

# PLAIN TRUTH<sup>®</sup>

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION<sup>®</sup>

## Our Partner In Prayer

By Greg Albrecht

**H**ave you ever had a difficult time coming up with the right words to say? Prayer is certainly one of those times when we can't find appropriate words—similar frustrations can occur when you're writing a card or an e-mail to a friend who has just lost their husband or wife, or a friend or family member who has just been told they have an aggressive cancer. Maybe the "right words" don't come when you're asked to stand up at a funeral or memorial service and "say a few words."

I have been actively serving in ministry to others for 49 years. As a result, many people feel that I will know the right things to say to God or about God in any given situation. They often say something like, "You're a man of God, say something inspirational—say something from God." I have to tell you that I feel absolutely inadequate in such moments,

because I know it's not within me to say uplifting, encouraging and inspirational things.

Sometimes I'll be standing before a memorial service or by a graveside as others await some profound thought or uplifting advice I might offer. At such times, the thought often crosses my mind that the words I have prepared might be trite, empty and over-used. So I ask God to ensure what I say is from him, not from me. Sometimes I am leading others in a spoken, public prayer—and as I do I am silently asking God to speak in and through me so that his words and thoughts are shared—and I often think at such times, "Greg, you don't have what it takes to say what needs to be said—but He does."

We all have so many times when we feel our words are inadequate—many times when we feel unable to articulate what needs to be said—and many of those times happen when we pray.

### It Doesn't Matter if We Don't Know How or What to Pray!

*"We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans"* (Romans 8:26).

Eugene Peterson uses contemporary phrasing when translating this verse: *"If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans"* (Romans 8:26, The Message Bible).

There are times when our prayers seem to be surrounded and obscured by a huge cloud or fog bank of our personal grief, depression and pain. Sometimes we hurt so much we just don't know what to say. It doesn't matter if we choose just the right words. Leave the eloquence to God.

God the Holy Spirit helps us by translating sighs and groans on our part into meaningful discourse, and that's just one of the reasons God the Holy Spirit is called our Comforter. **God the Holy Spirit is our Partner in prayer.**

When you don't know what to pray because you hurt so much... when you don't know what to pray when you hear about the horrible abuse of children...when you don't know what to say or pray when a loved one or friend is wasting away on their deathbed with only days or a few weeks to live...when you

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## “What Is God’s Plan for Your Life?”

**Y**ou may have been in a discussion with someone about dilemmas they face or decisions they must make when they concluded with a comment that went something like this: “Well, I guess we’ll just have to wait to see what God’s will is.”

Recently, a little four-year-old boy, who was a cousin of a friend of ours, opened the front door of his house and walked into the front yard only to be gunned down by a drive-by shooter. Should it make a difference (and it doesn’t), the little boy was baptized and regularly attended a brick-and-mortar church. *What was God’s plan for his life?*

I have several friends and family members who have died because of terminal diseases. I have several friends and family members who have endured horrific pain because of a crime, some because of automobile accidents, and others because of injuries inflicted on the field of battle as they served their country. *What exactly was God’s plan for their life?*

My own wife has endured two operations, chemotherapy and radiation for cancer. We are so thankful that the cancer, at this point in time as I write these words, is no longer evident in her body. She has regular tests and scans—living in a constant state of flux and unrest, wondering when and if the next test and scan and blood work will reveal that the cancer is back, or that it has metastasized.

Over the many years she has fought cancer, we have had people assure us that God has a plan for her life, and that she never would have battled cancer unless God wanted to teach her something. *Really? Cancer is part of God’s plan for our life? Cancer is a penalty God gives us because we need to learn*

*something? Seriously? Then why don’t we all have cancer?*

A member of my family who is just a little younger than I am was a teenager when she went on a date, only to be so severely raped and badly beaten that, though she survived, she has never been able to function in society with a family and in a profession according to her dreams as an adolescent.

