' differing ideas, races, genders, religions, politics, etc." This definition is useless, since *all* human beings hold some opinions that are intolerant of certain behaviors. For example, most humans are intolerant of mass murderers—does that make them bigoted toward the few who would justify mass murder? Is there some rationale a mass murderer could advance to make you believe they acted morally? Obviously not. This definition effectively makes everyone a bigot and is therefore of no practical use. Let's examine a better one.

According to *Merriam-Webster.com*, a bigot is “a person who is obstinately or intolerantly devoted to his or her own opinions and prejudices,” especially “one who regards or treats the members of a group (such as a racial or ethnic group) with hatred and intolerance.” While it is not the focus of this article, racism is indeed a source of bigotry, and the Bible flatly condemns it (cf. Colossians 3:8–11). The Bible does not approve of any prejudice against characteristics that are inherent and unchangeable (see Mr. Gerald Weston’s November-December 2017 *Tomorrow’s World* article “Sins of Racism, Anarchy and Secularism!”). Sin, on the other hand, is a choice, and the Bible clearly calls out some decisions as being unlawful—and therefore sinful according to 1 John 3:4.

However, Merriam-Webster’s definition also focuses on one of the root problems associated with bigotry: opinions that lead to hatred of others. This is perhaps the reason that the word *bigot* is used as a sledgehammer—those using it may imply that all contrary opinion is simply based in hatred. To be sure, when certain professing Christians protest at military funerals with signs reading “Thank God for Dead Soldiers” or “You’re Going to Hell,” they are expressing hatred. Such methods do not at *all* reflect a loving God. While those who use these tactics might think they are being loving, their efforts to shock people into repentance (if that is their motivation) usually backfire and lead to *fewer* people taking God, the Bible, or Christians seriously.

Of course, much of the problem is that these professing Christians lack understanding about heaven, hell, and God’s plan. As Christ put it, they fail to understand the Scriptures

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and the power of God. Regardless of their motivation, they have added fuel to the fire of those who want to label as a bigot anyone who believes that homosexuality is a sin. This leads to a problem for us in God’s Church, who disagree with both the LGBTQ+ agenda *and* the false doctrines of many professing Christians.

A further challenge we face in God’s Church is the hypocrisy of those who call us bigots. It is not easy to be accused of being filled with hate and not want to dispute that label, and perhaps the hardest part of opposing the LGBTQ+ lifestyle today is how quickly you can be labeled a *hateful bigot*, which then makes it permissible for people to *treat you hatefully!*

Fight Hate with Love—God’s Love

Needless to say, Christians are exhorted to not respond in kind to this type of treatment. When Peter instructed us to look to Jesus as our example, he specifically pointed out how Jesus responded to being mistreated:

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: “Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth”; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:21–23).

Furthermore, Paul gives us the instruction to “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Romans 12:14). This is not the normal human reaction to being cursed, insulted, or abused, but it must be our goal if we are to become more like our Lord and Savior!

One way we can achieve the goal of blessing those who persecute us is to follow the example Jesus set with His words to the Sadducees. This world—both its LGBTQ+ community and its false churches—absolutely fails to understand the Scriptures and the power of God. We, however, should understand God’s word and His power, and that should guide the way we deal with accusations of bigotry. As mentioned previously, the Scriptures clearly condemn homosexual activity (Romans 1:18–27). Paul dealt with the issue in his first epistle to Corinth:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9–10).

As Christians, we simply cannot condone *any* of these behaviors! We do not support those of the LGBTQ+ community because their actions, if unrepented of, will cause them to miss out on the Kingdom of God! Our goal is not to express hatred for any of these people that Paul calls out. Instead, we should be motivated by love towards *all* people to encourage them to abandon sinful behaviors. They will be blessed both now and eternally if they do! Moreover, these behaviors all involve choices and are not inherited traits that a person has no control over. In the very next verse, Paul points out that Christians during his time were already repenting of these sins: “And such were some of you. But you were washed, but

you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11).

Not Born That Way!

The scientific community has attempted to prove the existence of a “gay gene,” but has instead proven its *nonexistence*. Studies have been done on twins who share the exact same DNA. If humans were preordained by their DNA to be either homosexual or heterosexual, identical twins would either both be homosexual or both be heterosexual. Even if, due to environmental factors, this were not the case 100 percent of the time, these other factors would not lower this percentage very much. Needless to say, this is not what researchers have discovered. Studies that identify one identical twin as homosexual have found that there is only a *10 percent* chance that the other identical twin will also be homosexual (Neil and Briar Whitehead, *My Genes Made Me Do It!*, 2013). Although identical twins seem to have a greater chance of both being one or the other than fraternal twins or other siblings, those who preach that people are “born homosexual” or even “created homosexual” have to face the fact that identical twins are nowhere close to being 100 percent aligned in their sexuality. This is not to say that DNA has *no* influence, but at the end of the day, people do choose the sexuality they express.

As an aside, we notice that the Bible prohibits fornication and adultery as sins here for *all* people. Many heterosexuals might not have to repent of homosexual thoughts or activity, but might very well have to repent of lustful thoughts concerning any member of the opposite sex they are not married to (Matthew 5:27–28). The list of sinners also includes those who have stolen and those who have coveted—as Paul pointed out elsewhere, *all* of us have sinned.

Let us return to the other part of Jesus’ statement to the Sadducees: We have to understand the power of God! Given the aggressive nature of the LGBTQ+ agenda and the role homosexuality played in the downfall of Sodom and Gomorrah, some have treated homosexuality as if it were the unpardonable sin. But while homosexuality seems to be a “tipping point” sin for a society, treating it as if it were the unpardonable sin is overstating the case! As Paul pointed out, some members of the Corinthian church were former homosexuals who had changed. It *is* possible for homosexuals to change their ways—even during this age!

But God’s power and plan go far beyond this current age. During the Great White Throne Judgment period after the Millennium, God will resurrect all mankind back to physical life (Ezekiel 37:1–14). During that time, Satan will not be able to deceive individuals or nations, and all people will have their minds opened to the truth of the Scriptures (Revelation 20:10–13). Jesus revealed that people of all nations will have their chance to learn the truths of God during that

time of judgment (Matthew 12:38–42). And just to make sure that no one misunderstood, Jesus specified that even the aggressive homosexual rapists of Sodom will be resurrected: “And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you” (Matthew 11:23–24).

The power of God will be shown as all human beings finally have a chance to learn about God’s ways. This truth is lost on most professing Christians, who do not understand the resurrections. Understanding neither the Scriptures nor the power of God, they mistakenly believe that any unrepentant homosexual who dies during this age is condemned to eternal hellfire. (They also mistakenly believe that their own actions are not in any danger of judgment.) They do not understand God’s plan and purpose, or that God has power over the grave and will dramatically use that power to help all of mankind.

To Preach the Gospel of Love

Having reviewed all of this, let us return to the initial question: Are we bigots? While this entire article could have simply been “No!” (which would have been accurate and shorter!), I hope we can see that the entire reason we are even presented with this question is because of Satan’s frequent attempts to limit the conversation to his own bad solutions. Instead of falling for that mental trap and getting focused on the wrong tree, we must follow Christ’s example and make sure we are on the side of the Scriptures and the power of God!

The Bible makes it clear that homosexual thoughts and behaviors are sins and must be repented of. Furthermore, the power of God, especially as displayed through His plan of salvation, reveals that God will give all mankind a true chance for repentance. Finally, our motivation for condemning homosexuality—as well as all other sins—must be from a position of love. All human beings were made in God’s image and have the potential to be sons and daughters of God! Jesus Christ died for every single one of us! We hope that many homosexuals will repent during this age so they can avoid all the pitfalls of the LGBTQ+ way of life, including increased depression, higher suicide rates, increased STD rates, and shorter lifespans. And even though we might be labeled as bigots and treated hatefully, we must never forget the example of our Lord and Savior, who did not revile when He was mistreated.

