

The United States Is Not the Center of the Universe

My friend Kelechi is a brave Nigerian evangelist who has gotten himself kidnapped several times so he could share Christ with armed militants. More recently he has been involved in dangerous evangelism efforts in northern Nigeria, where Islamic jihadists have killed 17,000 people in the past five years.

A few days ago, Kelechi sent me a disturbing email, asking for prayer. He had just learned that a young man he was discipling, Boulous, was killed by militants while trying to get some Christians out of a village that had been targeted for a surprise attack.

Kelechi wrote: "Please would you pray for me and ask your friends to lift us before the Lord? It is a very trying time. We are the only people doing evangelistic work there, so we cannot stop. Also pray for me as I go to the area next week when I think it will be safer."

I feel helpless trying to raise awareness of Kelechi's cause. One of the worst waves of terrorism on planet earth has hit Nigeria, yet the world's media gives it scant attention. The Islamic group operating there, Boko Haram, killed more people in 2014 than ISIS terrorists in Syria. Last week in the Nigerian village of Dalori, Islamic militants bombed homes and burned children alive.

The death toll in Dalori was 86. But did you hear anything about the attack? It wasn't on any news channel I listen to. All the major networks were talking nonstop about Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton and the Iowa presidential caucus—along with the controversy stirred by Beyoncé's new music video.

In April 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped 276 Christian schoolgirls

from the Nigerian town of Chibok—and for a few weeks people on this side of the Atlantic Ocean paid attention, especially after First Lady Michelle Obama tweeted her support for the girls.

Almost two years have now passed, and the girls are still missing. They are most likely living as slaves in a Boko Haram camp on the Chadian border. Most likely they have been forced to marry their abductors. And most people have forgotten about them.

All these foreign problems are just too stressful to think about. And too far away. Besides, we have a Super Bowl to watch.

I'm not trying to put anybody under a guilt trip. I am blessed to live in the United States, and there isn't much I can do to stop Boko Haram from torching African villages. But it concerns me that so many of us are completely oblivious to the needs of the rest of the world.

Just a few days ago, Islamic terrorists linked to the group Al Shabaab killed four Christian in Kenya. One of the believers was beheaded. I have to rely on a relatively obscure Christian news service for this information because mainstream media outlets rarely report on Christian persecution.

Wars are going on today in Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Ukraine, Israel, Iraq, Nigeria and South Sudan—which is also dealing with a famine. But when I checked the latest headlines in *USA Today*, the focus of the news was on the New Hampshire presidential primary and pro football star Peyton Manning's legacy.

And this just in! Beyoncé will perform during the Super Bowl halftime show!

That's a shame. Especially when you do the math and realize that the United States has a population of 319.4 million while

the global population is about 7.2 billion. That works out to a 4.4 percent share of the world's population. Who do we think we are?

We are not the center of the universe.

I'm not going to hold my breath until mainstream media improves its reporting. People are always going to be more interested in Kim Kardashian's latest reality show than in how we can stop global sex trafficking, how we can help abused women in Somalia or how we can protect Syrian refugees while they flee the terror in their country.

But Christians should care. We may live in the United States, but we are citizens of God's kingdom and we are called to pray—and care—for the whole world. Paul told Timothy: "Therefore I exhort first of all that you make supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings for everyone, for kings and for all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and honesty" (1 Tim. 2:1-2, MEV).

Please be a global Christian. Look at the big picture. Stay informed of world events so you can pray with understanding. Make friends with people from other cultures and see the world through their eyes. Pray for the nations.

You can start by praying for Nigeria—and for my friend Kelechi, who will be risking his life to share the gospel this weekend while millions of Americans watch a 17-minute halftime show that will cost \$12 million.

What Hillary Is Learning About GenXers—and What Your Church Must Know

Hillary Clinton thought she had the full support of young American voters last year. She got high-profile endorsements from singers Pharrell Williams and Christina Aguilera. She appeared in a goofy skit on Saturday Night Live in which she praised herself for having a “young, cool vibe.” She even brought in pop star Katie Perry (sporting Hillary Clinton campaign fingernails) to sing her signature anthem “Roar” at a campaign event in Iowa.

But now, just a few months later, 68-year-old Clinton is scrambling to convince Millennials and GenXers that she is their candidate. She even opened a Snapchat account and put her 35-year-old daughter, Chelsea, on the platform. But the latest polls show that, among Democrats, a majority of young voters are choosing Bernie Sanders, the ultra-liberal, “democratic socialist” senator from Vermont—who is six years older than Clinton.

The reason? Young voters have told *CMW* and other news outlets that they don’t trust Hillary. They think she’s dishonest. And they believe she is too tied to the Wall Street/Inside-the-Washington-Beltway establishment. They detect something fake.