Every day of her life, as she walks with a pronounced limp, as she looks in the mirror at her permanently scarred and disfigured face because of that brutal beating, she is reminded of a few moments in time that changed her life forever. *Was the rape and sadistic beating she endured a part of God’s plan for her life?*

According to one nationally known television preacher, “God will accelerate his plan for your life as you put your trust in him. God is giving you victory sooner than you think.” It is incredibly reassuring and comforting to think that God has physical success mapped out for you—it’s exciting to think God will bring you “victory.” What “victory” specifically means is left unsaid, but of course when most people hear about God giving them “victory,” they imagine a result that will make them happy—perhaps even so gratifying it will lift them out of their chair yelling and screaming. “Victory” is a word that conjures up physically satisfying results.

There is no doubt that our heavenly Father loves us, cares for us and has compassion on us. There is also no doubt that God does not choose to control details of your life or of mine. God doesn’t have a blow-by-blow road map of your life—with predetermined turns and destinations and rest stops highlighted. God loves all of

us—but he does not predestine nor does he force anyone to accept his love, against their will.

Some religious authorities talk about how God “called” them to be a minister, priest or missionary. How, exactly, does a person determine that God is calling them to do a particular and specific thing with their life? When they feel he is “calling” them to a particular course of action do they also believe that if they do not respond favorably to his call they will be in a world of hurt?

Have you ever noticed that most people who talk about how God “called them” to make a particular decision never mention that he called them to flip burgers in a McDonalds in Miami, Florida—or to be a maid in a motel in Missoula, Montana? When I hear people emphatically announce that God “called them,” it always seems that it was for a spiritually “important” or highly esteemed mission. Does God only “call” a few people for important jobs but everyone else gets to make their own decision?

Jesus gives us two commands—to love God with all our heart, mind and soul and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Of course, those commands are not as exciting as reading a spiritual fortune cookie or dancing to the tune piped by a religious windbag who promises us “victory” in every aspect of our lives. God’s will? The plain truth is that he desires that we know of his love, and that we receive and embrace that love, by his grace. That’s his will. □

—Greg Albrecht

*Join us for the complete message “What is God’s Plan For Your Life?” at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of July 23, 2017.*

inner pain has you so conflicted and confused that you seem to be suffocating, gasping for spiritual breath... **a groan or a moan or a sigh or a wail or even a silent thought is enough.**

Audible prayer is simply a sound, of any kind, breaking through the silence and the loneliness and the separation you may feel between you and God—and an unspoken thought is also “enough” for God to hear and understand.

The book of Romans is a masterpiece of spiritual inspiration—in tandem with the book of Galatians the magnum opus of Paul’s soaring teaching on God’s grace. The book of Romans (specifically the 8th chapter) provides us with wonderful insight and teaching about prayer.

One author, who was working on a commentary of the book of Romans, asked a group of 20 pastors, Bible teachers and scholars to name their favorite chapter in the Bible. He knew that this task was somewhat like asking a father or mother to choose their favorite child, so he posed this situation to the group:

*If you were shipwrecked and washed up on a desert island, and you could choose only one chapter of the Bible as your companion as you awaited rescue, what chapter would that be?*

Five out of the 20 people in the group chose Romans 8. Romans 8 is the gospel in miniature—it clearly and concisely describes the love of our gracious God, inviting us to personal and intimate relationship with him—inviting us to be his very children, adopted children, heirs of the kingdom of heaven, heirs who will never be separated from him. Romans 8 tells us that nothing can come between us and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and that in Christ we are safe and secure forever.

*We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express* (Romans 8:26). Prayer is the heart of the gospel, for prayer is the good news that God

so longs to be connected with us that he himself, God the Holy Spirit, the third divine person of the Godhead, provides the way for us to be and remain connected with him.

### **God the Holy Spirit Listens and Responds**

*“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children”* (Romans 8:14-16).