We must not be hate-filled bigots who despise others. Instead, we must lovingly correct and pray that all will come to repentance and a true understanding of the Scriptures and the power of God (1 Timothy 2:1–4)—something we are blessed to understand during this age! (LW)

Television and Digital Media: An Interview with Mr. Mike DeSimone

By Editorial Staff

Television and digital media are among the most powerful tools God's Church uses to preach the Gospel of His Kingdom to the world. As LCG Headquarters' Manager of Broadcast Media and Social Media, Mr. Mike DeSimone leads a dedicated team that is using these tools to great effect. We at the Living Church News recently interviewed him—through a video chat, appropriately enough—to find out more about his personal background and the crucial Television and Digital Media Department.

How did God start calling you into His Church?

"I started attending when I was about five years old. Honestly, I didn't like it at that time, so at about 13, I stopped attending. I responded to God's calling at around 17 and ended up coming back. I wanted 'real quick' to learn how to be a better person.

"I didn't believe in God at the time, but I thought, *I can't look at my friends and figure out how to be a better person*, because I was hanging out with bad folks. I could not figure out how to be a better person from them, TV, movies, music that I was listening to, any of that. I figured, *Well, the Bible is—theoretically—from some God who knows how to do right. Let me just start reading the Bible and see how that goes.* I told one of my friends that I'd started reading the Bible. He said, 'Man, be careful. Sometimes people read that book and they change.'

"I said, 'Don't worry about me, I'm not gonna change! I just want to learn how to, you know, be a little bit better.'

"After a period of time, my mother said, 'You're coming to services with me.' As I was sitting in services one day, Mr. Raymond McNair read in a video sermon that 'the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the laws of God, nor indeed can be' (Romans 8:7).

"I thought, *Man, that is exactly what I've been struggling with. My mind can't think of how to do right.* So then I started changing, repenting. It has to come from God; there has to be a spiritual component."

How did you start working in television and digital media?



"I was working for an unrelated company, and it just dug into me that I wanted to fulfill this calling more. I didn't know what that meant, I just wanted to make sure I was doing my part. So my wife and I started praying, fasting, and looking for other jobs. I thought, *Maybe I'll find a job that I can use to better serve the Work and the Church in the future.*

"This had nothing to do

with a desire to be a minister or to work at Headquarters. In fact, during the next six months, the opportunity to get a job in Charlotte came three times. The first two times, the offers came from other companies, and my wife and I said, *No way. Of all the places on the planet, we do not want to live in Charlotte.* I just wanted to support from a distance, because like with any family, it's possible to notice some less-than-ideal personalities when you're up close.

"At this point, I realized, *I don't want another job if God doesn't want me to have it.* I stopped looking—and then the third opportunity came. The owner of the company I worked for called: 'Mike, what do you think about moving and starting an office for the company in Charlotte?' So I thought about it, prayed about it, talked to my wife, talked to the minister, and we decided to do it.

"The way everything played out in Charlotte, I believe God heard our prayers—I never imagined that I would be able to serve in this way. I served as the assistant pastor for Charlotte for three-and-a-half years, and then Mr. Weston came to my office one day and said, 'What do you think about taking care of digital media and television?'"

What are the Television and Digital Media Department's main goals?

"We did a situation analysis of television and the digital realm. We asked, *Where do we stand in regard to social media, search engine optimization, paid digital advertising, and the way our websites function?* What's a realistic, though stretching, goal we can aim to hit in ten years? Should the goals be set so that in another 100 years we'll reach the whole world? Should it be 50 years? Is it possible to do it in ten? Ten years isn't far away—on a human level it would be a big stretch, but it might be possible. Based on that, where do we need to be in five years, in one year? God is the one who will have to ultimately make it happen.

"Primary objectives came out of this analysis. Among other things, we want to *increase the number of television viewers to about 350,000 per week, increase the number of social media followers and subscribers, and increase the visitors to our website.*

"Social media broadens our reach to get literature to people, which puts ten issues of the magazine into their hands each year and gets them the semi-annual letter. That creates engagement. Even if they put it on their desk and never look at it, even if they take it to the burn pile every month, they

"God willing, once you focus on something and search for a way to make it better, you can, generally speaking, **find a way to greatly impact it.**"

still have to see the name *Tomorrow's World*. Maybe they read it, maybe they don't, but there's an engagement created at a level that email doesn't reach.

"There's been this argument: *People don't like getting stuff in the mail anymore. They don't like sharing their address.* But have you heard of Amazon? More people right now than ever in history are sharing their address every single day. Not that there isn't a place for email! Increasing our email subscribers is important, one of our goals. But we identified *literature orders* as where we can make easy, massive changes that should impact the total numbers of donors, co-workers, and 'go-tos.' The historic data says that as literature orders go up, so do those numbers. As literature orders go down, so do those numbers at the same rate. Every single quarter, the numbers of co-workers, donors, and 'go-tos' go up and down with literature orders. Altering and advertising digital orders of literature has really been key."

What's one thing you're currently trying to improve?

"A major thing we're trying to improve right now is the flow of the 'go-to' process. When I was serving as the assistant pastor,

a man called me, wanting to come to services. I asked, 'How'd you learn about us?' He said, 'I watch you on TV.' 'Great! How long have you been watching us?' 'Three years. I want to come to church.' 'That's great! So what have you learned?' 'I like it. I want to come to church.'

"I continued with this way that we've handled 'go-tos.' And he said, 'Boy, is there something that you're afraid of? You can't just give me the address?' He never showed up—just like about 70 percent of the people who were welcome to come to services.

"So I talked with Dr. Meredith and Mr. McNair about it, and changed my procedure: 'You want to come to services? Great! We'd love to have you; here's the address.' And *then*, 'By the way, how'd you hear about us?' Then it's just a normal conversation. And ultimately, it went from 30 percent showing up to about 95 percent showing up. Of course, those who don't live by godly standards won't *continue* to attend services, or may need to be uninvited. My point is that, God willing, once you focus on something and search for a way to make it better, you can, generally speaking, find a way to greatly impact it.

"God will call whom He calls—but what about the 70 percent of people who didn't show up? God wasn't their trip hazard—I was! God will call whom He calls and we can only do so much, but does that mean we can leave obstacles in front of people? No, we need to take *away* the obstacles. We need to clear the path, doing our part to make it as easy as possible. Otherwise, we're unintentionally putting trip hazards in front of them. So what we're trying to do with the 'go-tos' is remove the trip hazards, help them understand."

What do you find most rewarding about working for God's Church in this department?

"To me, it would have made sense if the degree to which you study your Bible, pray, and fast was the degree to which you grow spiritually—but that's not true. Mr. Armstrong used to say that the degree to which your heart is involved in God's Work is the degree to which you grow spiritually.

"Jesus Christ commissioned His Church to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. That is one of the primary reasons we've been called. That is our job, and having the opportunity to do that in a direct way is very fulfilling. And it's not at all that a person's not helping by not directly working for the Church—there's building the body, encouraging and edifying the brethren, giving tithes, a lot of things like that. I thank God that I have this particular opportunity to be part of impacting how many people hear the Gospel, how many people have that truth in their hands." (LN)



WHEN GOD SAYS “NO”

By **Lenny Bower**

Have you ever gone to God in prayer and *not* gotten the answer you wanted? I believe that every single human being who has ever prayed to God has had that happen at least once. It isn't unique to any of us, and in all likelihood, God may say “No” again in the future. One of the hardest things in this life is to receive the answer “No,” and even when it is God who gives us that answer, we can be tempted to ask, “Why not?”

How Did We Ask?