We’ll see how all this plays out in Iowa and New Hampshire in a few days. Meanwhile, I hope the church can learn a few lessons from politics. The truth is that Millennials and GenXers don’t have much trust in the Christian “establishment” either. Here are a few things the church must learn fast if we want to win the trust of the younger generation:

- 1. Quit being phony.** Young people today want authenticity. They can’t stand anything fake or pretentious. We are way past

the time when preachers can afford to be cocky and unapproachable. Ministers who arrive at church in limousines or who view ministry as a business venture might as well forget about attracting the younger crowd. Youth today cannot stomach the swagger of a slick televangelist who has been stuck in a 1980s time warp. If you genuinely care about taking the gospel to the younger generation, get rid of anything that comes across as fake. (And that includes pushing people to the floor when you pray for them.)

2. Stop preaching a money-focused gospel. Today's young people will go to the ends of the earth with you if you preach a message of humility and sacrifice. They want to heal the sick, stop child slavery and crush injustice. They despise corporations that oppress foreign workers and governments that exploit people. So if you spend all your time taking offerings for a private jet or manipulating people to give in your "first fruits offering," young people will yawn, roll their eyes and find a better cause to support. They can spot a religious con artist quicker than many adults who have been in church for years!

3. Cultivate real relationships. Today's young people don't place a high value on church attendance or religious routines. Part of the reason they stay away from programmed events is that they genuinely want to connect; they are not interested in keeping a chair warm just so you can fill your new sanctuary. They are relational. And some are starved for love because their own families split apart. They don't want to just listen to a preacher; they want to hear what you have to say and then have a coffee with you afterward. Churches that are successfully reaching young people create a true family environment of love and connection.

4. Offer assurance and encouragement—and follow through. Some of the young men I mentor were horribly disappointed by parents or spiritual leaders. Some were abandoned by their dads; others were verbally abused by pastors. For that reason,

they expect older adults to fail them again—yet they thrive when a true mentor steps in to offer affirming words and caring hugs. But remember: If you tell a young person you will help them, keep your promise. Make the phone calls, send the texts and take them to lunch when possible. You are making a priceless investment.

5. Stop being religious and judgmental. Many of the young Christians I meet today are more passionate about their faith than their parents. They spend their summers on the mission field, get involved in 24/7 prayer efforts and forfeit cars and careers to serve the Lord. But when they walk into some churches they are instantly judged because they have scruffy beards, metal piercings in their noses or tattoos on their forearms. Then they listen to self-righteous Christians who bash sinners rather than model compassion. Is it any wonder that so many Millennials and GenXers have checked out of church?

It is possible to close the generation gap in the church, but this won't happen until older Christians start caring less about maintaining the status quo and more about loving and empowering younger believers. Let's make the necessary changes by slaughtering our sacred cows, embracing new music, learning new technology and welcoming a fresh wave of the Holy Spirit's power.

How to Guard Your Heart From Bitterness

Recently a friend of mine hurt me deeply. I felt betrayed and disrespected. I tried to pretend the insult was no big deal,

but inside I was seething. I can always tell when resentment has invaded my life because I start obsessing about the pain. When I went to bed that evening, I literally felt sore. All I could think about was retaliation.

But just before falling asleep I mouthed a prayer. I meant what I said, even though my feelings begged me to retract the words. I prayed: "Lord, help me to forgive ____." Then, during the night I dreamed that I was enjoying a friendly conversation with this person. When I woke up, it felt as if we had really been talking!

It was a miracle. I realized the dream was God's way of softening my heart and taking out the offense. The Lord gave me the grace to forgive.

Perhaps you've been insulted, overlooked, stabbed in the back or mistreated—and now bitterness is poisoning your soul. Don't let it spread any further. You can nip your offense in the bud by following these guidelines:

1. Don't nurse your grudge. It feels good to our flesh when we replay an offense in our minds and then fantasize about hurting the other person. But if you star in and direct this dramatic movie in your head, you are going to be making sequels for months and years until bitterness makes you sick. Pull the plug on the whole production now.

2. Let go of all revenge. C.S. Lewis said: "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you." No matter how a person offends you, be humble enough to recognize that you've probably done the same thing to someone else before. Quit sharpening your knives. You will be tempted to think about hurting the person, but remember that those knives are hurting you worse than anyone else.

3. Don't spread your bitterness. Sometimes you may need to vent to a close friend about what happened, but this isn't so

you can ruin the reputation of the person who hurt you. If you share your pain with someone because you need advice, don't seek sympathy or go to those who have animosity toward the person who hurt you. That's like mixing toxic chemicals! Instead, go to mentors or friends who are mature enough to tell you the truth. You may feel mistreated, but the speck in your brother's eye may actually be a log in yours. A true friend will tell you that you are overreacting or being unreasonable.

4. Pray for good things to happen to the person who hurt you.

Jesus urged His disciples to love and pray for their persecutors (Matt. 5:44). That's a foreign concept in this age when we unfriend people on Facebook just because they forgot to invite us to a party. Calm down, let go of your petty outrage and ask God to bless the person who offended you. Forgiving prayer will feel like a warm salve applied to your wound.

5. Reach out and expect to repair the relationship. Jesus places a high priority on reconciliation. He wants us to get along. If you are praying and you remember that someone has something against you, Jesus said, "First be reconciled to your brother" (Matt. 5:24). On the flip side, He said if someone has sinned against you, "go and reprove him" (Matt. 18:15).

