

That's the Spirit!

How Charisma readers are spreading the true Spirit of Christmas in unique ways

The first Christmas didn't include a beautifully decorated tree, carols, wreaths, stockings or most of the elements that make up Christmas tradition today. Instead, it featured the greatest gift ever, one that forever surpasses all seasonal fare. Jesus' arrival on earth reflected the heart of the Father—the true Spirit of Christmas expressed through history's most selfless act.

Throughout the year, we hear countless stories of *Charisma* readers who carry this same selfless spirit. They're everyday heroes using whatever abilities or circumstances God has "gifted" them with to minister His love to others. This Christmas, we're highlighting a few of these *Charisma* fans who have launched ministries uniquely reflecting the Christmas spirit. Join us in celebrating what the Holy Spirit—the same Spirit that witnessed Christ's birth that first night—is doing through them.

 SPIRIT OF ADOPTION: The Van't Huls are now in the process of officially adopting Caleb (center), the first orphan they took in (© Ally McKay)

Loving the 'Unlovables'

American missionaries Mike and Deena Van't Hul sold everything, moved their children to China and brought nearly 90 severely special-needs orphans into their family

Hearing one little word from God—*go*—was all it took for Mike and Deena Van't Hul to quit their jobs, sell everything and

move their young family to a small village in China with only two suitcases and a box of Legos. They didn't exactly know what they'd do, whom they'd meet or why they were there; but they knew they had heard from God.

Their assignment eventually became clearer when an infant on the verge of death arrived at their front door. His frail body was wrecked with health problems including a cleft lip, cleft pallet, brain disorder, mental retardation, a hole in his heart and ambiguous gender. Yet after the couple unwrapped his naked body, they were overtaken by God's love and reminded of Christ's words: If you care for the least of these, you've cared for Me (Matt. 25:40).

"All I can say is that it was like holding Jesus," Deena recalls. "I know that sounds quirky, but it was like unwrapping the glory of God. You could feel the presence of the Lord so strongly."

In the words of the Van't Huls, it's been a "whirlwind" ever since. Through their ministry, Loaves and Fishes International, located outside Fuzhou, they have sheltered, clothed, fed and educated nearly 90 severely special-needs orphans who are considered "unlovable" by most locals. They've also watched miracle after miracle as God continues to open new doors of opportunity on a lifelong journey in learning to love the "unlovables" as He does.

Changed by His Love

Mike and Deena thought they understood God's love 15 years ago when they were starting their family in Englewood, Fla. As self-described nominal Christians, they attended church on Sundays but did little more to further their faith the rest of the week. Instead, they were actively pursuing the American dream and were well on their way with a comfortable home, great jobs and impressive resumes (Mike earned a bachelor's in business management; Deena has an master's in speech

pathology). Having grown up in the church, the Van't Huls didn't think there was more to God than what they'd already experienced.

"We tried the best that we could to have a Christian family," Deena says, "but there was no fruit and we basically had one foot in the world and one foot in the church. Church was a cultural family thing and not a heart thing."

Their story soon took a dramatic turn after they reluctantly attended a revival service with Randy Clark, an evangelist best known for being a catalyst in the Toronto Blessing. The couple arrived to the meeting late, hoping to slip in to the back of the room. But God had other plans. An usher assumed they were pastors and, despite their protests, escorted them to the front row for Clark's message on receiving more from God. After an altar call, the Van't Huls would never be the same.

"We ran forward and I remember Randy just touched our foreheads and said, 'More, Lord,'" Deena recalls. "I hit the floor and Mike was being radically changed. We woke up the next morning and just felt like everything had been radically changed. That was the beginning."

Awakened By His Love

That was in 2000. Over the next few years the Van't Huls went on a handful of short-term missions trips. The first was with Clark's Global Awakening ministry to Brazil, where they ministered to prostitutes on the streets and where God's love for humanity was awakened in them.

Deena recalls "feeling something supernatural" as she held a prostitute's hand: "I felt like I had a baptism of the Holy Spirit in love. I had heard about it before, but in the process it was so supernatural. [I was shocked by] the amount of love that was coming down from the Father through me to her. That was probably the beginning of the heart to the

poor.”

During a 2002 short-term mission trip to Mozambique to assist Rolland and Heidi Baker of Iris Ministries, Mike and Deena experienced the plight of orphans up-close and returned home wanting to do even more.