When we ask anything of our Father and Creator, we should always ask *in a right way*. We know we should come boldly to God's throne (Hebrews 4:16), but we also need to do so respectfully, remembering that we are talking to the great Creator of *all* things! We also must remember to ask *often*—the lesson of the parable of the unjust judge is that we are to come to God *continually* (Luke 18:1–8). God may require us to do more than simply ask once! A question we can ask ourselves is, *How badly do I want this prayer answered?*

We also must ask without doubt. James 1:6 tells us to ask in faith, with *no* doubting. As Dr. Meredith used to ad-

monish us, we should *know that we know* that God is *real* and that He *is* the rewarder of those who *diligently* seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). We have also heard in times past that we need to truly put our hearts into our prayers. Hannah was an excellent example of someone who asked with *all* her heart. As recorded in 1 Samuel 1:10, she prayed to God and wept *in anguish*. She poured out her heart, her very being. She didn't just ask God—she went before Him with her whole heart, inwardly *crying out* to Him! Do we put our entire being into our prayers to God?

Are we asking for the right things? James 4:3 is a corrective passage, reminding us that God may be telling us “No” because our motives are wrong: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.” Are we asking for the right reasons? Is what we are asking for truly of benefit to others, or is it something for the self only? Of course, not everything that we ask for ourselves is wrong—but our motives might be.

We need to be sure that when we come before God's throne, we realize that God reigns supreme. He regards those who diligently seek him. We must ask *ferently*, trusting in God, continually coming before Him, and asking for *right* things for right *reasons*. We can make a checklist of those

points if it helps us remember. This can also help us to examine ourselves, our requests, and our motives.

One more thing that we may have to consider is our own need to change. Sometimes the only thing holding us back from getting a “Yes” answer is simply that we haven’t repented. The book of Deuteronomy is filled with passages that tell us that when we seek our Creator with all our heart, when we turn to Him with all our being, He will hear us and bless us.

But What If...

What if we did all that, and the answer is still “No”? Perhaps you have had times where you asked for something that seemed to be right and good, for the right reasons, continually, with faith, humility, and respect—and God still said, “No.” This can be one of the most difficult times in a Christian’s life. Perhaps we asked for the healing of a loved one, or perhaps of our own ailment. Perhaps we had someone who was absolutely dear to us and we *cried out* day and night with all of our hearts for them to be healed—to no avail. All of the crying, all of the prayers and seeking God diligently with all of our hearts—all to be told, “No.”

At times like these, we can be tempted to ask God, “Why?” We can be confused, upset, heartbroken, even angry with God or ourselves. We face a myriad of emotions when things don’t make sense to us and we confront painful loss despite having done everything we could physically, emotionally, or spiritually. It can be extremely trying, tearful—it can seem to rend our very being in two. It can seem we’ll never be comforted and never understand—and we can find ourselves on unsure spiritual footing. We may be tempted to ask questions we never would have expected to ask, like “Why did God allow this?” or “How can I ever trust God again?”

This is truly a sore trial and a dangerous time for us as Christians. At times like these, our emotions can be all over the place, and we ourselves can become unstable. We absolutely *must* realize that this is a time when Satan *will* try to attack. We’re at a weak moment, spiritually, and are therefore easier prey if we are *not careful*.

What Can We Do?

It can be helpful to remember that we are not alone in such a trial. David himself faced a similar one. When confronted about his sin with Bathsheba, David was told that the son he had with her would die. Despite his grave transgression, David was indeed a man after God’s own heart—not perfect, but trying. We read in 2 Samuel 12:16–17 that David went before God and *pleaded* for the child, fasted, and laid all night on the ground. It certainly appeared that David asked for a right thing, for a right reason, with faith and humility, with prayer and fasting—yet even he was told “No.”

We read what David did next—he pressed on. We do not read that David doubted God after this. David did not open

the door for Satan to use the tool of depression against him. He certainly mourned, but he trusted that God knew what He was doing. We must remind ourselves that God *always* makes things work out for the best if we love Him, are called according to His purpose, obey His commands, and seek to please Him (Romans 8:28; 1 John 3:22).

The Apostle Paul also tells of trials and difficulties. Despite serving God with all his heart, he faced tearful times. We read some of this in Acts 20:18–19; Paul faced these trials with “many tears.” Certainly, Paul didn’t *want* these things to happen. Despite his tears and continually coming before God, he was given a “thorn in the flesh”—and the answer he got about its healing? “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:7–9)—in effect, “No.” So, what did Paul do? Philipians 3:12–14 tells us that he reached forward and pressed on toward the goal.

We may also forget, when we ask why we face loss or are told “No,” that even God Himself has faced and *will* face loss! God isn’t willing that *any* should perish—yet we know some will. His own creation has turned against Him and rejected Him, despite Him doing nothing but good (1 Peter 2:22)! It is only fitting, then, that we, too, share in pain, suffering, and loss (v. 21).

Another way we can cope with being told “No” is to turn the focus away from ourselves, *our* loss or pain, and look to others, especially to *comfort* them. In fact, when David had fasted and prayed for his first child with Bathsheba and was told “No,” he got up after the child died, ate, and started moving forward by, among other things, *comforting* Bathsheba. Sometimes, in our pain or loss, or when we are told “No,” we can focus entirely on ourselves. That’s natural—and, in a sense, completely understandable. But it helps to remember that others are also suffering. We *can* turn our grief and emotion outward to the benefit of others.

Various prayer requests reveal that *many* brethren are enduring extremely sore trials. One way to get our minds off ourselves is to focus on them and *their* suffering—to pray for them, to follow up and ask about them. Perhaps whatever trial is affecting us is also something affecting those around us, or there are other people who are experiencing similar trials. By getting our minds on others, praying for and talking to them, we are able to *serve* others as well as empathize with them in their suffering.

Peter tells us in 1 Peter 4:12 that we ought not “think it strange” that we have “*fiery* trials.” Not just regular trials, but *fiery* ones—extreme hardships and tests, times where we may cry out to God and still be told, “No.” These trials come upon *many* people, both in the Church and in the world. Paul tells us more about some of his trials: “For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia:

that we were *burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life*" (2 Corinthians 1:8)! Have you ever had such a trial—where you “despaired even of life”? What did Paul do in that situation?

Trust in God

Paul points out that he trusted in God (2 Corinthians 1:9–10). Perhaps we struggle to do that, if the trial is bad enough. We may be tempted, in some of these trials, to doubt God and perhaps even *blame* Him.

Have you ever had a trial or an answer from God that left you doubting or feeling angry at Him? Perhaps we find

We, as flesh and blood, tend to focus on the here and now, the physical. **But that is not God's focus. What's truly best for us is sometimes to be told “No.”** It may be best for us to face loss and extreme heartache—it may be what humbles us to the point of deeper conversion and more godly character.

ourselves asking what we ever did that was so bad that we deserved such trouble or disappointment. In a sense, this can be one of the natural stages of grief. But we must be careful—again, Satan is watching, and he knows we may be at a weak point. Rather than accusation, we need understanding.

Both Ecclesiastes 7:14 and Job 2:10 point out that we ought to accept both good times and troubles, both joy and adversity, from God. God has given us many blessings, but it can be easy to forget those and focus on what was taken away. We may accept the good *so* easily, yet not accept the hard times, the challenges, and the trials. We may mourn the loss of loved ones while forgetting the blessing they were when they were with us—and without appreciating who gave us those blessings and has the authority and the right to remove them.

I can recall many times when I was told “No” as a child. In my youth, I thought it made perfect sense that my every request should be granted—that I should never be told “No” and nothing should ever be withheld or taken away from me. In my later years, however, I can see that it turned out to have been for my *good* that I had not been given everything I had asked for, and even good that I had faced loss. Loss and trials help us draw close to God; they help us to truly look forward to Christ's return, when we can build a world that will not face pain and loss in the same way.

We all want to develop deep, perfect faith, humility, and trust in God. But God's word tells us that it is through hard trials that we best develop those attributes. 1 Peter 1:6–7 tells us that

we will be *grieved* in various trials to prove the genuineness of our faith that will praise, honor, and give glory at the return of Jesus Christ. Though it may break our hearts, rend us in two, and tear us down, ultimately we *need* to be tested to become better Christians; we need it to develop deeper faith and trust in God. And devastating loss can drive us to our knees to truly cry out and yearn for His Kingdom to come—and come quickly!