In both cases Jesus commanded us to confront. And confrontation is never easy. We'd rather just avoid each other. We'd rather "bury our hatchets," pretending that our nasty attitude is gone just because it's well-hidden under our Sunday morning smiles. But true forgiveness is not burying a hatchet while we still hate a person inwardly; forgiveness requires us to surrender the hatchet to Jesus.

6. Ask for God's forgiving love to fill your heart. One of my favorite preachers, Corrie ten Boom, struggled to forgive the Nazis who beat her in the Ravensbrück prison camp. After the

Germans surrendered, she met a former Nazi guard in the street, and he told her he had become a Christian. He reached out his hand and asked her for forgiveness. She couldn't look at him.

But then Corrie remembered Romans 5:5, which says, "The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit." She realized that when we don't have the capacity to forgive, God gives us the love. Jesus changed Corrie's heart.

Corrie added: "God's love is stronger than my hatred and unforgiveness. That same moment I was free. I could say, 'Brother, give me your hand,' and I shook hands with him, and it was as if I could feel God's love streaming through my arms."

Jesus didn't promise a life without offenses. Hurt happens. But He provided the way to keep resentment from ruining our lives. As we enter this new year, make a conscious decision that you will embrace a life of miraculous forgiveness. {eoa}

5 Ways to Grow Closer to Your 'Daddy' God

This morning as I was walking to my car in my driveway, I sensed that familiar voice speaking to me—the voice of my heavenly Father. The words triggered a big smile on my face. God said to me: "Lee, I get a big kick out of you!" For the next 10 minutes in my car, I praised Him for showing me, yet again, His overwhelming love.

I can already hear some people gnashing their religious teeth over this comment. "You just made that up!" "God does not talk

like that!" "You're delusional." But I really don't care what people say about it. I know my Father's love, and His acceptance has transformed me. And I'm eager to grow more intimate with Him.

Many Christians struggle to truly know God as an affectionate, approachable and even playful Daddy. They read the Bible, listen to sermons and attend church, and they can quote Scriptures about God's love. But for them, God's love is a cold, clinical doctrine—not a warm experience. If you'd like to go deeper in intimacy with your Father in this new year, consider taking these steps:

1. Discover your identity as a child of God. Everybody's talking about *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* these days. It's interesting that the central plot of all *Star Wars* films is the mystery of paternity. In one of the original films we learned during a certain dramatic light saber duel that Darth Vader was the father of Luke Skywalker. In the new movie, we discover (spoiler alert!) that Han Solo is Kylo Ren's dad—and we are left with a bigger question: Is Luke Rey's father?

I've met a few people who don't know who their father is. But I meet Christians all the time who doubt God loves them as a father. The Bible tells us that when we are born again, the Holy Spirit enters our hearts to solve our own paternity mystery. Romans 8:15 says, "... You have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" The Holy Spirit helps us understand who we belong to. And His name is "Abba"—the Hebrew word for "Daddy" or "Papa."

2. Throw out old religious mindsets. Are you uncomfortable calling God your "Daddy"? If you are, you really don't believe Romans 8:15. He is Abba! The problem is that many Christians have been conditioned by harsh sermons, rote prayers and somber organ music to believe God is (1) very distant, (2) always angry and (3) too busy managing heaven to take notice of us. That's how the legalistic Pharisees viewed God, but

Jesus challenged their warped ideas. Throughout His life on earth, He showed us that God is approachable, accepting of all people, friendly toward sinners, forgiving, protective and affectionate. He even let the disciple John lay his head on His chest (John 13:29)—something a proper Pharisee would never do! Yet Jesus isn't the slightest bit religious. If you let Him, He will pull you close to His chest and let you hear the beating of His heart. He really wants you to be close!

3. Get healed from your own issues with your parents. When some people hear the word “father,” the word conjures up painful memories of domestic abuse, abandonment, alcoholism or frightening punishments. Others associate “father” with a numb detachment—because they never connected emotionally with their dads. These are called “father wounds”—and there is a maternal version too. Don't let the mistakes of your imperfect parents keep you from enjoying God's perfect love. Talk to a pastor, mentor or counselor about your pain. Then let the Holy Spirit show you that your heavenly Daddy is strong, compassionate, accepting, gentle, kind and faithful.

4. Accept the forgiveness you've already been given. Some Christians can quote every Bible verse about God's forgiveness, yet what they believe in their heads has never shifted to their hearts. Deep down they think God simply tolerates them. They know the blood of Jesus paid for their sins, but this seems more like a legal transaction ratified by a benevolent judge. They still believe God is silently mad at them, even though He canceled their guilty sentence. That is not the gospel!

God did not halfheartedly or reluctantly forgive you—He forgave you from His gushing heart of love. Yes it was a legal transaction, but it was enacted out of a wondrous compassion that will take all of eternity to comprehend. The Bible says God directed all His righteous anger toward Jesus and laid our punishment on Him—so that He could remove the barrier that separated us. All because of love! He is not angry at you

now—He loves you so much He actually threw a party to welcome you into His presence! He doesn't just tolerate you; He delights in you!