“At that point, as wonderful as short-term missions were, we left those trips completely changed by the Lord, but also feeling like something in our hearts was longing for more,” Mike says. “There was something [in us] not quite fulfilled.”

Transformed By His Love

After traveling to China to adopt their daughter, Priscilla, and seeing countless sick and dying children in orphanages, Mike and Deena couldn’t deny that God was telling them to return to China. Facing an uncertain future yet knowing they had to be obedient, they sold everything and moved with their children—then ages 8, 5 and 1—8,000 miles across the globe.

“We didn’t have a plan,” Deena says. “We just thought, ‘If He’s calling us to China and we wait, and then the doors close, how would He feel? How would it be if we waited until we knew everything or until everyone in our life was OK with the move?’ We just felt like He was saying, ‘Go to China.’ The gospel for us after we were touched has been really simple.”

The move wasn’t easy, however. The family crammed into an apartment, battled rat and raw sewage issues, and struggled to learn the language amid culture shock. Yet every time a ministry door seemed to close due to laws (the local government originally forbid foreigners from serving as foster parents), they would pray and God would supernaturally open the door.

Meanwhile, God’s love continued to overtake them. The day before their first orphan, Caleb, arrived at their doorstep, the Van’t Huls received a book called *Home of Loving*

Faithfulness about two English missionaries to Hong Kong who took in special-needs orphans 50 years prior. At that time, special-needs children were treated like animals—literally locked in cages—and considered the most unlovable of all humans. Mike and Deena thought they would help orphans in China but didn't think they could care for severely special-needs children.

"I knew we didn't have that kind of love," Deena says. "Nobody knows us better than us. You're talking about people who can't walk. Drooling. Having to wipe bottoms. This wasn't the cute little babies."

That all changed for the Van't Huls with the arrival of Caleb, whom they are now in the process of officially adopting. One child turned into two, then five, then a dozen. Loaves and Fishes now has 58 children in its care, along with 54 national paid staff members, six missionaries and six properties—all of which have been miraculous gifts that, like Caleb, seem to divinely arrive at their doorstep.

The ministry showers the children with love and creates a family atmosphere for them. It's also committed to taking those with the most severe cases of mental retardation and other ills only after hearing God tell them where to go and who to get. In fact, when Mike and Deena go into an orphanage they specifically ask staff which child is close to dying and which one is the most difficult to care for. They immediately know that those are the children they should take with them. And in doing so, remarkably, Loaves and Fishes has earned such favor from the Chinese government that the ministry is now pursued for special projects and has been able to start a school for special-needs children.

"It's been neat for us to see that from the beginning it's not ever been about us," Mike says. "We didn't come with our talents or anything of ourselves to make this happen. We just came with His heart to serve and to give our lives as He

led.”

—Felicia Abraham

Leanne Stevenson uses her  book to minister to women considering an abortion (© Cindy Corl-Concord First Assembly)

A Ministry Birthed in Pain

The Holy Spirit's prompting helped to turn one Charisma reader's abortion experience into an impactful ministry

Leanne and Rob Stevenson will always remember where they were on Mother's Day 2011—the day everything changed for them. That Sunday in May, their North Carolina church watched a video of Leanne's dramatic testimony and listened as she confessed to an abortion she'd had years earlier.

“I was numb,” she recalls. For years, only Leanne's husband and one other person knew her secret, which happened before she met Rob. After she told him, the couple didn't speak of it again until God began prompting the circumstances leading up to that worship service. And after revealing such a personal thing, Leanne still felt nervous about the response she'd get.

“It was not until I heard testimonies from women who spoke to me after the service that I began to realize the impact of what was happening,” she says.

Early in their marriage, Rob succeeded in sales and marketing, and Leanne worked as a job placement specialist and vocational rehabilitation counselor. After the birth of their second daughter, Leanne's desire to stay at home led the couple to start an online business, , which grew into a demanding

venture.

To accommodate their daughter's school activities, the Stevensons relocated from Charlotte, N.C., to Concord, N.C., in 2001, and began attending Concord First Assembly of God church. One morning in 2010, the Holy Spirit awakened Leanne with a vision for a book. The idea initially seemed unfathomable.

"I didn't feel like I had the time or energy, with the kids, all their commitments, the business and other things," she says. "I certainly did not feel I had the qualifications."

Leanne tried to put the notion out of her mind, but it returned months later. When she opened her Bible, she read: "My tongue is the pen of a ready writer" (Ps. 45:1, NIV).

