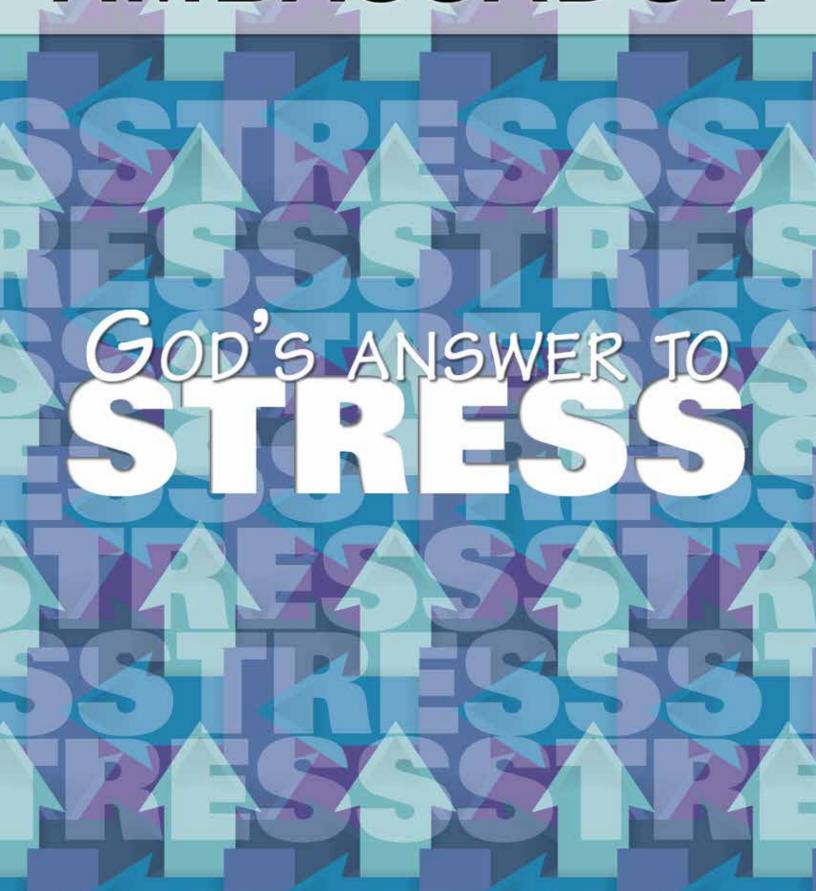
THE LUTHERAN SADOR



Encouraging Word

The Truth

I can recall a time when

reading the Word of God was

satisfying. The greatness of

what Jesus had done got in my

head and stayed there all day.

hen asked to write a series of articles for this segment of the *Ambassador*, I first said no. At the time, I knew that the last thing I would be qualified to write was an encouraging word to anyone, especially from a spiritual perspective. I felt as far away from being spiritually encouraged as I ever had.

"They think that I'm still a solid Christian," I thought, "I don't know what I am anymore." This doubt had come after months and years of persistent discouragement: in reading God's Word,

worry over my sin, fear that I was not really forgiven and a general feeling of burden and tiredness concerning the things of God.

A couple months went by, and I was not able to forget the request. Then I began to think that maybe someone should talk about the existence of "discouraged Christian

lives" as I perceived my own to be. I share these feelings and experiences in the hope that others who feel discouraged may find encouragement along with me.

So here you have an "encouraging word" from a discouraged Christian.

As I reflect on my spiritual life my thoughts first jump to my own failings. I know my sin; it is burdensome. I think of how my Bible reading has been lately, this discourages me the most. When I read, I feel indifferent toward God's Word and unaffected by what it is saying. These feelings lead to inconsistency in devotional times and studying. I know that for a Christian to neglect God's Word is sin, and it is dangerous.

I can recall a time when reading the Word of God was satisfying. The greatness of what Jesus had done got in my head and stayed there all day. Now, commonly, I stare at the words on the page of my open Bible.

"I don't know what happened," I think to myself. It

feels like it means nothing to me now. It feels like it doesn't apply to me.

"I'm sorry for my sins," I pray. It feels insincere. I am discouraged. Then I become *terrified* because it really seems that if I were still a Christian I would not feel this way.

I pray again, "I'm sorry. I don't have anything else. I can't make it meaningful to me." A lingering worry stays with me the rest of the day.

"Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you. He rises to show you compassion" (Isaiah 30:18a).

> What is the good news that I had been reading? Things like: "Come to Me, all you who are weary and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (I Peter 2:24). "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God"

(II Corinthians 5:21). "Such a high priest meets our need one who is holy, blameless, pure ..." (Hebrews 7:26).

Shall I deny myself the truth of these verses? Shall I continue to tell myself that this good news could not possibly be true for a sinner like me? Perhaps there is no Savior for me as long as I feel discouraged.

No. These words are true. The good news of these words is as true as the truth about the damning nature of my sin, which I seem to know so well right now.

So what can I do? It is the truth and it is good news! Submit to it, accept it, and then I am even able to relax in the truth of it. May God continually grant us faith to believe all of His words.

> — Karina Olson **Faith Free Lutheran** Minneapolis, Minn.

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When God seems most absent from us, He is doing His most important work in us.

— Larry Crabb

I believe the reason God says "fear not" so often is that fear will sink us faster than anything else. Fear disrupts faith and becomes the biggest obstacle to trusting and obeying God.

— John Ortberg

Spiritual growth is not running faster, as in more meetings, more Bible studies, and more prayer meetings. Spiritual growth happens when we slow our activity down. If we want to meet Jesus, we can't do it on the run.

> — Michael Yaconelli Messy Spirituality

We experience wonderful peace and security by leaving our difficulties, both great and small, with Him, who is not only solicitous for our welfare but who also understands what is best for us.

> — O. Hallesby Prayer

spiritual A The

By Dr. Tim Skramstad

ouldn't life be great if we never had stress? Well, not really. Stress is a normal part of life. When we hear the alarm clock, our body reacts to shut it off and then get out of bed. A lack of stress can produce apathy, laziness, and an unproductive life.