He Knows Best

If we have indeed done everything as instructed to the best of our ability and are still told “No,” we must push through the tears and the heartache and remember that God knows what's best for us. God does not see as we see, and His thoughts are so much higher than ours are (Isaiah 55:8). He seeks our *eternal* good, even if that requires temporary suffering, sadness, loss, and being told “No” right now. We, as flesh and blood, tend to focus on the here and now, the physical. But that is not God's focus. What's truly best for us is sometimes to be told “No.” It may be best for us to face loss and extreme heartache—it may be what humbles us to the point of deeper conversion and more godly character.

We must resist the urge to ask, “Why?” If we're honest with ourselves, we *know* why! It is what's best for us—as hard as that can be to accept sometimes. We must resist the urge to blame, question, doubt, and be disappointed in God. There are several verses that tell us that when we wait and hope on God, we will not be disappointed or put to shame.

It's crucial that we resist Satan's trap of thinking God is not fair. In Ezekiel 18:29, Israel is rebuked for saying that very thing. We must remember that God *always* loves us and *always* does what's best for *our* ultimate, eternal good. It may be that such eternal good requires our being told, “No.” As Hebrews 12:11 says, “Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” We must accept that *sore* and *fiery* trials that bring us to tears are “extreme training” for our good, and that they *will* yield peaceable fruit afterward—if we let them!

Our Creator God *loves* us and wants *good* things for us. But what *God knows* is good for us may not be what we *think* is good for us. God sees further “down the road” than we do. He foresees stumbling blocks and trials that we cannot. Perhaps God's “No” to our request today will save us from worse heartache tomorrow. Rather than give in to depression and doubt, we can trust that God knows what He is doing. We can dwell on the positive (Philippians 4:8), be thankful for the good, and wait until it all makes sense—for one day, it all will, and “God will wipe away *every* tear” (Revelation 21:4). (LH)



Festival 2020: Unexpected Blessings in Challenging Times

By **Rod McNair**

The Feast of Tabernacles in 2020 was certainly “A Feast Like No Other,” as Pastor Phil Sena explained in his sermon by that name posted on *LCG.org*. As the Feast drew near, entire countries, such as **Trinidad and Tobago**, the **Philippines**, and **Nigeria**, were still in lockdown. In the Australian state of **Victoria**, brethren were not allowed to travel more than five kilometers from their homes. The Canadian province of Quebec tightened meeting regulations and actually closed borders just 24 hours before the Feast. This made it impossible to hold the Feast as planned in **Drummondville, Quebec, Canada**. In the Caribbean, the **Montego Bay, Jamaica** site closed at the last minute, but the brethren were able to relocate to a venue in **Ocho Rios**.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, shutdowns threatened the **Royal Leamington Spa** in the **United Kingdom** at the “eleventh hour” because of a misinterpretation of lockdown orders. Just a few miles away, the venue manager successfully appealed to local government officials so that the **Dunchurch, U.K.** site could proceed. Lockdowns were in force in Latin America, so only four Feast sites were able to meet in person: **Punta Leona, Costa Rica; San Ignacio, El Salvador; Cuba; and Puerto Rico**. And even at one of those four, brethren attending at Punta Leona, Costa Rica, had to brave protests and road closures to get to the Feast. Other brethren in Latin America—about 530 of them—were able to watch Feast services at home online or meet in small groups.

In the Northwest corner of the United States, there were also challenges leading up to the Feast at the site in **Florence, Oregon**, as reported by Festival Site Coordinator Brandon Fall: “In the months leading up to the Feast of Tabernacles, we didn’t know exactly what to expect. In the west we had riots in Portland and Seattle, challenging Oregon COVID regulations, and horrible fires that put brethren on call for evacuation.... Everything seemed like it was up in the air.”

Truly, the Feast of Tabernacles 2020 arrived under less-than-ideal circumstances! The ministry was charged with organizing the Feast all over the world while juggling huge challenges and constantly shifting conditions. Yet, through it all, God blessed the Feast, providing a way for 11,183 Living Church of

God attendees and guests to be able to worship Him in person or online. And according to many, it truly was a memorable Feast!

Perhaps the Feast of Tabernacles 2020 was unforgettable for you. But why? Was it only because of the lockdowns and masks? Was it because of the unusual circumstances and restrictions? Or was there something else that will always mark this year’s Feast in your mind in a positive way for years to come?

One reason this year was so remarkable was that, despite daunting challenges and obstacles, *God provided encouragement and inspiration in unusual and unexpected ways*. Yes, there were difficulties. There were uncomfortable regulations and logistical challenges. There were unusual restrictions. But in many ways the Feast exceeded expectations for many brethren. Many positive comments were expressed in the online Feast survey filled out by 1,471 Living Church of God Feast attendees and guests attending in 59 different countries. Others were submitted by Feast Coordinators in their post-Feast reports.

In the remainder of this article, let’s review some of those unusual joys God showered upon His people in 2020. It truly was a year of unexpected blessings!

The Spiritual Blessing of “Just Being There”

At many Feast sites around the world, brethren faced COVID screening, mask orders, and prohibition of singing in public groups. Feast site seating capacities limited by local regulations meant most Feast sites were unusually small. In **Taupo, New Zealand**, part of the congregation had to meet separately for much of the Feast. Festival Coordinator Paul Kearns explained, “We had to separate Aucklanders from those outside of Auckland within the meeting room for the first five days of the Feast, until these restrictions were lifted for the final few days.” In **Florence, Oregon**, venue social distancing requirements meant that the congregation was divided into two groups meeting by alternating between “on” and “off” days. The Ontario, Canada brethren were forced to meet in four different small groups to comply with local regulations: **Kingston, Lindsay, Grand Bend A, and Grand Bend B**. At the **Poconos, Pennsylvania**, Feast site, being split up meant being in nine different rooms with no more than 25 people in each, because of state and venue regulations. In **Traverse City, Michigan**, the same was true—with an even more extreme government

limitation of no more than ten in any indoor room! However, an outdoor tent meant that 100 brethren could participate together in services outside. According to the Feast survey, many brethren took the inconveniences in stride. As one Feastgoer commented, “Sitting outside in a tent in cold weather was viewed as a treat for most who were there.... It provided a space for fellowship and we all found joy in the little things this year.”

In spite of all of these unusual circumstances, many brethren expressed something similar to what one member noted in **Midway, Utah**: “With the difficulties we’ve all had during 2020, it was a blessing just to have the Feast.” As **Magaliesburg, South Africa**, Festival Coordinator Roger Herbert observed, “The fact that brethren could assemble and fellowship after a hard lockdown of more than six months during which there were no services was a definite highlight.” **Liverpool, Nova Scotia, Canada** Coordinator Shane Kruse commented, “It seems that this year everyone learned to be thankful just to be able to come and be present at the Feast.”

Encouraging and Inspiring Messages

We go to the Feast to “learn to fear the LORD [our] God always” (Deuteronomy 14:23). The eight days spent at the Feast of Tabernacles and Last Great Day are designed to give us much to ponder during the coming months. It should give us a jumpstart—“fill our tank”—and inspire us to carry on in God’s way. It should renew our zeal and sharpen our focus, as a

“This year’s Feast presented itself with many challenging situations and I was thankful to even be able to go this year.” — Tupelo, Mississippi

Feastgoer in **Grand Bend B, Ontario, Canada**, commented: “Honestly, the sermons, sermonettes, and Bible Study were my highlights.... The ‘first love feeling’ I had for the first few years after I came into the Church is revived by the things I learned at the Feast this year.”

This year, the backdrop of political chaos and division all around us seemed to add extra urgency and weight to the message of the Feast. We come to the Feast to be lifted up, and many brethren experienced that in a profound way that was, perhaps, unique to this year. As one attendee in **Boerne, Texas**, commented, “This Feast was excellent. The messages were positive and encouraging.” Just a few hundred miles south, in **South Padre Island, Texas**, another member commented, “This was by far the best Feast I’ve ever attended. Mr. Weston’s opening night message really helped set the tone. Plus, all of the leaders and brethren really seemed focused on what the Feast was REALLY about.”