With the Lord's direction, one book quickly became two. The first, *Tiny Hands that Hold My Heart*, is a beautiful gift book of Scripture verses and photographs that captures the miracle of life in the womb at every month of development. The second is a paperback version, compiled for women in crisis pregnancy situations and to be distributed by pro-life ministries.

Leanne struggled as the vision for the crisis pregnancy edition took shape.

"God started to reveal things to me, things I had buried for a very long time," she says. "He said to me exactly, 'This booklet will not go where you want it to go—and will certainly not go where I want it to go—unless you are able to share your complete story.'"

Leanne surrendered and spoke with her husband about the project. On Mother's Day 2011, her church family watched her testimony unfold. They responded in love and compassion, and some offered financial help. Leanne's ministry so moved the guest speaker at church that Sunday, best-selling author Lysa TerKeurst, that TerKeurst urged others to support Leanne.

Since then, the entire Stevenson family is more involved in pro-life activities beyond her books. In 2012, Leanne and Rob founded Tiny Hands Ministries (), which aims “to engage in activities that save the physical lives of the unborn and spiritual lives of mothers in crisis pregnancies.” While *Tiny Hands that Hold My Heart* gift books are available through booksellers everywhere, the crisis booklets have been made available through the ministry website and can be freely distributed by churches, pro-life ministries, counselors and medical missions groups internationally.

—Brenda J. Davis

 Sam Stewart at a feeding center in Guatemala (© Eric Tiansay)

Nourishing Lives Through Lunch

Charlie's Lunch sees new generation of children transformed by God's love—through a plate of food

All missionaries Sam and Janey Stewart wanted to do was honor their son's life. Now, 13 years since Charlie died three weeks shy of his own 13th birthday, their ministry is experiencing life far beyond what even Charlie could've imaged.

Charlie's Lunch, a ministry dedicated to physically and spiritually nourishing needy children, has seen a generation of the first youngsters it cared for now leading, teaching and serving in churches with its own feeding centers. Since 1999, Charlie's Lunch has established feeding centers in six countries—Guatemala, Zambia, Mexico, India, El Salvador and Honduras—as well as domestic outreaches in Fairvilla, Fla., and Reno, Nev. Based in central Florida, the ministry partners with local churches in using the feeding centers as a tool for evangelism, discipleship and outreach.

Former Assemblies of God missionaries in Guatemala, the Stewarts have been *Charisma* readers since the 1970s and were featured in the magazine 10 years ago, yet their ministry has significantly expanded since then—including Charlie's Christmas, an offshoot of Charlie's Lunch that provides food, shoes and toys, and stages evangelistic events for the children and pastors' families during Christmastime.

A year after Charlie died of a congenital heart condition in Guatemala, Sam and Janey unintentionally launched Charlie's Lunch after some street children knocked on their door begging for bread. "I felt the Lord was telling me, 'Give them Charlie's lunch,' and so I did," recalls Janey.

Today, millions of meals later, children receive a hot lunch, typically featuring meat, tortillas, rice or beans, fruits or vegetables, and a drink. It costs an average of 50 cents a meal, or \$15 per month, to feed each child, yet the greatest return is found in the children now blessing others because of the ministry.

"We have seen such great fruit from our Charlie's Lunch graduates," Sam says. "The graduates are living productive and happy lives, serving God and even helping in Charlie's Lunch feeding centers."

The first feeding center opened in 1999 at Hosanna Assembly of God in Santa Lucia Los Ocotes, a remote village near Guatemala City. Thanks largely to Charlie's Lunch, Hosanna Assembly has become the largest church in Santa Lucia, feeding 125 children, ages 3 to 12, every week.

"Not just the children, but their families have come to know Christ through Charlie's Lunch," says pastor Luis Villatoro. "It's not just a plate of food. The children's families have been destroyed by alcoholism, drug addiction and prostitution. When they come to the feeding program, they've found the love of God and their families have been healed. We've seen a new

generation of people who have been transformed by the love of God through a plate of food.”

Villatoro says Hosanna Assembly’s young adults have caught the vision. “The children who first came to the feeding program 10 or 11 years ago now give offerings for Charlie’s Lunch in other places to receive food, as well as do the work of missions,” says Villatoro, who is moving with his family to northern India in January to start an orphanage and a Charlie’s Lunch feeding center.

Ivania de Coronado was also fed as a child through Charlie’s Lunch. Now 19, she serves as the main Sunday school teacher at Jerusalem Assembly of God in Chuicavioc, a Mayan village just outside of Quetzaltenango. She leads more than 40 children each week, while coordinating the thrice-weekly feedings of Charlie’s Lunch.