5. Bring your hidden shame out of the closet. You can receive Christ's forgiveness the moment you confess your sins (1 John 1:9). But James 5:16 says you can go further: You can also confess your secret sins to another person "so that you may be healed." Many Christians have never taken this bold step because it's too embarrassing. But the more transparent you are with others, the freer you will be from your past. If the devil is constantly reminding you of your past sins, grab another Christian and pray together about these accusations. I guarantee your accuser will flee.

When you truly know you are accepted and embraced by the Father without reservation, you will sense His presence, feel His embrace and hear your Daddy's voice.

What Is God Saying to America in 2016?

I've been accused of being a prophet, and I cringe every time because (1) I don't like the title, and (2) I'm not comfortable with the way some Christians put prophetic people on pedestals. The gift of prophecy is certainly needed today, but we should never turn prophets into celebrities or follow them like gurus. Nor should we cheapen prophecy by turning it into a Christian form of fortune telling.

True prophecy is the holy proclamation of God's will and purpose in a particular situation. It is possible to discern what God is saying to a specific church or even a nation. And

I believe He is saying some very specific things to the United States. I do not claim to know every detail, nor is the list below complete. The Bible says “we prophesy in part” (1 Cor. 13:9)—and that’s why other prophets should add what is missing.

I believe God is most definitely saying these things to us today:

1. We shouldn’t look to politicians from either party to save us. At this point, unity among conservative Christian voters looks impossible—especially since most black churchgoers and a big percentage of Hispanic Christians will vote for the Democratic ticket. The bigger question is this: Regardless of whether we have Clinton, Rubio, Trump, Cruz, Carson or even Sanders, will the “right” president deliver our country from its problems? We’ve had both liberals and conservatives in the White House over the past three decades, but neither party has stopped our morals from sinking or our families from disintegrating. Only a sovereign intervention from heaven can help us now. We can vote our consciences, but we must look to God to heal America.

God is saying: “Ask Me for a spiritual awakening, not a political victory.”

2. The church must be equipped to heal broken people like never before. The family has been fragmenting at an alarming rate over the past few decades—and the number of young people who grew up with a father and mother in the home has dwindled to a minority. This will have huge implications for the church in the next few years, and if we are not trained to handle the pain, the church will lose the battle. It is time for every church to prepare an army of healers. Christian marriages are in crisis. Sex addiction is rampant. The transgender movement, along with the Supreme Court’s decision to redefine marriage, now poses huge new challenges for kids and teens today—and we cannot meet this test without the Holy Spirit’s power. The

church must train counselors to deal with divorce, abandonment, abuse, domestic violence, gender confusion, sexual perversion and all the other problems associated with family breakdown.

God is saying: "Heal the brokenhearted and give them My compassion!"

3. Aging churches must embrace change—and discard outdated religious baggage. A huge number of Bible-believing churches have already become irrelevant to the culture because they have refused to update their styles and reconfigure their methods. Our gospel is unchangeable, but our methods must adapt to the needs of people. We only have a window of time to make these changes; old wineskins will soon become useless. Denominations must be open to innovative leadership and new ideas—or their lamps will go out. It is a time for drastic measures. Churches that seek God for His new direction will enter into a new season of fruitfulness and growth.

God is saying: "The season of spiritual barrenness is over, if you seek Me. I will break the yoke of dead, dry religion and release a fresh anointing so you can reach your cities."

4. The church must build the bridge of racial reconciliation. God is serious: He wants us to root out racism in the evangelical churches of America. He is not happy that we have dragged our feet on this! Government programs and political speeches don't have the power to heal the problems we saw in 2015 in Ferguson, Baltimore, Charleston or Chicago. The church has been given the "ministry of reconciliation" (see 2 Cor. 5:18), and reconciliation will only work when black, white and Hispanic church leaders engage the enemy together.

God is saying: "A banner has been unfurled over this year, declaring Psalm 133:1: 'Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!'"

5. We must open our hearts to foreigners. Our national

discussion about immigration, refugees and Muslims has exposed a spirit of bigotry and hatefulness, even among followers of Jesus. Today the world looks at the United States and wonders if we really are still a nation that believes all people are created equal. Our racism and nationalism have erected more walls than bridges. If we truly want to be Pentecostal in our theology, we must embrace the foreigners who are drawn to Christ by the Holy Spirit. This doesn't mean we throw out immigration policies, or allow terrorists to enter the U.S., but it does require us to make room in our cold hearts for the people God is bringing into our communities.

God is saying: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations! Open your doors to everyone I am sending to you!"

6. We must focus our prayers on the Islamic world. In the 1980s, Christians prayed for seven years for the collapse of Soviet communism. But when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, most believers were shocked that God answered those prayers. The same doubt exists today; many Christians focus only on the evils of ISIS rather than considering the possibility of a massive move of God among Muslims. We must pray expecting the Islamic Curtain to fall. Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, even Yemen—unbelievable spiritual shifts will take place in these nations in response to the prayers of God's people!