The Holy Spirit awakens our lethargic spirits and motivates us to pray for the salvation of the lost. He further moves us to send missionaries and to invite neighbors to join us at church. The stress resulting from the conviction of sin or the need to reach the lost is truly a gift from the Lord.

But what happens when stress becomes unmanageable? Reactions to high levels of stress can become perilous to our physical, mental or spiritual health, especially if there seems to be no possible solution to the problem or our resources for coping with stress are inadequate.

Stress reduction techniques abound, and there is much wisdom in monitoring our sleep, diet, and exercise. But have you discovered some of the stress-reducing or stress-management aids the Lord has provided in the Bible? Yes, the Scriptures abound with wisdom for difficult situations.

While the Bible informs us as to several practical ways in handling stress, Jesus said that we must first recognize our relationship with Him. Look again at His words: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, NIV). In this profound sentence, Jesus relieves us of trying to be God. He is God, not us.

Our position before God is always one of dependence. If we are to be productive from God's point of view, then we must rely totally upon Him. Such thinking goes against our human logic, which argues for us to be self-sufficient, or to rely upon good planning, super programs or whatever else is popular at the moment. While the Lord wants us to use the gifts, talents, and intelligence He supplies, the victory over monumental problems and even small issues begins by trusting in the Savior.

The Apostle Paul knew what it was like to be so overwhelmed that he even gave up on life. But through the very worst of circumstances, the Lord still delivered Paul, and he would write, "This happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (II Corinthians 1:9). As we remain connected to Christ and learn to depend on Him in all situations, our faith increases and

the Lord can use us in ever expanding ways.

What is the very worst thing that could happen?

I ask this not to minimize the seriousness of your situation, but to help you to consider what is beyond your current dilemma. Paul knew about the resurrection. He actually saw Jesus, the risen Lord. He preached sermons about the resurrection and even wrote key passages about it that became sacred Scripture. But when Paul's situation grew so dark and hopeless that he concluded that his life was over, he began to see the *power* of the resurrection. Even if Paul's life would end, he concluded that God would raise him to life.

The story is told of a patient with a serious illness who was asked what would happen if all the treatments failed. He responded: "I guess I would die." And then his pastor asked, "And then what would happen?" The glow on the man's face reflected the believer's hope, "Well, then I would be with Jesus!"

Ultimately, all of life's problems will seem miniscule when we see Jesus face to face. However, the believer does not need to die and go to heaven to handle stressful situations. When we acknowledge that we belong to the Lord, we can face problems with the strength God provides, and we can trust that He will indeed cause all things to work out for the good (Romans 8:28).

Knowing that we belong to the Lord and that He has the power to take care of every situation brings tremendous peace for the believer. Yet, there are those times that these realities seem so far from our experience. Unrelenting pressure and monumental problems may call for a time away from the situation. A spiritual retreat, whether it be for an hour, a day, or a week is exactly what the Great Physician ordered when He said, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31). We all need rest — physical, mental, and spiritual rest. If Jesus needed that time away from the rush of the crowds and He saw this as a need for His disciples, how could we be any different?

A spiritual retreat, listening for the Lord's direction, searching the Scriptures, devoting ourselves to prayer, recalling His precious promises, and just resting helps us to regain our perspective on life. Problems become smaller when we are rested physically and renewed spiritually.

Skramstad is pastor of Living Word Lutheran, Eagan, Minn.



was in high school when I was diagnosed with shingles. If it weren't for the keen eyes of my sister, a nurse, the doctor probably would have missed the diagnosis. Shingles, a virus central to the nervous system, strikes older people, people with real worries and stresses. What did I, a 16-year-old, have to worry about?

Like any other high school student, I had finals, research papers, scholarship essays and college applications to work into a busy social life. But as it turns out, it wasn't what I was dwelling on that had me in bed for a week taking 16 pills a day. Rather, it was how I dealt with these issues.

In my mind I had to be the best. I had to get straight-As. I had to prove to the world that I was worthy. I still do. Otherwise, guilt creeps in.

"How could you ...?" seeps into my guilty conscious at every step. I could fill in the blank with just about anything. How could I misspell someone's name and have it in print for all eternity? How could I skip my workout and chow down on pizza and ice cream? How could I measure up to the world's standards of beauty, style and grace?

People who know me at work say it's the nature of my job. As an editor and graphic designer, my work is not only meticulous, but also open to critique from any corner. Insert deadlines into the mix and the recipe is ripe for a stressful work environment.

Add to that the world's pressure to be ideal and anyone would fail the perfect-o-meter. My problem is letting guilt find its way into my daily life. It's cyclical: I set an unreachable standard, I stress out while failing to meet it, guilt sets in, and my stress is doubled. "Next time," I tell myself, "I won't fail." And another, more unreachable standard is set.

Believe me, the irony of seeing my problem, naming it, and deciding to continue the cycle is not lost on me. Why do I put up with the shingles, the hives, the headaches or the snappy temper — the guilt — instead of, simply, choosing peace with God?

I have spent a lot of my own devotional time searching for that respite. I remember pleading to God for something I thought unnameable. I was desperate. Searching my soul, I finally uttered, "Peace. That's all I need, Lord."

Peace, after all, is the opposite of stress and guilt. And I know that God's peace is bigger than anything I could conjure up. The challenge, which I still struggle with, is letting go of the guilt and taking the peace. Otherwise, choosing to live with guilt is another sin I can tack onto my long list.

I found my answer in Psalm 31. "But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hands ... Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love" (vs. 14-16).

"Could it be a matter of trust?" I wondered. I saw myself, then as I was, striving for perfection. I saw how I took imperfection as a measure of my worth. I saw how I wanted to achieve things for myself, to be the sole proprietor of any acclaim. I saw my guilt. I saw ... just myself. Alone. I realized the remarkable thing about my guilt was my utter loneliness in it.

"Guilt that gets a stranglehold on our souls and refuses to let go can suck the life right out of you," writes David Moore in "Guilt Good and Bad," a Crosswalk.com article. "When that variety of guilt enters

your life, there is only one real antidote: Grace.... [God] exchanges guilt for grace."