“Charlie’s Lunch is a big part of our ministry,” she says. “It is a true and powerful blessing in our community. There have been other feeding centers that have started here but have failed because the love of God is lacking.”

“The Bible says God has a purpose for every life,” Ivania adds. “I now tell the kids that they can do what I do and they can teach others. I tell them we can make a difference in this country and win souls for Jesus.” –*Eric Tiansay*

Jessica and Brian Daly 
created a support system for
caregivers

A Heart Condition

Becoming a caregiver for her husband not only changed Jessica Daly’s life, but also opened her world to a new ministry

Never in her wildest dreams did Jessica Daly believe she would

be spoon-feeding meals to her 28-year-old husband only six years into their marriage. Then again, never did she imagine that God would use her experience as a caregiver as a springboard for a ministry to countless others in similar situations who are often forgotten.

When Brian Daly was diagnosed with congestive cardiomyopathy—an ongoing disease process that damages the muscle wall of the heart’s lower chambers—Jessica Daly was forced to become his caregiver, attending to almost his every need while also balancing a career. Most of Brian’s heart muscles had ceased to function, dropping to a rate as low as 5 percent. Doctors said the only hope for Brian’s survival was him undergoing a heart transplant.

Through Jessica’s dedication and attention to her husband—and much prayer from the Dalys and hundreds of others—Brian’s heart has since rejuvenated to 40 percent function, without any transplant. Jessica said Brian’s doctors have called him a “walking miracle.”

“Without Jessica, I wouldn’t be alive,” Brian says. “She has simply been amazing. She married me for better or for worse, for sickness and health. Well, we’ve experienced worse and sickness. The devil was very hard on Jessica, but I’m so grateful to the Lord that Jessica stuck with me and that He gave me such a wonderful wife.”

During Brian’s recovery, Jessica discovered the many challenges caregivers face daily. Because her husband couldn’t work, Jessica kept her job as a schoolteacher to put food on the table as they adjusted to a loss of more than \$50,000 in income. Yet through their experiences, Jessica developed a deep-seeded appreciation for what caregivers go through, prompting her to start My Daly Outreach. The ministry is a support system for the caregivers themselves and their need for encouragement.

“You never know how many hats you have to wear until you become a caregiver,” says Jessica, who lives in Goldsboro, N.C., with Brian and their daughter, Taylor. “People asked me why I didn’t stay home with Brian full-time. It’s because I had to keep our insurance and my salary. That was really hard. When I would go to work, my cellphone would ring 10 times a day. We had some scares.

“God called us into this ministry, and He has given us the resources to do it. When people hear about someone who is sick and needs to be cared for, they usually think about the patient. But what about the caregiver? They have a very difficult job and really get very little support. That’s what My Daly Outreach is all about.”

The Dalys hosted their first caregivers’ conference, “Called to Care,” at the First Pentecostal Holiness Church of Goldsboro this summer, and Jessica’s speaking invitations are increasing. They’ve also created a website, , where caregivers can share stories, get tips and receive encouragement to keep going when they feel like giving up.

“I’ve been there and God has shown me so many things,” Jessica says. “I’m so appreciative of what caregivers have to go through. I simply wanted to give back to the Lord because I have been blessed so much through this.”

—Shawn A. Akers

 Robyn Bomar continues to spread the birthday love (© Amanda Suanne)

The Birthday Project

How one Charisma reader’s birthday spent blessing others has sparked a global initiative

On the surface, The Birthday Project doesn't look like a typical ministry, nor does its founder describe it as one. But Robyn Bomar says God has used it to reach people who may not have ordinarily given it a chance.

"It's not one of those things that says Jesus all over it, but it absolutely has Jesus all over it," says Bomar, who sparked this growing movement almost three years ago. "I've seen a lot of people's lives touched through it, and I really believe it is absolutely divinely appointed."

The Birthday Project's goal is to create a shift in the way people think about and celebrate their birthdays and other milestones. Rather than making the day all about themselves, participants spend the day serving others. The idea came when Bomar spent her 38th birthday doing 38 random acts of kindness—one for every year of her life. The seemingly miniscule acts ranged from feeding parking meters, to handing out balloons to kids shopping with their parents, to rounding up carts in a store parking lot. She initially didn't want to publicize how she celebrated her birthday, but her husband, Michael, convinced her to post it on her blog—not to brag, but to share it with people. It soon went viral, and comments began flooding in.