God is saying: "Is anything too hard for Me? My Word will not be chained. I will pull back the veil of Islam and shine My light in the darkest places."

7. We should expect a spiritual awakening to break out among young people. I've never been more convinced that we are going to see a fresh wave of the Holy Spirit's power to hit this country—and I'm looking for it to erupt in our high schools and on our college campuses. It will take a miracle—since God is not exactly welcome in these secular environments. But when one fire starts blazing, others will catch. I fully expect to see America's college students praying, fasting, preaching and

worshiping so radically that something akin to the Jesus movement of the 1970s happens again. The music of this next movement will grab the world's attention. The testimonies of transformed lives will end up on the mainstream news. Social media will provide the platform to spread this campus revival quickly.

God is saying: "I will call a new generation to serve Me, and they will boldly proclaim My gospel—even in the strongholds of secularism. I will have radical followers even in the Ivy League schools."

A Big Promise Takes Time—Don't Give Up

Most Christmas pageants focus on the principal characters of the nativity story—an innocent Mary, a bewildered Joseph, awestruck shepherds, mysterious magi and a sleeping baby Jesus. Then we throw in nonbiblical extras such as the Little Drummer Boy to spice things up. But I've yet to see a play or a movie of the Christmas story that includes Simeon and Anna, the two Jewish intercessors who prophesied over Jesus a few days after His birth.

This Christmas, I'm thinking more about Simeon and Anna—not because I've reached their age bracket yet (we know Anna was 84), but because I have more appreciation these days for people who wait patiently for God's promises.

While most of Israel was clueless about God's plan of salvation, and angry about Roman occupation, Simeon knew Jesus was coming—and the Holy Spirit told him he wouldn't die until he saw the Messiah. When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the

temple to be dedicated, Simeon took the boy in his arms and declared that He was the “light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32).

Simeon finally got his prayers answered after decades of waiting. Then Anna walked into the scene. She had been praying and fasting continually in the temple, asking God to send the Savior. She looked beyond the bleak circumstances and dared to ask God for a miracle.

Like Simeon, she immediately recognized Jesus as the answer to her prayers and began telling everyone that their long wait was over.

At that point she probably thought: *“I can die and go to heaven. God has heard my cries.”* She reminds us that God openly rewards those who pray in secret.

I imagine both Simeon and Anna held their hands in the air—and perhaps even shouted—as they welcomed the fulfillment of ancient Messianic prophecies. But what we don’t see in this happy occasion are the decades of painful groaning that these old saints endured. The joyful moment of Jesus’ birth did not come without a price.

God’s promises, like the birth of a child, requires a gestation period—an agonizing season of waiting. Most people in the Bible who claimed big promises did not get instantly downloadable answers. Like the childless Hannah, or the heirless Abraham or the imprisoned apostle Paul, they travailed. And groaned. And waited. And travailed some more.

Waiting is often the key to faith. And groaning is an aspect of prayer that we rarely teach about today. Yet Romans 8:26 reminds us that Spirit-directed prayer involves “groanings too deep for words.”

Are you praying for something that seems totally beyond your grasp? Are you holding onto a promise from God, yet it is

painful to pray because you see no evidence of His hand at work?

Take courage and keep groaning.

In the animal kingdom, big creatures often have the longest gestation periods. A baby whale is in his mother's womb for 18 months, and a baby giraffe waits 15 months. And some species of elephants are pregnant for two years. The rule, it seems, is clear:

The bigger the baby, the longer the wait.

If you are carrying a big promise, you should be prepared for painful delays.

I watched my wife give birth to all four of our children. Yet how quickly I forget that prayer is often compared with childbirth in the Bible. In this painful process we must press through the darkness of doubt and lay hold of God's sure promise, especially when we feel like giving up.

Many of us today are at the most intense stage of the birth process—the transition phase—in which a pregnant woman feels confused, irritable and restless. We endure similar feelings of desperation in our walk of faith. We ask ourselves, "*Did God really promise me that? Did I hear Him wrong?*" Everything inside us wants to quit believing.

I'm sure Simeon and Anna considered quitting during their years of prayer. The headlines in Jerusalem were depressing. The economy was awful. The political situation was demoralizing. Why pray when everything looks so depressing?

Yet these two faithful prayer warriors didn't go into retirement. They found the grace to press on. Though their hands grew feeble, their faith grew strong. They felt barren, but they shouted anyway.

And finally their groaning paid off—until they truly had

something to shout about. They not only witnessed the Christmas miracle; they also got to hold the baby Jesus in their arms. As you enjoy Christmas with your family and friends, I pray the faith of Simeon and Anna will inspire you to hold tightly to all God has promised you.

Joy to the World—Except During an Election Season?

On the first Christmas, the shepherds in Bethlehem learned that Jesus' birth was a cause for celebration. The angel said in Luke 2:10: "For I bring you good news of great joy, which will be to all people." It's too bad Christmas cheer is in low supply these days. I don't know if it's due to the mudslinging in this presidential campaign or the warmer-than-usual December, but people in general are angrier, more fearful and more negative than I can ever remember.