When I got a glimpse of my foolishness, I realized that God already knew. He knew about the motivation behind my perfection. He knew I would fail time and again. And He knew I would stress out about it. He saw the cycle. What He wanted to give me, instead, was a straight road where I can mark my progress instead of going around and

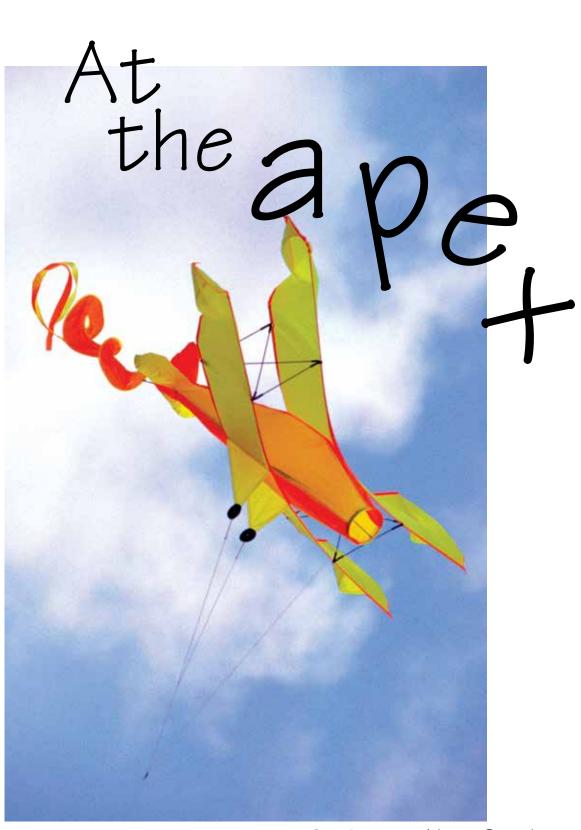
It's cyclical: I set an unreachable standard, I stress out while failing to meet it, guilt sets in, and my stress is doubled. "Next time," I tell myself, "I won't fail." And another, more unreachable standard is set.

around my own dramas with no end in sight.

In Philippians 4:8-10, Paul writes about that road as the "excellent or praiseworthy" things we should "put into practice." I see now how I turned those things into personal certificates of achievement, when, really, God deserves honor. I failed because I trusted myself. My work — my life — should point observers to Christ. And what is the result? "And the God of peace will be with you" (vs. 10b).

Peace. That's all I need, Lord.

Gunderson, managing editor, is a member of Vision of Glory Lutheran, Plymouth, Minn.



By Pastor Alvin Grothe

e hear the word "stress" and the expression "I'm all stressed out" with ever-greater frequency today. It seems the more hi-tech we get, the more self-help books are printed, the more pills are developed, the worse it gets. The stress can be relentless and

Imagine flying in a large airplane and all of a sudden there is terrible turbulence. The plane is jumping around. You look out the window and it seems the wings are flapping at the tips. Can they cope? Will they take the stress and strain?

That's stress, and that's what life is like at times. We live in turbulent days. The stresses and strains, the tensions and pressures mount up for each of us. Any number of things can cause stress. It can be the workload and the responsibilities. It can be strained relationships, heavy burdens for loved ones, severe illnesses in the family, financial problems, student study loads, and on and on we could go.

A few times in my life I thought the wings would break when the turbulence and stresses became severe. At one point I felt like all the stresses were converging on me. I felt it was the apex.

I was fearful. I was questioning God and my faith. Satan attacked me. I felt oppressed. The old nature reared its ugly head. I felt like the song writer who asked, "Where can I go, oh where can I go, seeking a refuge for my soul?" There was only one place: "The Lord is my refuge and strength; a very present help in time of trouble" (Psalm 46:1). We can turn to Him and "be still and know" that He is God (Psalm 46:10).

Nights became times of agonizing prayer and tear-soaked pillows. The one big lesson I had to learn all over again was that paradox of the Christian faith that victory comes through surrender. How proud and stubborn we can be. How hard it is, even with our face to the wall, to throw up our hands in surrender and admit, "I cannot cope. I cannot face it all. I cannot hold my own or wrestle with it any longer alone."

We have to surrender it to Jesus. "I surrender all, all to Jesus I surrender," the hymn states. We have to trust Him. "Even though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15). It is essential to confess our weakness and believe His promise. When we are weak, He is strong (II Corinthians 12:10).

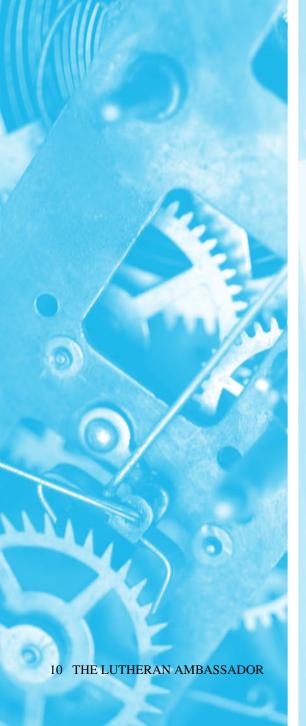
Take Jesus at His Word. Take your burdens to the Lord and leave them there. "Cast your cares on Him, for He cares for you" (I Peter 5:7). Jesus is our burden bearer. When you are stressed out He invites you: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your soul" (Matthew 11:28, 29).

I mentioned earlier the apex of my stress. It was when my first wife, Frances, died. God used His people during that difficult time and surrounded me with praying friends far and near. One of the first sympathy cards I received came from a dear, saintly old lay preacher in northern Michigan. It contained the verse: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you" (Isaiah 43:2).

God was with me, and He'll be with you too.

Grothe is a member of Bethany Lutheran, Astoria, Ore.





Learning about

By Miriam Novotná

he first semester of my third year at Bible school (Ministry Training Institute) was the most hectic of my whole life. I had already graduated from college with a master's degree before I came to AFLBS, but I do not think I had ever been through such an exhausting experience — early morning workouts at the YMCA, morning classes, afternoon work, evening homework, late night duties as a dorm assistant and just enough sleep to be able to get through the next day. When it finally came to a Friday, there was always a weekend filled with ministry and people with all sorts of needs. But the worst thing was, no matter how much I tried or how much I did, I still felt like I only failed in everything. I never had any satisfaction.