In Mr. Weston’s Opening Night message, he encouraged us to think about lessons we’ve learned from past Feasts. What about now, several months after the Feast of 2020? Can we look back and point to specific things the spiritual messages taught us about God’s way and our role in His coming Kingdom? Even as the Feast of 2020 recedes further and further into our memories, let’s remember the spiritual lessons we took from that extraordinary year.

Focus on a Meaningful Balance of Activities

Each year, Feast activities are organized to bring brethren together to forge new bonds and deepen friendships. But “activity for activity’s sake” is not the focus of the Feast. It’s not just about having as much fun as possible and then dropping from exhaustion! Yet, if we’re not careful, as carnal human beings, it’s easy to do just that.

This year, the COVID-19 pandemic meant fewer activities. For many brethren, the slower pace was a breath of fresh air and a blessing. It meant more time to think, digest the messages, and even rest. It meant a more spiritually rewarding Feast. One member in **Red Deer, Alberta, Canada** said this: “Sometimes the activities become the focus and you hardly have time to meet with people when everyone’s leaving to do this or that. I really liked the suggestion of Mr. Weston this year, that activities be minimal.” This was an oft-repeated sentiment at the Feast, as **Port Shepstone, South Africa**

Feast Coordinator Christo Botha noted: “Brethren stated they preferred the more peaceful Feast without having to attend too many activities.”

As they could, coordinators scheduled limited organized activities to bring the Church family together in a safe and uplifting environment, but at a slower pace. Some

activities included visits to nature parks, educational tours to historical sites, or outdoor picnics and barbecues, such as the one held at **Langebaan, South Africa**. As Feast Site Coordinator Lawdi Ferreira explained, “There was a men’s BBQ and ladies’ evening arranged by members.... This was a highlight where everyone spent quality fellowship time together and got to know each other better in a proper South African way around a BBQ fire.” In **Lake Geneva, Wisconsin**, Festival Coordinator Bob Rodzaj arranged a Hospitality Room, “where members could informally gather to reconnect at the end of the day before retiring to their rooms.” And in **Hilton Head Island, South Carolina**, one enterprising and generous couple sponsored and ran an impromptu birdhouse-making activity for brethren.

The COVID-19 crisis surely required creativity on the part of Festival Site Coordinators in responding to local conditions and bringing brethren together who were separated physically.

Coordinator Arius Nusantara noted that while the brethren in Indonesia met in separate localities, **Villa Bagoes, Batu, and East Java**, “We tried to entertain one another, both [those]

from every direction, well served by both the ministry and the brethren, and inspired and assured by the very solid and grounding messages.” Another first-time attendee at that site

“There was an unusual amount of love, patience, teamwork, and joy demonstrated at this Feast, to such a major degree that we have not seen before. All the brethren were very generous in their giving and sharing with one another. No one was left out.” — **Florence, Oregon**

staying at the Feast sites and [those] at home, by sending videos to one another to share the excitement of every activity.”

Perhaps an unexpected blessing of Festival 2020 is that, through being forced to alter our schedule of activities, maybe we can all start to gain a little more perspective on what activities are for in the first place.

First-Timer Enthusiasm

If you were to pick an optimal time for God to call new brethren into the flock to attend His Feast, would you choose *the year of a pandemic*? Not likely! Yet, this year, many new brethren attended their first Feast and expressed their gratitude and thankfulness for becoming part of the Church family despite the inconveniences of a Feast during a pandemic.

One site, **Langebaan, South Africa**, had nine new attendees. A new attendee in **Red Deer, Alberta, Canada** noted, “I found the entire experience of my first FOT to be tremendously uplifting! The fellowship of the brethren and their obvious love for one another is profound!” In **New Bern, North Carolina**, another first-time Feast attendee said, “This was the first Feast for my wife and I, and it was extremely enjoyable.... What an experience, when your heart and mind has been exposed to the truth.”

In **St. Augustine, Florida**, another first-time Feastgoer said this: “This was my first Feast ever, and I was baptized!... I am beyond grateful.... It was an incredible experience and I will never forget it.” A few other brethren at other sites were also baptized at the Feast because of the timing of their counseling. While setting is not the crucial aspect of baptism—as the account of the Ethiopian eunuch brings out (Acts 8:36)—it was a joyous occasion for those who made this commitment during the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Living Church of God also had new attendees coming from other Church of God groups in 2020. Here are comments from a couple who were observing their 48th Feast but their first with the Living Church of God (**Florence, Oregon**): “This is our first Feast with LCG, having left another COG group a few months ago. We felt warmly welcomed

said this: “This was my first Feast with LCG, and it was the best Feast I have ever had. The quality of messages and the genuinely kind and caring nature of all the people I met truly made this a wonderful experience. I learned a lot.”

Health and Protection

In the midst of the pandemic,

many brethren appreciated the care everyone took to guard one another from getting or spreading the virus. One member attending in **Hickory, North Carolina**, commented, “I felt comfortable being at the Feast due to the diligence of the ministry in providing a hall where we felt secure: spacious and with enough social distancing that we were not crowded.” This was echoed by a Feastgoer in **Liverpool, Nova Scotia, Canada**, who initially was quite concerned about the virus: “Everything went well, even though there were concerns of COVID-19. My spouse and myself were concerned of catching it. The staff and the congregation... did a wonderful job.”

One of the ways of combating the COVID-19 virus was social distancing during services. For some sites, this meant having brethren sit in the same seats each day for logistical reasons. But even this measure turned out to be an unexpected blessing, as many expressed how much they liked the “assigned seats.” As one member in **Gatlinburg #1, Tennessee**, noted, “The unfortunate circumstances of the pandemic required assigned seating; however, brethren did find it stress-free, the fact that they had stable seating awaiting them each day with their families.”

A few brethren did catch the virus during the Feast. As Mr. Weston mentioned in his video update on October 30, “We did have several areas where people did come down with COVID. We don’t know whether it was actually during the Feast or after.... But, from everything that we hear, most of them are recovering just fine. They had very light to mild symptoms, or even no symptoms at all but they tested positive. There are one or two people who I have heard are having a little bit more of a difficult time with it.... So, although we did have a few cases of COVID, those are getting past, and we’re very thankful for that.”

In regard to the COVID-19 virus and illnesses in general, God did bless the Living Church of God at the Feast in 2020. In fact, one of the common observations by coordinators in 2020 was the lack of general sickness. As **Traverse City, Michigan**, Feast Coordinator Bill Long noted, “The most common remark that brethren have made about this year’s Feast is that no one came down with any illnesses. I believe

this was a blessing and the result of wearing masks indoors. It seems every year there is a sickness that occurs during the Feast, but not this year.”

Smaller Sites, Greater Service

When we decided this year to limit transfers in order to have smaller and more local Feast sites, some understandably expressed disappointment. But that decision brought an unexpected blessing for many. For example, 2020 is the first time in 17 years that the Feast was held in **Puerto Rico. Bunbury, Western Australia**, was also a Feast site, and as one member commented, it was “no more than two hours away for any member and this was a big plus.”

Smaller, more localized Feast sites also gave brethren the opportunity to get to know local brethren in a way they previously hadn’t. As one member in **Branson #3, Missouri**, stated, “Being with our own congregation brought unity and opportunity to get to know brethren in our congregation better.” A Feastgoer in **Grand Bend A, Ontario, Canada** explained, “The BIGGEST highlight of the Feast was being a smaller group so that fellowship was much easier, and with only a week it gave more time to get to know more brethren

“This has been indeed a Feast like no other for all of us, given the current pandemic situation. We are just so grateful to be able to observe the Feast in person in peace and safety together with our brethren.” — **Lake Geneva, Wisconsin**

individually.” Another Feastgoer in **Gatlinburg #2, Tennessee**, made the same observation: “Many brethren have been attending the Church for several years or decades and have never met a lot of the brethren from their sister congregations just three or four hours away.”