#### **• Those who are led by the Holy Spirit are the children of God.**

The verses in Romans 8 that immediately precede vs. 14 tell us that when we surrender and yield to God we are given the precious standing as his own dear children, putting to death the deeds of our bodies, as we are enabled and empowered by the grace of God the Holy Spirit.

Our spiritual death to purely physical goals, ambitions and lusts is the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit—and the work of the Holy Spirit is the driving force and power behind any and all of our Spirit-led activities.

#### **• God the Holy Spirit is not a spirit of fear driven by bondage and slavery.**

God is not a law-defined or law-limited divine taskmaster, but rather he is personally and relationally revealed to us as our heavenly Father—therefore we are not slaves of God but we are his own adopted children.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we have the high privilege and honor of calling God “Abba”—which we might roughly translate in



*...we have the high privilege and honor of calling God “Abba”... “Daddy.”*

English as “Daddy”—an endearing term for our human father.

#### **• God the Holy Spirit responds positively and affirms our cry.**

God the Holy Spirit says you have the honor and privilege to call the Father “Daddy” because that’s what he is to you, his dear child.

As his children, the Father doesn’t expect us to have the exact and correct words and terms that describe specifically how we feel and what we want to express. God is always listening intently and carefully to you and me. He does not expect a formal recitation or an impassioned and eloquent prayer—nor is he impressed with the same-old, same-old, tired recitation of words that have long since lost their meaning to us.

I’m sure you have seen photographs and even televised footage of long receiving lines, where a dignitary receives guests. If you’re like me, you wonder when someone meets a president or a prime minister what can they say in a few seconds that has any lasting significance?

According to an account I once read, President Franklin D. Roosevelt disliked the long receiving lines at White House receptions. The people he met always said the same things, as he did in response, and it all seemed so meaningless. So one evening he



## *God the Holy Spirit is like wind—always blowing—but in order for us to move forward we must hoist our sails.*

decided to see if people were actually listening to what he said.

On this evening, reportedly, when he shook hands with the person in the receiving line and they said something to him, he responded by saying, “I murdered my grandmother this morning.” No one seemed to acknowledge what he said, because they all said something like “nice to meet you” as they moved down the line.

Finally, one person heard exactly what the President was saying and caught on to this little game Roosevelt was playing. So he said, “Well, I’m sure she had it coming to her.” They both had a laugh at President Roosevelt’s listening and communication test.

We can be assured that God is listening (intently and carefully) to us. We have his full attention and he is interested in our concerns and cares. He hears exactly what we say, and more than that, he understands what we are unable to say.

### **Our Comforter**

In John 14:16, Jesus told his disciples, and all of us, that God the Holy Spirit is a comforter.

That word *comforter* today generally makes people think of a thick, blanket-like covering that provides warmth to us when we lie down and sleep. But the word Jesus used that is translated “comforter”

means so much more—the Greek word is *paraclete* and it means “called alongside to help”—with the idea of an assistant, a helper and aide. Some verses speak of the Holy Spirit as an advocate—the divine Someone who will stand with us, defend us, support us, intercede on our behalf and plead our case.

All of that, and more, is the work of God the Holy Spirit for us in prayer. He finds and assists us with the right words. He intercedes, he pleads our case and supports us. He comforts us, assuring us that we are indeed the very children of God.

We want, and beyond that we need, God to help us pray. Think of how many prayers we’ve offered to God that have been almost completely self-centered, with utter disregard for the needs of others. Think back with me to prayers we have asked God that, would he have answered them as we asked, our lives may have been devastated.

### **Humility and Dependence**

The very beginning of Christ-centered prayer is the admission that most of the time we don’t have the right words—and that we really don’t know how to pray. We depend on God for everything—even helping us to pray!

When we pray, we are not praying on our own. The eighth

chapter of the book of Romans assures us that God the Holy Spirit is praying with us.

**God the Holy Spirit is our Partner in prayer.** In John 3:8, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, as the Spirit who blows where it wills. We don’t see the wind, but we can feel the wind, and we can see the effects of the wind as it blows trees and leaves.