At Christmas I got a book called "The Overload Syndrome: Learning to Live Within Your Limits" written by Dr. Richard Swenson. At first I did not understand why; I did not think I had a problem with overdoing it. But then I started reading the book and it clearly spoke to my situation.

The book helped me see so many things in a completely new perspective. I so desperately wanted to follow Jesus' example in all that I did. But I never before realized that Jesus went to sleep each night without having healed every disease in Israel; neither did He minister to everybody who needed it. There were many needs He simply chose not to meet. But unlike me, Jesus understood what it meant to prioritize and how to focus on the truly important. I slowly started learning from Jesus that at any given moment, the most important thing in life is the person standing in front of me.

I slowly started to understand that we were *created* with limits. The Bible never says we are unlimited, but it does say that God is! God is the creator of my limits, so it is okay with Him that I have limits. As Swenson says in his book, "God probably does not expect me to be infinite and is a little surprised when I try. It is okay with Him if I am not all things to all people all the time all by myself. As a matter of fact, it is probably not okay with Him if I assume otherwise."

Swenson helped me remember that it's okay for me to have limits — God doesn't. It is okay to get a good night's sleep — God doesn't sleep. It is okay for me to rest — God does not need to. And it is probably even okay to be depressed — because God isn't.

But the part of the book that I remember the most is this little dialog:

For example, if after a productive, busy day you finally quit at midnight, I would go to your house and greet you on the front step. The conversation might go like this.

"Are you done for today?" I would ask.

"Yes. Finally. A long day — but a good one."

"Why are you quitting now?" I would ask.

"Well, because it's midnight."

"So it is. Does that mean that all your work is done? Isn't there something that you could be doing? Isn't there some good that you could still pursue? Isn't there some need that you could work on? Some studying... or perhaps letters of encouragement to write?"

"Give me a break!" you would say. "What do you expect?"

And that is the point! But it was a new thing for me to realize that whenever we quit for the day, it is *always* arbitrary. The fact is, whenever we quit we are abandoning the job unfinished. And that was very eye-opening to me.

I have also learned that sometimes I have come to believe that activity is all that counts, everything else being sloth. If I am not busy, I am not of value. And in addition to the guilt of inactivity, there is also an associated pride that comes from being busy. The tighter my schedule is, the better I feel about my achievement and myself. But I am learning that my identity comes from God and is not contingent on my job description or how many hours I work.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened," offered Jesus, "and I will give you rest." I so needed that reminder. As Swenson writes, "Just because Jesus said this 2,000 years ago doesn't mean it doesn't apply today!"

I am really thankful for this book. So if you, too, feel like you need some refreshment in your busy, hectic and overloaded lives, pick up Swenson's "The Overload Syndrome." Maybe you feel like you do not even have time to read books, but trust me, you will not regret reading this one!

And remember — God does not give out monthly productivity reports. All He asks is, "Do you love Me?"

Novotná, a 2004 graduate of MTI, attends Grace Free Lutheran in Maple Grove, Minn.



n our church office a poster tells a proverb a little newer than those of King Solomon: "Blessed are the flexible for they shall not be bent out of shape."

Stress is one of those things that can bend us out of shape, weigh us down and even break us. It can also train us to be strongly flexible like the beautiful weeping willow tree. Daily we live with stress, and it can either be a blessing or a curse. Stress as a blessing can help us focus on the things we need to do. It can be the motivator that pushes us to be quicker, better and more effective in using the gifts God has entrusted to us.

But stress can also be a curse. If we allow the strain and pressure of stress to overpower our lives it can be tremendously destructive.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary informs us about stress: "stress \'stres\ n 1: PRESSURE, STRAIN; esp: a force that tends to distort a body."

Stress can physically raise a person's blood pressure and even contribute to cholesterol

being elevated to unhealthy levels. Stress can cause a loss of perspective and keep us from seeing clearly; it tricks us into focusing on the wrong things. Unhealthy stress ends up as a focus on self, draining away proper attention to our other relationships. And stress is often a series of bad choices we have made as we habitually invite too many responsibilities into our lives, emotionally bending us out of shape.

As a young pastor, the negative aspects of stress trapped me, together with depression and exhaustion. Each morning as the alarm clock would buzz I would reach over and roughly hit it off and mutter, "Rats!" I would, with that one word, brand the day and, in my heart and mind, give it over to the rats.

It seemed as if I was in a rat race, and the rats were winning. Life and ministry was becoming less than satisfying. I was becoming less than the pastor I should have been and less of a husband and father than I expected myself to be.

All of this increased my stress level, and I



felt more tired and more depressed each day.

A Way for Change

Stress does not have to rule our lives. There are ways of escape.

- Allow God, through prayer, to be our first counselor. Bring those things that stress us to Him. His Word encourages us to give Him all our cares because He cares for us (I Peter 5:7).
- Allow God's people to use the gifts God has entrusted them to support and help us. Again, God's Word encourages us to bear each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2).
- Allow our minds and hearts to be gently filled with the promises of God. The LORD used a young David to soothe a crazed king through the gifts of music and song (I Samuel 16:14-23).
- Allow ourselves to do less in a day without embracing undeserved guilt. God hasn't called any of us to do everything. He just wants us to be faithful in the things He has called us to do. Jesus reminds His followers to "count the cost" (Luke 14:28).
- Learn what we should allow to remain unfinished. God interrupted Paul's plan for mission work in Galatia and Bithynia to make room in their schedule to travel with the gospel into Europe (Acts 16:6-7).
- Purposely invite Jesus to come into each part of the day. It is to the Church that Jesus says, "Behold, I

stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20).

While a young pastor, I was freed from the destructive impact of stress, depression and exhaustion. I remembered from my time in Bible school a study in Romans. "You must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 7:11). I began to speak the truth each morning at the buzz of the alarm. The "rats" which had come from my lips and heart was replaced with the reminder and truthful declaration: "I am alive unto God today!"

Within weeks my exhaustion, my depression, my disappointed outlook on life were replaced. I began to live in hope, excitement and with the joy of the Lord. The difference was obvious by the words on my lips, the song in my heart and the bounce of my step.