In a local congregation, we get to know each other each Sabbath when we meet. But the Feast inspires fellowship on an entirely different level! It’s eight days of being together every day, and many were delighted to discover the benefits of staying local. Smaller, more local Feast sites also gave many brethren a greater opportunity to serve, such as in **Mur de Bretagne and Carry-le-Rouet, France**. Festival Coordinators Simon Roberts and Jean-Luc Pirotte noted, “With more opportunities to serve in smaller sites, it provided a deeper understanding for those involved of Acts 20:35, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” This was encouraging to see, as one Feastgoer in **Natchez, Mississippi**, noted: “We really enjoyed being able to hear men from local congregations speak more than they usually would. The fellowship was more special than usual.”

With 2020 being such an unusual year, it was really up to all of us to “step out of our comfort zones” and go above and beyond

to make the Feast work. This was reflected in comments from a member attending in **Hervey Bay, Queensland, Australia**: “This year’s Feast of Tabernacles was uplifting in so many ways.... it was so encouraging to see the warm family atmosphere created by everyone. People stepped out of their comfort zones to serve in new ways and many sacrificed to help others.”

Being in a small site and closer to home wound up being a blessing for some local shut-ins as well. In **Roswell, Georgia**, brethren attending the Feast made a special trip to local shut-ins: “We took each of them a basket of goodies. The joy that they felt when we showed up cannot be put into words.... One of the shut-ins said that she would never forget it. [Another shut-in] has never been able to attend services, and he was happy to meet some of his brethren.” In another case, in **Branson #1, Missouri**, one member drove five and a half hours to pick up another member who hadn’t been able to attend the Feast in two years! He was overwhelmed and grateful, noting that “God’s people never fail to reach out and help those who need it. What a blessing.”

Mr. Weston, in his member letter of May 11, 2020, exhorted us all that because of less transferring, many of us would have more funds available to help others financially. Many brethren took this

to heart. **Langebaan, South Africa** Feast Coordinator Lawdi Ferreira observed, “Some members were financially challenged this year due to cuts in income. It was wonderful to see how John 13:35 was applied in a greater

scale where members would share accommodations, share transport, lend out extra cars to those who do not have transport.... those who had more to give were helping others who had less. COVID brought many companies down but strengthened God’s family and brought them more closely [together] as a strong, unified, faithful group who love God and love neighbor.”

The Blessing of Technology

This year brought unusual challenges in trying to link together services and brethren via technology. Internet livestreaming and telephone connections, while not as good as being present in person, proved a wonderful tool to connect those who couldn’t attend. In **Trinidad**, where brethren were not able to meet together, one of the brethren explained how encouraging it was to be able to connect online: “The highlight of the Feast this year was the role of technology, the Internet in particular.” One of the shut-ins in **Midway, Utah**, wrote of her gratitude for the daily connection to services: “The messages that were delivered were the strongest we have heard in several years! I had to stream in this year, BUT it was sooo encouraging—and gave much food for thought and personal Bible studies!”

Jeffreys Bay, South Africa Feast Coordinator Lawdi Ferreira noted, “Daily services were received through the webcast from the Langebaan Feast site. It was wonderful to be part of the online services even though we were 800 kilometers apart.” As **Porto-Novo, Benin** Feast Coordinator Rees Ellis noted, commenting on the French livestream linking 16 French-speaking congregations all over Africa and Europe, it was a treat “being in communion with other French-speaking sites connected to services in France.” French services were also livestreamed in the Western Hemisphere, connecting brethren in **Quebec, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Haiti, and French Guiana**.

Many had the special opportunity to be in the virtual adults’ and children’s choirs or to be involved in other special music throughout the Feast of Tabernacles. As one member in **Natchez, Mississippi**, noted, “I loved the virtual adult choir. It was so moving it made me cry.” In **Tupelo, Mississippi**, another Feastgoer echoed that, saying, “I would like to say how much I loved hearing the special choir, it was wonderful. I had tears in my eyes hearing the children sing.”

Spanish-language services were conducted in **New Bern, North Carolina**, and streamed to almost 600 Spanish-speaking brethren! Festival Site Coordinator Cristian Orrego noted, “All small groups were asked to send a short video of no more than 30 seconds showing where they were and sending a greeting to the rest of the brethren. During the announcements in each service we showed five or six of these short videos and it was really moti-

vating to see and hear from so many people from different places in the world sending their messages of encouragement, joy, and faith.” Internet livestreaming was a blessing that was used to unify God’s people all around the globe.

Relief and Vision

In the midst of a pandemic that has gone hand-in-hand with political chaos, violence, and strife, the Feast of Tabernacles 2020 was a welcome relief for many of our brethren. Whether it gave the opportunity to watch a sunset over the harbor in **Port Macquarie, New South Wales, Australia**, or view beautiful Lake Victoria in **Ukerewe, Tanzania**, the Feast provided a peaceful and tranquil environment for God’s people. But even more importantly, the spiritual messages and uplifting fellowship were refreshing and unifying, and those who couldn’t attend in person were not left out. Festival 2020 was an inspiring and meaningful time to grow and deepen relationships with one another and with God. As one Feastgoer in **Bangor, Northern Ireland** noted, “All the fruits of God’s Spirit were very evident at this Feast. These far outweighed anything else. It is a Feast I will always cherish.”

What will you take forward with you? Perhaps you will sum it up like one member in **Williamsburg, Virginia**: “Although COVID-19 is real and dangerous, I truly believe God allowed His people to use it as an opportunity to draw closer together spiritually while still maintaining ‘social distancing.’ 2020 was a wonderful Feast for me.” (L)



Nansio, Tanzania



Drummondville, Quebec



Punta Leona, Costa Rica



Natchez, Mississippi



Woman to Woman

Women and the Great Commission

By **Janth B. English**

Before ascending to heaven, Jesus Christ gave His Church important instructions on what it should be doing until He returns. We find these instructions in Matthew 28:18-20 and Mark 16:15, which state that the Church is to go into all the world preaching the Gospel to everyone and making disciples of all nations, teaching them everything Christ taught. This is referred to as the Great Commission. What role is there for women in such a vast, important, and noble mission? More than you might think.

When we search the Scriptures, we find that God has used women throughout history to further His plans. Miriam was a prophetess who was counted as one of Israel's leaders during the Exodus under Moses and Aaron (Exodus 15:20; Micah 6:4). Deborah judged Israel during a time when they were conquered, and God used her leadership to free the nation (Judges 4:4; 5:7). We see Ruth, an industrious woman of good character, whom God chose as a progenitor of David and of Jesus, though she was a Moabitess and not an Israelite. There was Esther, who saved the Jews from annihilation. These were all exceptional women whom God used for His purposes in those exceptional times. How does the average woman, like you and me, fit into the picture? What can we do as women to further God's purpose, the Great Commission, at this time?

Women and the Early Work

To see this a little more clearly, let's examine the ministry of Jesus Christ with respect to women. When you consider the cultural norms during Jesus' physical, human lifetime, His approach to women may have been considered radical. Men and women did not interact as they do today. In fact, women were considered of less value than men, although they fared better in Jewish society when compared to Gentiles. Nevertheless, Jesus counted women as His disciples, and they were allowed to learn alongside the men. We see this in Mary's decision to learn from Christ rather than prepare a meal (Luke 10:38-42). Women were among those who followed Jesus on His evangelical tours throughout Galilee (Mark 15:40-41). Women supported the Work by serving Christ and others. They no doubt took care of many details, such as food

sourcing and meal preparation, which allowed Christ and the Apostles to preach the Gospel without being concerned about such things. Women such as Joanna and Susanna provided financial support for preaching the Gospel message (Luke 8:1-3). Women—ordinary women like you and me—were clearly involved and hands-on in Christ's ministry, the Work of that time.