Christians should be the happiest people this time of year. But if Facebook posts are any indication of the national mood, folks aren't just mad—they're outraged. And others are so spooked by blood moons, Obama conspiracy theories and Muslim terrorists that they are ready to head for the hills to hide. It's as if the Grinch really did steal Christmas.

Personally I believe we have a lot to rejoice about during this holiday. If you only listen to *Fox News* or *CNN*, the world is a gloomy place—with plane crashes, terrorist attacks and bickering politicians. But I don't let today's alarming headlines steal my peace. I don't let angry opinions steal my love. And I don't let grumpy people steal my joy.

Here are 10 positive trends I'm celebrating this Christmas:

1. Muslims are coming to Christ faster than ever. David Garrison, author of the new book *A Wind in the House of Islam*, says something unprecedented is stirring in the Muslim world. “We are living in the midst of the greatest turning of Muslims to Christ in history,” he writes—citing evidence that dozens of powerful Christian movements have started among Muslims since the year 2000.

2. The gospel is transforming China. The British newspaper *The Telegraph* reported two years ago that Christianity is growing so fast in China that it will most likely be considered a Christian nation by 2030, when its Christian population will exceed that of the United States, Mexico and Brazil. Given China’s economic power in the world, this has huge implications for our future.

3. The United States is in a church-planting boom. There has been lots of handwringing about the decline of mainline churches in America. But church growth expert Ed Stetzer says new churches are actually being planted in the United States faster than old ones are dying—and research shows that 60-80 percent of the people who join new churches are from unchurched backgrounds. That means more people are being reached with the gospel today than when dead religious churches talked and sang about evangelism but never did it.

4. Latin America is experiencing a political and spiritual awakening. Recent elections in Venezuela were one more indication that leftist governments are losing power in Latin America. Today two-thirds of Venezuela’s parliament members oppose leftist President Nicolas Maduro. Similar movements against socialism and corruption are occurring in Argentina, Brazil and other Latin countries—at a time when evangelical churches are growing at unprecedented rates.

5. Spiritual hunger is rising in our nation. I’m not denying that segments of our culture have grown hostile to Christian faith. But the popularity of faith-based films such as *War*

Room caught Hollywood by surprise this year. Meanwhile popular Bible teachers such as Joyce Meyer, Andy Stanley and T.D. Jakes get as much traction on Twitter and other social media than secular celebrities such as Katy Perry or Lady Gaga. And the amount of Christian content on You Tube, Periscope or other digital media today is staggering.

6. Global violence is actually decreasing. Because we have easy access to news, and we hear about mass shootings or terrorist attacks as soon as they occur, Americans think the world is more dangerous than ever. That's actually not true. If you compare violent deaths from wars, genocide and crime over the centuries, the numbers have never been lower than today—even with 21st-century terrorists on the loose.

7. There are fewer dictators in the world. The number of authoritarian countries has actually dropped from a high of almost 90 in 1976 to about 25 now. Democracy is growing—and it's likely that authoritarian nations in the Middle East (such as Iran) will see drastic political changes in our lifetime.

8. The Bible is still the most popular book ever. The Bible ranks at the top of all favorite book lists among Americans. And according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, it is also the best-selling and most widely distributed book in the world. Nearly 4 billion copies of the Bible were printed and sold globally in the last five decades—far exceeding any other book.

9. We can still celebrate Christmas. Don't worry about Starbucks' decision to take a generic holiday message off their coffee cups. Instead of complaining about the war on Christmas, let's be more proactive about telling people why Jesus was born. Nobody is stopping us from doing that.

10. Jesus is still on the throne. The last book of the Bible reminds me that when it's time for Jesus to come back, He will

return victorious. All His enemies will bow down and acknowledge His lordship. Jesus is not worried about ISIS, Hillary Clinton, gay marriage, illegal immigrants, Obamacare or the war on Christmas.

Don't let the evening news steal your joy. Christ is born. We have something to celebrate.{eoa}

What We Must Remember From America's Racist Past

Donald Trump brashly announced this week that he believes all Muslims should be barred from entering the United States in order to stop radical jihadis from carrying out another attack on American soil. He stopped short of demanding the deportation of Muslims already living in this country, but his comments were outrageous enough to be denounced by almost all Republicans running against him.

Marco Rubio called Trump's comments "offensive and outlandish." Jeb Bush said Trump is "unhinged." Christian physician Ben Carson—who was criticized for saying in September that a Muslim should never be president of the United States—said he believes it would be wrong to bar Muslim immigrants or tourists from the country.

Mr. Trump made his divisive proposal on Dec. 7, which was—ironically—the 74th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Even Trump, at age 69, is not old enough to remember how that act of war in Hawaii triggered an ugly backlash against Japanese-Americans living in the United States.

It might be time to remember this sad chapter of our history before we find ourselves repeating it.