As a final word of encouragement, there is another sign in our church office. It is a reminder to all who enter: "If it ain't fatal, don't sweat it!"

The good news to believers is if in the end it is fatal. then we really are the big winners because our fatality here leads to being present with the Lord Jesus forever.

Hoff is pastor of St. Ansgar's Lutheran, Salinas, Calif.

BE SILENT

By Father Richard Herbel

nd they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great." This is said of the three friends of Job when they came to comfort him (Job 2:11ff). I have long been moved by reflection on their response to the situation. Their silence is more than speechlessness in the face of horrendous suffering. It is a compassionate and powerful communication of sincere commiseration with Job. It is an expression of holy fear. They bow in silent reverence before the powerful and inexplicable hand of God that has touched Job. It is a wordless prayer: "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him come my salvation" (Psalm 62:1).

Noteworthy here is the amount of time that was passed in this way: seven days and seven nights. There is no impatience in this silence. Job and his three friends were not preoccupied with what they would do next because they knew that in keeping this silence they were already doing something. Following the attacks on September 11, there were many "moments of silence" kept for the victims. Sincere as this gesture may have been, a moment is probably not long enough to constitute a true parallel. On the other hand, we can be thankful that it does not usually take a whole week of silence for it to be grace-filled and fruitful. This kind of silence is more than a pause. It must be given sufficient time to deepen and mature.

The silence of Job's three friends has been on my mind, again. I thought of it last spring as I stood by the bed of my father after a disastrous heart surgery, which eventually took his life. Again last fall it came to mind as I spent a week with my sister shortly after she had undergone a bone marrow transplant and was suffering the unpleasant side effects of the harsh chemotherapy. In both cases I had brought along things to read, and hospitals nowadays seem to have TVs everywhere. But I had no desire to entertain myself. I felt I was witness to and participant in a great and momentous drama in the life of my loved ones. I had more than enough to do to "read" these events in silence, and I was more than willing to dedicate an extended amount of time to this.

These experiences have deepened my appreciation for the Christian practice of silent prayer and meditation. There is a silence that is discerning and full of light and awe and time does not oppress. One becomes intensely aware of the present moment lived between individual heartbeats and breaths. There is a keen awareness of the irreplaceable value of each moment and each event in the unfolding of salvation history, which is the only reality there is. Jesus Christ is Lord of this moment, and that conviction shuts the mouth and silences, at least for a time, the racing thoughts and desires of the heart. In the Book of Revelation when the Lamb opens the climactic seventh seal we are told without further elaboration, "there was silence in heaven."

Insightful silence like this can and should be a part of our everyday lives. If we are willing, there is time to find and enter this silence. May the grace of Jesus enable us to hear the Father's great Word with new clarity.

Herbel is prior of Saint Augustine's House, a Lutheran monastic community based on the Benedictine tradition in Oxford, Mich. Their Web site is www.staugustineshouse.org.

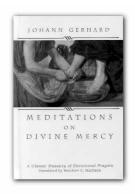
From Parish Education



Running the Race of Faith

Pam Ausenhus

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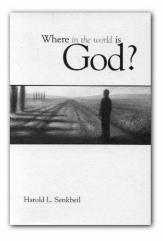


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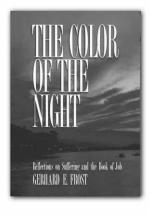
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The Color of the Night

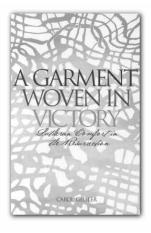
Gerhard Frost
Short reflections
on suffering and
the book of Job
wrestle with difficult issues we
face during
times of crisis
such as trust in
God, the mean-



ing of life, and unfairness in the world. Added questions appropriate for personal devotions and group study encourage deeper meditation in the book of Job.

A Garment Woven in Victory

Carol Geisler
Tied together by the metaphor of a thread woven in a garment, this book reveals how the thread of resurrection hope is woven into the fabric of our Christian faith and brings sustaining power for the believer through weakness, suffering, and even



the valley of death. Adversity, distress, and loss can be faced head-on with a confidence found only through faith in Christ. \$10.50

For information on ordering these books, contact Parish Education at (763) 545-5631, email parished@aflc.org, or write to 3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd., Plymouth, MN 55441.

Our President Writes

the challenge of an aging church



Robert Lee

It is often presumed that our older church members are the spiritual backbone of the congregations. yet this may no longer be the case.

ou've heard the saying before: "Growing old is not for sissies." We usually think of this in reference to people, not institutions, while the fact is that it's a real challenge for congregations to grow old, too. I'd like to encourage you to consider this challenge as an opportuni-

Those who attended the AFLC pastors and wives conference in January heard Cliff Pederson present some startling statistics about the reality of *mass aging*: two-thirds of all people age 65 and older and three-quarters of all people age 75 and older are alive today! By the year 2030, estimates put more than half of the population of the United States older than age 65. Studies also show that the percentage of older people is higher (at least 13 years) in the churches than in the general population, and the number of senior citizens is even higher in small towns and rural communities.

It is often presumed that our older church members are the spiritual backbone of the congregations, yet this may no longer be the case. A 1990 study of Lutherans indicated that lay people age 55 and older were more spiritually mature than their pastors; more recent studies suggest that pluralism is taking its toll on the faith of our seniors. Pederson stated that his queries found 51 percent of those surveyed base their hope of salvation on living a good life and having been influenced by the teaching that it doesn't matter what one believes as long as you are sincere. I was troubled, also, to hear that the so-called builders generation (ages 53 to 71), which is 87-percent churched, has parented a generation who are only 40-percent churched, with grandchildren who are only 25-percent churched.

There may be a connection between the concerns mentioned above and a decline in church participation by older adults revealed by a Barna Research Group survey. Elders are dropping out of organized religious activity, including church attendance (down 6 percent in the past five years), in significant numbers, and Barna points to "the erosion of commitment among builders" as a contributing factor.

How will our congregations respond to the challenge of mass aging? Do we see our older members as an opportunity or an obstacle? Are we ready and willing to give the same high priority to senior ministry (ministry "to, with, and by" seniors) as to youth ministry? I was impressed to hear one of our pastors declare that in his congregation senior citizens don't get put on the shelf; they have to climb up there all by themselves!