After Christ's death and resurrection, the New Testament Church was founded, and we again find women in key roles. During a crucial time after James was killed and Peter was imprisoned, it was Mary the mother of John Mark who offered her home as a place for the Church to worship and offer prayers for Peter's release (Acts 12:1-5, 11-12). Mary showed a lot of courage and jeopardized her life by supporting the Work and allowing the fledgling Church to meet in her home during a time of great persecution. Aquila and his wife Priscilla were fellow workers with Paul as he evangelized the city of Antioch. It was Aquila and Priscilla who taught the fiery preacher Apollos the complete Gospel message (Acts 18:24-26). Priscilla had to be an apt student of the Scriptures in order to help her husband instruct others in this way of life. Women, too, were imprisoned and suffered martyrdom in advancing the cause of the Great Commission (Acts 8:2-3; Hebrews 11:35-38). Plainly, women have played important roles from the earliest days of the Church of God.

Women and the Next Generation

While they had an active role in furthering the Gospel, we do not see women as preachers and ministers in God's Church historically or today. Why is this? The reason is simple. God's word states that women should not speak at worship services (1 Corinthians 14:34). The context of 1 Corinthians 14 shows Paul giving the Corinthian brethren instructions on how to conduct worship services. There had been much confusion during services, and apparently women had been involved in the disorder. God has ordained that men be the heads of their families, leading and guiding them. Allowing some women to exercise dominion over men in formal teaching roles would undermine the authority in the home and cause more confusion. God is not the author of confusion. God is wise, He knows what is best, and it is best that women not teach in worship services.



This does not mean that women do not teach. We teach our children, the next generation of Christians, God's way of life. Teaching the next generation is an important part of the Great Commission, and women have a major role in this effort. Older women are encouraged to teach the younger women how to be good homemakers (Titus 2:3–5). We also teach when we give a reason for the hope that lies within us (1 Peter 3:15). But most importantly, we teach by example, showing ourselves to be godly women so that others will be turned to God and His ways (Matthew 5:16).

Women and Crucial Support

Since women are not called to be ministers or preachers, how can we play an active part in the Great Commission, the Work of today? Ministers and others in high-profile jobs are the voices and the faces of the Work, but they cannot perform their duties without the support of the rest of us. Each of us has been called to be a part of the Family of God, and we have

been conscripted to work in the “family business.” Not everyone can be the mouth, the eyes, or the hands, but everyone has an important part to play (1 Corinthians 12:14–22).

We can pray without ceasing for the Work, as Anna did (Luke 2:36–37). We know that our prayers will make a difference because we are told that the prayers of a righteous man or woman avail much (James 5:16)! We can support the Work with our resources, as Susanna and Joanna did. We can set a powerful example of being courageous and steadfast, just like Mary the mother of John Mark. Like Priscilla, we can learn the Scriptures so that we are able to teach them to our children and others when appropriate. We can use hospitality to further the Gospel and promote unity, as Lydia did (Acts

16:13–15). Like all the holy women who have gone before us, we can be examples that others will want to follow, and through our examples, lead people to Christ. There is much that women can and should do to be an active part of the Great Commission.

God has given men *and* women the opportunity to be a part of His Kingdom. He has also given men *and* women the privilege of having a part in announcing to the world the good news of His coming Kingdom. God, in His infinite wisdom, has given women primarily support roles in doing the Work. Support roles may not be the glamorous jobs, but they are absolutely necessary. Serving in those roles is the perfect tool to teach us servant leadership, which is a skill we must have to fulfill our positions as kings and priests in the Kingdom of God. God has used women in the past, and He continues to use women to fulfill His purposes. Women have important roles in completing the Great Commission—so let us be about our Father's business and get it done! ^(LN)

Amazon Smile—A Free, Easy Way to Help the Church Financially

If you ever make purchases through Amazon, please consider using Amazon Smile. When you shop at *Smile.Amazon.com*, 0.5 percent of the price of your eligible purchases will be donated to the Church. Just sign in online at *Smile.Amazon.com* and select the Living Church of God as your

charity. You can then purchase the *same* products at the *same* prices, but Amazon will donate a portion of the purchase to LCG. This is a free, easy way for you to generate donations to the Church, and, if we all do this, it could result in thousands of dollars a year in extra contributions that we

can put to work preaching the Gospel around the world.

While 0.5 percent may not seem like much, over time it really adds up. To date, members shopping through Amazon Smile have generated more than \$13,000 in extra donations! Thank you for your prayers and your support of God's Work!

Lamps, Not Torches

By Thomas White

“No one, when he has lit a lamp, covers it with a vessel or puts it under a bed, but sets it on a lampstand, that those who enter may see the light,” said the Christ in Luke 8:16. But here’s a thought: They had portable torches long before Jesus’ ministry. Why didn’t He say, “No one who has lit a torch sticks it under a bed, but waves it around so that everyone can see him”? We are supposed to make our spiritual lights *obvious*, right?

One of my oldest friends is outside of God’s Church and extremely “liberal.” Over the years, we’ve talked quite a bit about religion and spirituality, but I’ve never gotten my friend truly interested in the Church. And I used to wonder if I was doing something wrong—if I was representing the truth badly.

Lights Like Noah

It can be easy to think that way. But then we can remember the number of people who were called into God’s truth during Noah’s considerable time preaching it while building the ark. As Mr. Rod McNair has said, that number was a big ol’ *zero*. It definitely wasn’t that Noah’s was a dim, ineffectual light—it just wasn’t the time for the people around him to respond to it. But it’s safe to say that during that time, the foundation was laid for some *very* interesting conversations Noah will have someday with those who never even considered boarding the ark.

Several years ago, my friend “entered my house” by asking me why I considered homosexuality a sin. Did I successfully convince her to adopt God’s point of view? No. Technically, the ensuing discussion was a failure for us both—neither of us convinced the other of anything. But at the end of the conversation, she said, “I can’t believe how civil and friendly this discussion was. Thank you for presenting your points with kindness and respect.” I sincerely thanked her for doing the same, and we’re friends to this day—she even wishes me “Happy Sabbath!” on occasion, despite not keeping it herself. While it’s true that she didn’t embrace God’s truth, she came to associate that truth not with bigotry and vitriol, but with kindness and respect. And with that foundation, I’m hoping to have some much more fruitful conversations with her after God opens her mind.

Now, as we’re all aware, not everyone of the world handles disagreement so gracefully. But that’s not our problem. We’re responsible for whether we handle it gracefully. We can’t compromise on the truth, but if we’re making the truth look like something only demeaning and disagreeable people believe in, aren’t we doing it a disservice? If our friends “outside” can’t stand to talk about moral principles with us at all,

it might be time to change our approach. But if we *can* talk about such subjects with them, we don’t need to doubt the strength of our lights just because they never actually agree with us—they may not be accepting the light as their own, but they’re definitely looking at it.

An Inviting Lamp

Those who have lit their spiritual lamps set them on lampstands, Jesus said, so that “*those who enter* may see the light.” Hopefully, those entering our houses are doing so because they actually want to be there; they already find us interesting, and want to get to know us better. We obviously shouldn’t be manipulating anyone—we’re messengers, not salesmen. But neither should we expect anyone to stick around if we’re threateningly waving a torch at them, as if Jesus expected us to demand, “You will look directly into this light *and you will like it.*”

When we’re trying to befriend someone, we start with what we have in common with them. We don’t open with, “Howdy stranger, that sure is some sinful music you seem to be listening to—interested in hearing why it’s completely of the devil?” We take a different approach, one that never *dims* the light, but *invites* people to behold it by making it clear that the light has something real to offer them *personally*. The Apostle Paul purposely made himself relatable (1 Corinthians 9:19–21), which is important. Someone who believes he has *nothing* in common with you will never be interested in entering your “house” and seeing that light.

We’re to *invite* people “into our house,” thereby letting *those who enter* see the light of our lamp—not shove a torch in unsuspecting faces. After we’ve made friends based on mutual interests, *then* we can look for opportunities to show them the Good News in ways that speak to those interests. They’re our friends, or at least our acquaintances—they’ve “entered our house,” so to speak. And once they’re in there, it works even better if they notice the lamp before we point it out, so we can respond to *their* comments: “Oh, that? That’s my lamp. To tell you the truth, it’s extremely important to me—the most important thing in my life, in fact,” as opposed to, “And over here, you can see *my truly amazing lamp*. Take a closer look. Bask in its light. Bask, I say!”