After the Japanese killed 2,403 Americans in the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, hatred of Japanese people boiled over here at home. Americans, especially on the West coast, put up signs telling "Japs" they weren't welcome. In an archived photo of that era, a woman points to a large banner that says: "JAPS KEEP MOVING. THIS IS A WHITE MAN'S NEIGHBORHOOD."

U.S. Lt. Gen. John DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command, poured more fuel on this fire when he announced, "The Japanese race is an enemy race."

Soon the U.S. army was empowered to move 110,000 Japanese-Americans from their homes to internment camps in remote areas. Some of these people were only one-sixteenth Japanese, but they had no choice than to be herded into captivity. Most lost their homes and businesses.

They lived behind barbed wire from April 1942 until they were set free in January 1945. And it wasn't until 1988, under President Reagan, that the United States offered an official apology for the degrading way innocent Japanese people were treated. The U.S. government also gave \$20,000 payments to survivors of that awful blunder as restitution.

Fast-forward to 2015, and Donald Trump is not acting like Ronald Reagan—whom he claims to admire. Trump suggests that all Muslims are responsible for the actions of radicalized Islamic terrorists. To stop more attacks like the one that killed 14 people last week in San Bernardino, California, he wants to close the borders, bar all Muslim tourists and refugees and turn the United States into a fascist bully.

I honestly don't take Mr. Trump seriously because he talks off the top of his head and shoots his verbal bullets carelessly. But what grieves me is that so many evangelical Christians shout "Amen!" when the eccentric billionaire says things about

foreigners that are completely contrary to the gospel.

I want to shout it from the housetops: Jesus calls us to love foreigners, and the gospel we preach is for all cultures! There is no room for racism or xenophobia in God's house. When Jesus was born, some of His first official guests were foreigners (Matt. 2:1-2). I find it fascinating that the magi who brought their gold, frankincense and myrrh to Bethlehem came from either Persia or Arabia—nations that are now Muslim.

If Donald Trump had been around at the time Jesus was born, would he have suggested that the Wise Men be barred from visiting the manger?

I'm not saying we just drop our guard and let ISIS terrorists shoot up our malls and bomb our courthouses. Obviously we need stricter surveillance, better security and wiser immigration policy. But stirring up anger and demonizing all Muslims is not the answer to this dilemma.

- If you are a Christian yet use racial slurs or demeaning language to describe certain ethnic groups, including Muslims, ask God to break your heart and expose your hatred.
- If you are a Christian yet don't like to be around foreigners, ask God to give you His compassion. And remember: Revelation 5:9 says when we get to heaven we will be surrounded by people from "every tribe and tongue and people and nation." Muslims can't be a part of that number unless we can reach them with the gospel.
- If you are a Christian yet would rather see Muslims go to hell than get a chance to hear the gospel, your heart is hard, and your anger grieves the Holy Spirit. How we treat Muslims now will determine how open they will be to the gospel tomorrow.

1 John 2:9 says, "Whoever says he is in the light but hates his brother is in darkness even until now." Please check your

heart and make sure you have not allowed hateful political rhetoric—of the red or blue variety—to turn your heart cold.

7 Ways to Bless Immigrants Instead of Bashing Them

This morning when I bought a newspaper in the Orlando airport, the man who rang up my purchase greeted me with a bashful smile. The name on his employee badge was “ZIAD.” I always try to guess where people are from, but his name wasn’t familiar. Was he from Lebanon? Jordan? Egypt?

Ziad finally solved the mystery. “I am Palestinian, sir,” he said.

“Welcome, Ziad,” I told him, “Let me be the first person to tell you today that I’m glad you are here in the United States!”

“That makes me very happy, sir,” he replied.

I’ve been going out of my way to say kind words to immigrants these days—not just because Donald Trump has been offending them with his “all Mexicans are rapists” comments but also because I believe Christians have a responsibility to be hospitable to foreigners.

I understand the fear that has gripped our country in this age of ISIS terror. In the last month around 130 people died in the Paris attacks, 43 were killed in Beirut and 224 died in the Russian airliner that was allegedly bombed by radical jihadis. In response to the violence, 30 U.S. governors have announced that Syrian refugees aren’t welcome here—even though

they are fleeing to America to escape terrorists.

What I don't understand is how Christians in this country can be so heartless when it comes to showing kindness to the very people Jesus told us to love. We have allowed our fear—as well as our cherished Republican Party values—to nullify God's Word. (Note to critics: I'm a Republican, but I'm a Christian first.)

The New Testament calls us to love not only the people who look like us but even those who are considered enemies. Hebrews 13:2 says: "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unknowingly." Meanwhile Christian leaders are exhorted in 1 Timothy 3:2 to be "hospitable"—and this is not simply a reference to hosting a meal. The word is in the Greek *philoxenos*, which means "love of strangers."

So how can you and your church obey this biblical mandate and show love to the strangers who live near you? Here are a few suggestions, offered just in time for the holiday season:

1. Say something nice. I often tell immigrants I'm glad they are in the United States—and most of them say they've never received a compliment like that before. Many of them are lonely—and they feel unwelcome, especially when Mr. Trump and other disrespectful Americans complain about foreigners as if they carry a disease.