The theme of our 2004 Annual Conference was "To All Generations" (Psalm 100). It is my prayer that our church family will catch a new vision for the eternal value of every member of the body, regardless of age, seeking to win, hold, and enlist all generations for the building of free and living congregations.

Marcelo's call



was born three months prematurely. Because of a very difficult birth and weighing approximately 800 grams (1.75 lb) I spent the first three months of my life at the hospital in an incubator. At 2 years of age I went to live with my grandmother while my mother went to the city of Amanbai in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. I remained with my grandmother, and through the years we have had a very close and loving relationship.

When I was around 3 I started talking, and by the age of 5 I was going to school. In school I had some difficulty in learning and also in motor coordination, which was caused by physical problems since birth. Because of my physical disability, school was difficult as I had to

depend on the help of others to get around.

Because I was born early, my legs did not form well; the doctors say that I have a congenital dislocation of the left femur, which makes it difficult for me to get around by myself. The doctors have told me that I would need an operation to get the bones to the place were they belong. It is my wish to be able to have this operation and to also one day have a better wheel chair so that I could get around better and be more independent.

I came to know the Lord as my Savior at the age of 16, and since then I have always had a desire to study and grow more in the Word. So at the age of 19 the Lord opened the door for me to attend the Bible school and seminary (Semear) in Campo Mourão. It has been about three months since school started, and I have already grown much in the Word and have been able to put into practice what I am learning. I have also had some wonderful experiences getting to know more people and adapting to a new environ-

ment, learning to live with many others in the boy's dorm.

It is a dream of mine to one day become a teacher and share my experiences with others. But the most important for me is to teach the Word of God. and to bring this message to the people who have not heard. So I feel that the Lord has called me to Semear to get a deeper knowledge of the Bible.

Thank you for your prayers, and may the Peace of God comfort you and the Holy Spirit be with you all.

> — Marcelo Glier Campo Mourão, Brazil

[World Missions] Multiplying ministers

"... to prepare God's people for works and service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ..." (Ephesians 4:12).

Brazilians are seeing their need for a deeper relationship with Jesus.



quipping lay people and pastors for future outreach is one of our goals as ■ we begin our 20th

year of ministry with the

AFLC in Brazil. We are happy to report that five young people from the Bateais congregation are attending Bible school in Campo Mourão this year. Five others are participating in a seminary course on Urban Ministries in Curitiba. A group of 16 of our members, including our son Matthew, meets weekly for the Child Evangelism Fellowship nine-month training course. In the local church we are involved in special small group training courses ranging from discipleship classes, to marriage seminars, to financial management courses. A doctrinal course for the local pastors will begin in the second semester.

Through Bible camps and weekend seminars in other AFLC churches, we seek to build up the body and equip people for ministry. Brazilians are seeing their need for a deeper relationship with Jesus. This has been manifested in recent conversions and signs of revival such as public confession of sin and restoration of broken relationships. Wonderful things are happening as God's Spirit works through His Word to call people to Jesus.



Missions is exciting and worthwhile! As an AFLC family we rejoice in the part we play in the big picture of God's redemption story. We appreciate your prayers for us and for those being trained as we build the body of Christ and contribute to multiply ministers in our AFLC Brazilian churches.

> — Paul and Becky Abel Curitiba, Brazil



e all have experienced stress. We tend to blame ourselves for being "too busy." Webster's Dictionary defines stress as "a condition in which an individual fails to make a satisfactory adaptation. Synonymous with strain, pressure, and tension." The Latin root of the word stress means, "to bind tight." I came across a book, titled "Women and Stress," by the late Jean Lush. Although primarily



Sharon Borg

written to women, I found much of the information to be beneficial to both genders in how to manage stress in biblical, productive ways. Here are some highlights.

Do away with disorder

Beauty and a sense of order in vour home are functional — not luxuries. Beauty is right for everyone and fundamental for emotional health. Creating beauty gives us a sense of accomplishment, charges

us with energy, and reduces tension.

Just straightening up the house can give you an inexpensive perk. But first define order. Remember, things don't have to be spotless to create peace. Instead, they need to be neat, according to your standards.

Diversions

In our busy lives — caring for our families, working outside the home, being involved in our church and community — we tend to the needs of others, often at our own expense.

Some stress-management diversions include daily devotions (spiritual food is a *must*); hobbies such as reading, listening to music, crafts, walking, bargain hunting, journal writing, cooking, and gardening; or playing games with family, making time for friends, having a makeover and/or massage, etc.

Find some creative outlets to release your tensions. Diversions are gifts we can give others and ourselves. They can quiet our hearts so we can hear God and receive the direction and encouragement we need. Read Psalm 23:2-3.

Deliberate relaxation

There is an unattractive side to a driven life where we create our own tensions. Some of us feel guilty if we are not being productive.

Are you only available to friends when they are in trouble and need a listening ear? Are you missing out on great opportunities for friendship? Take the time to relax and bond with old and new friends. You will enjoy the rewards for all eternity.

Do you rest on your days off? Most people return to work exhausted. Scripture teaches us to rest on the Sabbath. This is spiritually, prophetically and physically significant. We are to completely

separate ourselves from the pressures of daily life, focus on God and allow Him to feed our souls.

Dehiscence

A good hard cry, or a hearty laugh relieves tension. Research has shown that the hormones released during crying have a tranquilizing effect on the body, and laughing has stress-reducing benefits.

side to a driven life where we create our own tensions. Some of us feel quilty if we are not being productive.

There is an unattractive

Dedicated exercise

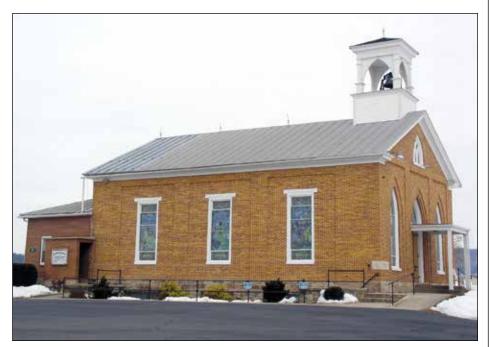
Healthy eating habits, regular sleep and exercise are the first things to fly out the window when we are stressed out. But they are important for good health.