Bomar began praying about what to do with the idea. Nearly a year later she heard God speak to her, and she knew what she needed to do and what to call it: The Birthday Project.

"When I think about it, it's not this genius, novel, never-before-been-thought-of idea," Bomar notes. "There is something anointed that doesn't make sense to me, but it's exactly what it's supposed to be."

Bomar, whose husband and three daughters also give back on their birthdays, encourages people to find unique ways to celebrate. For her 40th birthday this year, she spent the previous 12 months writing letters to 40 people who made a

difference in her life.

“There are no real rules,” she says. “It’s really about celebrating your life by pouring into the lives of others, whatever that means. For me, that means asking God; for everybody else it’s going to be different.”

That dynamic element is especially evident among those who share their experiences online. Blogger Jennifer Esses wrote about her Birthday Project-inspired 42nd birthday: “I know that God put me here ... for a definite purpose. The reason isn’t just about me, but rather to show others who God is and what life with Him is all about. The Birthday Project completely drove that point home; when your birthday becomes about giving to others, it is a small representation on the calendar of your life as a whole. I’m not sure I will ever look at my birthday the same again.”

Bomar believes God is using The Birthday Project in mighty ways. After gaining momentum last year when Pinterest emerged as a social media force, the initiative now has more than 12,000 Facebook fans. The Project also has chapters across the country and shares testimonies from around the worldwide on its website, .

“There are so many people who have said to me, ‘I’ve always believed in doing random acts of kindness for fellow man, but when I did this there was just something different,’” says Bomar, who prays not only for the people who take part in The Birthday Project, but also the recipients of their kindness.

“There are people who do kind acts. That’s what we’re supposed to do; that’s how Jesus lived. But then there’s something that’s Spirit-driven. It’s so unbelievably touching, it blows my mind. I don’t even pretend to understand it. It’s really, really exciting to be part of it.”

—Gina Meeks

Kathy Baxley (r) leads the  ministry-minded clinic

When the Spirit Invades a Clinic

Patients at the Free Medical Clinic of Darlington County receive more than simply cost-free medical care

So, what's the catch?" It's a question Kathy Baxley deals with almost daily. As the executive director of the Free Medical Clinic of Darlington County (FMCDC) in South Carolina, she knows that cynicism among the patients isn't uncommon. Baxley simply deals with it with a smile and an enthusiastic heart.

"When most people come in to our offices, they can't believe that they can receive free medical treatment," says Baxley, who has worked at the FMCDC since 2002. "They're excited, but they are cautious. Of course there are some conditions that have to be met. But when we explain everything to them, they are very grateful. For that reason alone, this is an amazing place to work."

Those prerequisites include restrictions on age, county residency and household income. Patients also can't be eligible for Medicaid or have health insurance, and eligibility recertification occurs every six months. But dispensing free medical treatment is only part of the satisfaction for the staff. The FMCDC proudly touts itself as a Christian organization, regularly praying for and sharing the gospel with patients. Occasionally a patient will even get saved.

"We have seen many lives changed. The Spirit of the Lord is undoubtedly involved in this place," says assistant director Debra Reed, another *Charisma* reader who has worked at the FMCDC since the clinic opened in 2000. "We have people come in and can simply sense the presence of God. They know He is in

this place because they have felt it and they see it. I am so blessed to work here with such amazing people.”

Funding for the FMCDC comes from several outlets, including local businesses, organizations, foundations and individual donations. One business recently raised and donated \$33,000 to the clinic after a charity golf tournament.

Since launching out of a local ministry, the FMCDC has treated more than 2,500 patients and now has offices in Darlington, S.C., and Hartsville, S.C. Three full-time employees man each location, but 25 local physicians and an additional 25 nurses volunteer their time at the clinic two to three days a week. Reed said the Darlington clinic sees about 30 patients each week.

Baxley, whose husband volunteered his doctoral skills to the clinic from 2000 to 2005 and passed away in 2010, has countless heartwarming stories of how the FMCDC has changed lives beyond physical care. One woman came to the clinic contemplating suicide. After a staff member involved a local pastor, the woman accepted Christ and continues to come to the FMCDC for treatment.

“The biggest thrill for me is that I get to combine my Christianity with medicine in my job,” Baxley says. “I’ve always loved medicine, and I love God. You can’t get much better than that.”

—Shawn A. Akers