2. Find out their story. You might be surprised to learn that the "Muslim" living in your neighborhood is actually a Middle Eastern Christian. Or that the Somali refugee who attends your child's high school fled to this country to escape a war. All you have to say is: "I'd love to hear how you came to live in America." Then listen.

3. Invite them to church. Never assume that immigrants are hostile to your faith. When I spoke recently in South Dakota, I met a Muslim girl from Uzbekistan who has been attending

church for months out of curiosity. She finds love and friendship among Christians, even though she struggles to understand why Jesus died for her.

4. Offer legal help. Americans often complain about illegal immigrants without bothering to realize that many of them are eager to comply with our laws. They actually need help navigating our complicated system, which is snarled by delays and unfair to people from certain countries. Recruit lawyers in your church to provide free seminars or other legal assistance to immigrants in your area.

5. Prepare a Christmas meal. Foreigners who move to the United States are curious about the meaning of our Christmas holiday—and they won't understand it by visiting a local mall or by watching *Elf*. Invite international students or an immigrant family into your home and let them experience your family traditions.

6. "Adopt" a refugee family. Aside from the displaced Syrians who are waiting to come to the U.S. today, refugees from Africa and other nations are probably already living near you. Most of them have been traumatized by war, poverty or persecution—and they are lonely and insecure. Contact one of the Christian organizations working with refugees (such as World Relief) and volunteer to provide meals, babysitting, Christmas gifts or mentoring.

7. Become an English instructor. There are more than 1 million internationals studying on U.S. campuses in 2015. (The majority come from China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Mexico and Brazil.) These students would love an American friend to help them with their English. Offer to be a language coach by contacting your local college or university.

While the immigrant-bashers talk of building a wall to keep immigrants out, we are called to build bridges of friendship.

Let's remember that Jesus—who lived as a refugee in Egypt during His infancy—wants the church to love foreigners. {eoa}

How to Leave an Unhealthy Church

Two weeks ago I shared some practical guidelines on how to leave a church gracefully. I wrote this because I hear so many stories about people storming out of churches because their feelings got hurt. But an astute reader also pointed out that my guidelines really don't apply when the church or its pastor have become abusive.

“Teresa” wrote that in her city, a popular leader of a megachurch was exposed for engaging in secret immoral behavior that affected countless members of his congregation for many years. “Thousands of people have been abused, broken, manipulated and controlled by [the pastor],” she wrote. “He has literally destroyed hundreds of families over the decades.”

So how do you leave a church that is spiritually abusive? What if the pastor or other leaders are guilty of sexual misconduct, unethical or illegal financial activities or controlling behavior? The rules for leaving are different.

1. Get outside advice. Before you plan your exit, make sure you are looking at the situation rationally. Talk to two or three people who are not members of this church or ministry. You might even want to set up a meeting with another pastor from your city. Explain your concerns. They will help you see if you are overreacting, or if you really have a case.

2. Gather the facts. Never base your concerns on rumors or unfounded allegations. Can this improper behavior be documented? Is there a paper trail? Paul said in 1 Timothy 5:19: “Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.” If there has been wrongdoing, there will be evidence. (If you find concrete evidence that something illegal is going on, such as extortion or child abuse, you should contact the police.)

3. Confront the issue. This will not be easy if the leader in question uses threats, manipulation or anger to run over people. I normally advise that meetings be in person, but don't meet alone if the leader in question is a manipulator. Take people with you so that you can't be bullied. It's also best to put your concerns in writing and take the letter with you.

4. Make a clean break. If you know that the pastor or other church leaders are guilty of behavior that disqualifies ministers, and there are no signs of repentance, you don't have to stick around. God gave you two feet, and you can use them to walk out. Some people feel guilty for leaving an abusive church, but you must renounce feelings of false guilt or displaced loyalty. God will help you start a new life. Don't let anyone (especially extended family members) manipulate you into staying.

5. Get counseling and prayer from a mature Christian. Spiritual manipulation messes with your mind. People I know who were part of an abusive ministry were made to feel guilty for simply asking questions. They were told that God required them to be blindly loyal, and that if they ever left the ministry something terrible would happen to them. If you were under this type of toxic control, you need someone to pray for you—so you can break free from psychological abuse.

6. Find a healthy church. Never let the devil convince you to give up on church just because the one you attended went off

track. You need God's people in your life. Some frustrated saints who have been wounded by unqualified leaders have asked me, "Are there any good churches left?" My answer is always yes! The Great Shepherd always leads us to green pastures where we can be healed and comforted. If you isolate yourself from church, you are wasting your spiritual gifts and ruining your chances of being restored.

7. Help others to heal. In my work with abused women, I've seen that those who suffered the most became powerfully effective in helping others after they experienced healing. This can be true for people who were wounded in an unhealthy church. God does not waste our pain! He can use your testimony to help those who are going through similar situations.

Once you leave, it is possible that other members of your church will contact you—and some of them will be honestly seeking the same freedom you have found. You owe it to them to share the story of your exit. If you stay healthy during the process of leaving, God can use you to pull others to safety.

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