Exercise increases your fitness, helps your immune system, reduces stress, and lifts your mood. Exercise also helps you sleep better because it uses up surplus adrenaline, releases muscular tension, ventilates the lungs, and creates a physical fatigue that helps the onset of sleep.

Over-exercising, however, can increase stress. Enjoy what you chose to do, and do it regularly.

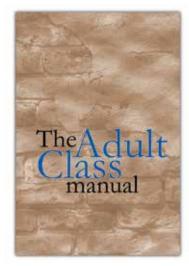
Our goal, with God's help, is to free ourselves of the unnecessary baggage of stress, and be mentally and physically available to say to God, "Here am I, send me."

Borg is a member of Grace Free Lutheran, Maple Grove. Minn.



Mount Zion Lutheran (above), Landisburg, Pa., and Tressler Memorial Lutheran (right), Loysville, Pa., joined the AFLC in January. Both churches were formerly affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.





Parish Ed reprints **Adult Class Manual**

The Adult Class Manual was recently reprinted with a new cover design and is now available from AFLC Parish Education. The book is regularly used by AFLC congregations for new-member classes to give a foundation in the teachings of the Lutheran church. The manual is also an excellent study guide for those in search of salvation and for those seeking to be strengthened in their faith. For information on ordering this book, contact Parish Education at (763) 545-5631, email parished@aflc.org, or write to 3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd., Plymouth, MN 55441.

AFLC schools given funds for three vans for summer teams

AFLBS conveys special praise to God and thanks for funding given this spring to provide three new vans for the summer ministry teams. After a letter

sent from the AFLC schools maintenance department expressed a need for vehicles, several churches and individuals responded with gifts enabling the schools to purchase two used 2003 Chevy vans and a new GMC van. These 15-passenger vehicles, along with one of the old vans, will supply the transportation needs for the four ministry teams traveling this summer to camps and churches throughout the country. Additional funds have



also been received for the purchase of a fourth van this fall. A used mini-van was also donated to the Home Mission department for one of the two Barnabas ministry teams.

See the AFLBS Web site at www.aflbs.org for the summer teams schedules and pictures. Please pray for the teams as they travel throughout the country this summer.



Graduation

Seniors at the Association Free Lutheran Bible School and Theological Seminary as well as the Ministry Training Institute graduated on May 22. Pictured, above, are seven of the nine MTI graduates. At near right, seminarian Brent Olson receives his diploma. At far right, AFLBS graduate Tony Pierson is congratulated by AFLBS Dean of Students Mark Johnson.









Six teams of students from AFLBS are touring the country this summer as a part of the annual ministries to local congregations. Pictured, above left, are members of the Ambassadors, including Sarah Rolf, Steve Nash, Alicia Vigness, Dan McCarlson and Abby Fugleberg. Pictured, above right, are members of the Majesty team, including Rebekah Borg, Ryan Sivertson, Theresa Welsch, Jordan Langness and Renah Thompson. Serving on the Foundation team this summer are Jessie Parsley, Adam Osier, Stefanie Knapp and Seth Twedt. Serving on Cornerstone are Justine Kantonen, Rebekah Watson, Masha Plotnikova and Sam Willard. Serving on Barnabas North are Gretchen Knutson, Jared Langness, Ben Olson and Abby Wellumson. Serving on Barnabas South are Dan and Marcela Giles, Christina Berge and Malea Russum.

People and places

Due to a lack of funding, members of the AFLC Foundation board eliminated the position of director of Development at the end of May. **Jon Galland**, who filled that position, will return to the banking industry and is continuing his graduate studies in political science.

Pastor Anthony Striffler, Denver, Colo., has accepted an interim call to serve St. James Lutheran, Garden City, Kan.

Daniel Keinanen has accepted an internship, possibly turning into a full-time position, as director of youth ministries at Christ is Lord Free Lutheran, Onalaska, Wis.

Pastor Greg Schram, Northwood, N.D., and **Pastor Kent Sperry**, DeKalb, Ill., were placed on the regular clergy roster from the fellowship roster by members of the Coordinating Committee.

Members of the Coordinating Committee removed **Maranatha Free Lutheran**, Willmar, Minn., from the AFLC congregational roster at their request.

At their May meeting, members of the Coordinating Committee placed three congregations on the AFLC congregational roster.

Ebenezer Lutheran, a Home Missions congregation in Humbolt, Tenn., is served by interim Pastor Brent Logeman.

Salem Lutheran Church of Oxford, a former ALC church in North Branch, Minn., is served by AFLC Pastor Ken Marquardt.

Peace Lutheran, Canal Winchester, Ohio, is served by AFLC Pastor David Barnhart.

What does it mean?

AFLC: The Association of Free Lutheran Congregations, a fellowship of independent congregations that have chosen to be interdependent for the purpose of accomplishing service in the Kingdom of God that cannot best be done alone. Founded in 1962 with headquarters at Plymouth, Minn.

AFLC memorials — May 2004

AFLBS

Kenneth Nylander, Dorothy Eraas, Evelyn Buck, Edna Ohnstad

AFLTS

Wayne Setness, Terry Simons, Edna Ohnstad, Marion Hendrickson

General Fund

William Parker, Abby Utne, Edna Ohnstad

Home Missions

Jan Fatland, Elizabeth Fahsholz, Edna Ohnstad

Parish Education

Mary Lindquist, Corrine Bauch, Iris Myron

Vision 2004

William Parker, Mildred Skyberg, Joseph Sandquist, Ruth Rogenes

WMF

Robert Burton, Marion Hendrickson, Kenneth Krueger

World Missions

Lillian Kohl, Harry Lykken, Frieda Holter, Edna Ohnstad

... in honor of

WMF

Autumn Spiering

MTP offers Four Northern Lights

"Four Northern Lights," a book by G. Everett Arden, is now available from Mercy and Truth Publishers. The book features Hans Nielsen Hauge, Nicolai Gruntvig, Paavo Ruotsalainen, and Carl Olaf Rosenius and may be purchased for \$12 plus postage.