We’re lamps, not torches, because lamps are friendly. Torches... well, there’s a reason people usually expect pitchforks along with them. If we strive to reflect God in everything we do, and truly care about preaching His message to the world, we’ll do it in a way that will *reach* the world—“crying aloud and sparing not,” to be sure, but also presenting the inviting, loving light of a lamp on a stand. (LN)

Finances: 2019 Review

By **Jerry Ruddlesden, Financial Controller**

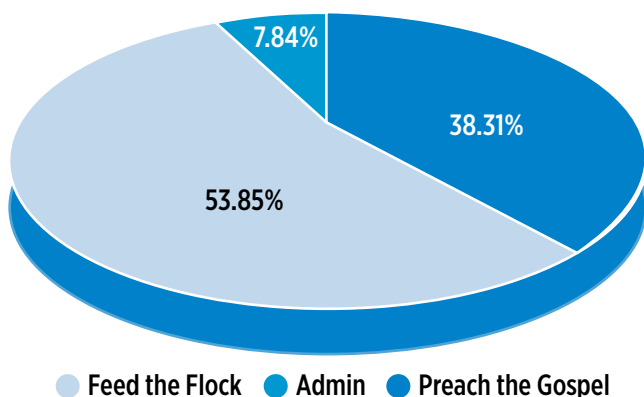
The 2019 Audit for Living Church of God (International), Inc. and Affiliates was published on October 22, 2020. It can be reviewed in its entirety on *LCG.org* under the “About Us” link. This audit was delayed because of the 2018–2019 shutdown of the United States government, and we and our auditors also had to adjust to working remotely and be creative in sharing information.

Once again, the audit was performed by Cherry Bekaert, LLP, and we received an unqualified opinion in the Independent Auditor’s Report. It states, “In our opinion, the consolidated financial statements referred to above present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position of Living Church of God (International), Inc. and Affiliates as of December 31, 2019 and 2018, and the changes in its net assets and its cash flows for the year then ended in accordance with accounting

The Church relies on the tithes and offerings of its members, donors, and co-workers to be able to fulfill the mission outlined in the Scripture to preach the Gospel and feed the flock. **We are very grateful for your faithful support.**

principles generally accepted in the United States of America.” In other words, outside viewers such as vendors and financial institutions can read our financials and know that the numbers stated are materially correct and that the Church uses proper accounting methods to present its finances.

A general summary of expenses for the year 2019 includes 38.31 percent preaching the Gospel, 53.85 percent feeding the flock, and 7.84 percent administrative.



The Church relies on the tithes and offerings of its members, donors, and co-workers to be able to fulfill the mission outlined in the Scripture to preach the Gospel and feed the flock. We are very grateful for your faithful support. Regular donations increased 4.4 percent in 2019, which allowed us to plan on sustained growth in important areas such as TV time, Internet, and the support of our local and international congregations.

In recent years, we have also been blessed with several one-time income items. We noted in last year’s report that we were planning on paying off the mortgage on the Headquarters building and all vehicle capital leases, which we accomplished very early on in 2019. It was a joyous day when we received the actual deed to our Headquarters property! Our balance sheet is in a strong position, and our savings, we are now realizing, allow us to buy equipment and software as needed without paying interest.

Having made it through 2020, we now look back at the fiscal year 2019. Even 2019 seems like it was another age, because of the world seemingly being turned upside down in 2020.

We couldn’t help but wonder why God sent us the funds in the order they ended up being received. He could have sent them at any time, but His was the perfect timing, just like that of an answered prayer. When you consider the special offerings that began accruing in 2018, God was preparing His Church for the leap forward that you are beginning to hear about even now.

He began with sending us the funds to pay off the building and all the vehicles. This really allowed us to concentrate on infrastructure and be ready to weather the storm of 2020. Not only have we weathered the storm—we are coming out of the crisis ready to push the Work forward as led by Christ!

Brethren, even with this good news, we know that we have only a little power and totally rely on God for His blessings and His guidance. We know that it is God who opens and closes the doors to preach the Gospel (Revelation 3:7–8). We are often reminded to pray for the Work and pray for more open doors.

It is exciting and sobering to see how God provides for His Work; know that you directly play an important part in the commissions of the Church. God could have called anyone He wanted from the billions of people we see around the globe, but He called *us* to share the Gospel with the whole world and welcome with open arms all who answer God’s call. Let’s get to work! (LN)

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LET US NOT JUDGE ONE ANOTHER! continued from page 4

When this comes to an end—and it will—we will be the same Living Church of God that we were a year ago, though stronger for the trial. Yes, some have left us, but God is replacing them with new members. *Tomorrow's World* magazine subscribers have increased by nearly 100,000 during the past year. God has blessed our income and we are able to hire additional employees that we could never afford prior to 2020. We have also

expanded our efforts by adding new television stations and making significant strides with our Internet and social media presence. And now, in 2021, we are expanding from six to ten annual *Tomorrow's World* magazine issues.

The fruits of this Work show that God is pleased with us. We are thrilled by the way He has blessed us over the last year, but we realize that we are, as Dr. Meredith sometimes referred to us,

“half a peanut shell in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.” While we continue to do our part, we look to Jesus Christ to do the Work through us. We simply cannot do it on our own. Let us never forget the big picture of why we are called, nor get hung up on twiggly matters that cause division and heartache. And let us not judge one another! Not one of us is so righteous that we are justified in throwing stones at others, on or off social media.

Keep this big picture in mind! ^(LN)

Eternal Life as a Tangible Asset

When I was in high school, I was in a one-act play that reached the state finals. Our last competition started at 9:00 p.m. on Friday evening, so as a Sabbath-keeper I wasn't able to participate. "Can't you miss church once?" one girl from our cast asked me, casually adding, "God would understand."

The answer to her question would come to me years later: In reality, we are the ones who don't understand God's promise of *eternal life*. Fully understanding what that promise means should make eternal life our supreme goal.

Be a Pattern of Good Works

Do we really comprehend eternal life? It can seem ethereal and out of reach—after all, we've never experienced it. This physical life can seem much more real—tangible—than the promise of eternal life.

We know that eternal life is the gift that God gives us through grace (Romans 6:23), and we seek that gift through faith and action (James 2:24; Romans 2:6–7). Eternal life does indeed mean to live forever, because death is destroyed when God's plan is fulfilled (1 Corinthians 15:54; Revelation 21:4).

The Bible reveals that, in order to receive this promise, there is something we must do now: keep the commandments (Matthew 19:16–19). Imagine someone promised you \$10 million if you didn't lie for one year. Your first thought every morning would probably be, *I'm not going to lie today*—because \$10 million is tangible. You know of people who actually have that much money. The reality of the reward

would inspire you—but it would not be easy to always tell the truth. The question then becomes, *Is doing what's right worth the reward?*

Keep the Faith of Jesus Christ

The same question applies to the pursuit of eternal life. But how do we know eternal life is reality? Because someone already has obtained it—our Savior, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:20–23)! And He tells us that regardless of what we leave behind for His sake, we will receive a hundredfold more as a reward, "and in the age to come, eternal life" (Mark 10:29–30). Paul wrote that the gift of eternal life is worth any hardship suffered in this physical life (Romans 8:18). Fully becoming part of God's Family will fix literally everything suffered during this physical life—even death!

Is there something we can do to make eternal life more tangible to us? In 2 Corinthians 4:18, Paul says we should look for the unseen things, because they are eternal. How can you believe in things that are unseen? Hebrews 11:1 assures us that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Faith is the key to making the invisible things of God real to us. Over time, our hope becomes grounded less in our fallible faith and more in the faith of Christ Himself (Galatians 2:20; Revelation 14:12).

As Paul tells us, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). With this promise, we can know that devoting our *entire lives* to the goal of eternal life is worth it.

—Karl Harmdierks