For more information, contact Mercy and Truth at 19594 450th St. NW, Newfolden, MN 56738-9286 or call (218) 874-2101.

Association of Free Lutheran Congregations

3110 East Medicine Lake Boulevard Minneapolis, Minnesota 55441

AFLC Benevolences (5 months) - January 1 - May 31, 2004

FUND	TOTAL Subsidy	REC'D IN MAY	TOTAL REC'D TO DATE	% TOTAL
G 1.P 1	4000 774	400 700 00	4407.070.00	40
General Fund	\$288,771	\$22,599.98	\$125,373.06	43
Youth Ministries	54,024	2,844.18	29,080.71	54
Parish Education	82,062	4,120.41	34,909.56	43
Seminary	154,195	28,951.30	99,635.23	65
Bible School	264,089	31,086.26	104,319.30	40
Home Missions	287,115	20,099.51	99,310.91	35
Church Extension	$24,\!576$	265.02	5,175.54	21
World Missions	256,326	22,332.88	98,275.23	38
Personal Support	328,311	30,907.79	154,040.02	47
TOTALS	\$1,739,469	\$163,207.33	\$750,119.56	43
TOTALS 2003	\$1,740,325	\$127,349.90	\$654,489.85	38
Goal 42 %	,		•	

The Evangelism Department received \$4,938.43 in May. The office of director of Development received \$405 in May.

[Editorial]

The importance of good theology

ne of my favorite comic strips is from Peanuts. Lucy is looking out the window on a rainy day. She wonders if the rain will ever stop and worries about the flooding and troubles that could come. Her brother, Linus, reminds her of the story of Noah



Craig Johnson

and God's promise that He won't flood the earth again. Lucy finds comfort in that. Linus says, "Good theology has a way of doing that."

Good theology brings comfort and peace. Poor theology is at the root of much

stress. In particular, improper understanding and use of the law and the gospel is the source of much discomfort.

The law is that portion of Scripture that teaches what we must do. It declares how we have sinned and tells us what we deserve. "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (II Corinthians 3:6, NIV). The purpose of the law is to put to death our old nature. It tells us to quit foolishly thinking we can ever work our way into God's favor. The law tells us we have no hope apart from Christ. "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). The law leads us to Christ and shows us our need — but is unable to meet our need. That happens through the gospel.

The gospel is the good news of what Christ has done. It is the wonderful declaration "that Christ

died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (I Corinthians 15:3, 4). It tells us of God's love and grace, mercy and forgiveness. It speaks of the joy. hope and peace found in Jesus. It describes how Christ has dealt with our sin and done what we are unable to do. "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son ..." (Romans 8:3).

The law gives stress. The gospel relieves it. Looking at the things going on in the world as Lucy did brings worry and fear. Looking to the promises of God as Linus did brings peace.

Many worry about what the future holds. They wonder if the bills will get paid and what the doctor's report might say. The longer they look at the problems instead of the promises, the more their stress grows.

In Isaiah 41:10 the Lord gives the command, "So do not fear," and then follows it with the promise, "for I am with you: do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Much stress comes because we're concerned with what people think. "What will they say?" We try to meet their expectations, satisfy their requirements and gain their approval. That is living under the law. The gospel tells us what the Lord has done and how that makes what the crowd thinks irrelevant.

The legalistic religious leaders of Jesus' day were continually adding stress to people's lives, telling

The law gives stress. The gospel relieves it.

them what they must do and be, but offering no gospel. The disciples pointed out to the Lord that He had offended the leaders. It didn't bother Jesus. "Leave them; they are blind guides," He said (Matthew 15:14).

The law tells us we'll always fall short. We'll never be good enough. But the gospel tells us of how Christ died for our sins "in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us" (Romans 8:4).

When I went out on my seminary internship I was a little stressed. I was thinking about all the things I needed to remember. "Don't do this. Don't say that." I was aware of the responsibility and all the things that could go wrong. But I had started to forget the gospel. God reminded me of the gospel during that year — the good news of His love and His care. It brought peace to a worried heart. Good theology — the gospel — has a way of doing that.

THE LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd. Minneapolis, Minnesota 55441

[ARC]

A friend once gave me some good advice about tackling difficult tasks. He told me the best way to eat an elephant was one bite at a time.

Stressed but comfortable

y the time you read this, summer programs at the ARC will be in full swing. The Annual Conference will have come and gone along other large camps. Summer staff will have several weeks of camp experience and should be comfortable in their tasks. Maintenance and remodeling of several buildings will be completed and hopefully appreciated by all the campers. This article for the back of the *Ambassador* will have been edited and printed.

While I'm writing this, however, conference is only a few days away, the summer staff can't find their way from one end of the camp to the other, there is still more than 700 square feet of tile to install in one of the buildings, and the article I was supposed to have in to Ruth two days ago I'm writing at midnight.

I totally forgot about the article that she asked me for several months ago. When Ruth called and asked if I had the article done, I had to confess to her that I hadn't even started it. When I asked her what the theme of the issue was, she replied, "Stress." When she suggested I write about some stress in my life, I didn't have to think long.

The beginning of summer is always a stressful time at the ARC. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed with all the preparations. This is my 10th summer here, and the stress I felt going into each of the previous summers was very similar

to this one. What I need to remember is that the same God who helped me cope with the stress of last year is the same God who is here helping me this year. When I stop and realize this fact, I can be much more relaxed and efficient with the time I have. When stress gets the best of me I have a bad attitude. The tasks ahead seem impossible and I have a difficult time completing them.

A friend once gave me some good advice about tackling difficult tasks. He told me the best way to eat an elephant was one bite at a time. A little crude, yes, but it makes a good point. When I have tasks that seem impossible, I need to learn to just start the task and leave the rest up to God. I have to consistently remember that the ARC belongs to God and I am only a steward of the talents, energy and time that He gives me.

When things seem overwhelming or impossible and you start to stress out, remember three things. First, God has helped you through tough situations in the past. Second, use the talents God has given you and slowly start "biting" into the project at hand. Last, remember to thank God after He helps you through another tough situation. This will remind you when you face your next stressful situation that God helped you in the past and He will help you again.

— Eric Westlake ARC Director