We don’t know exactly where the wind comes from or what makes the wind blow—but the wind, nevertheless, is real and dynamic. So too with God the Holy Spirit, who dynamically empowers us to pray. God the Holy Spirit is our partner in prayer.

The Holy Spirit was also likened to the wind in the book of Acts, when Acts 2:2 says the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost like a violent blowing wind from heaven. God the Holy Spirit is like wind—always blowing—but in order for us to move forward we must hoist our sails.

Don’t just sit there and not hoist your sail because you don’t know what to say. Don’t be intimidated, thinking that your words and thoughts are so meaningless that God will be embarrassed or offended by what you say.

All you need to do is groan, moan, sigh or grunt—or just think of what you want to say—**God the Holy Spirit, our partner in prayer**, will help, translate, advocate and support as you plead your case.

God stands with us in our prayers, he interprets and translates our cries and our inner groaning. We are not alone. God is with us.

*Thank you for the comfort, support and assurance that no matter where we are geographically or no matter what state in which we find ourselves emotionally or spiritually, you are always with us. You are our partner in prayer. When the right words won’t come, you give us the right words or you interpret and translate. When we feel empty, you fill us. When we feel our prayers are not going anywhere, you fill our sails. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Amen. □*



# Walking in the Jesus Way

by Brad Jersak

**W**hen I was a child, I walked a lot. I walked to school, walked downtown, walked to the beach, walked through forests and across fields—even across a lake when it was frozen. As a small-town Canadian prairie boy, much of my walking led me along paths of mud and ice, or across fields of snow. Deep snow.

**Pet peeve:** Stuff in my boots—stuff like pebbles or water or snow.

**Solution:** walking in my father's footsteps. Which suggests a parable.

Whether trekking through mud or snow, I learned that my dad's footprints compacted the trail. If I just traced his steps, I wouldn't sink and best of all, my feet would stay dry. But if I didn't take care, one misstep onto untrodden ground and I would suddenly sink all the way to my hips. I would exhaust myself struggling until dad pulled me out and set my way back onto his path.

**Now this is important:** When my dad cautioned me to follow his tracks, he was not giving me a law that, if broken, would require punishment. His admonitions were entirely about a caring dad, helping me along. When I strayed and slipped, my dad was not angry; he

never stopped loving me completely. I was still his son.

So it is with God. When Scripture describes *two ways* and *two walks*, God is not setting conditions for his love. Rather, the counsel he gives is an expression of God's love. He wants us to follow his footsteps because he cares and wants to help us "keep our feet dry."

The Bible often contrasts two types of paths or "ways"—*where* we walk. It also distinguishes two "ways" of walking—*how* we walk.

## WHERE WE WALK

**1. God's way vs false ways:** In the Psalms, David prays, "Show me *your ways*, O LORD; teach me *your paths*. Guide me in *your* truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in *you* all day long" (Psalm 25:4-5, my emphasis).

God's way is set against the false ways (Psalm 119:104), the ways of the other gods (Micah 4:5) or doing things our own way (Isaiah 50:10-11, Jeremiah 10:23).

**2. The sure way vs the slippery way:** We find that by sticking to God's way, our feet will not slip (Psalm 17:5). Even when traversing "the high places," God makes our

footsteps as sure as a mountain goat (Psalm 18:33). God's heart is to lead us through dangerous ground onto level paths (Psalm 27:11).

**3. The straight way vs the crooked way:** In the New Testament, Peter contrasts following the "straight way" of God with those who wander off onto crooked paths (2 Peter 2:15). The contrast is between faithfulness to God's direction vis-a-vis rebellion and the corruption of "crooks."

**4. The narrow way vs the broad way:** Sometimes, God's way is pictured as a broad highway, away from the treacherous back roads where muggers and wild beasts lurk (Isaiah 35:8-9). According to Isaiah, the redeemed walk on this "highway of holiness" while "fools" avoid it at their peril.

But Jesus could reverse the analogy, speaking of the "broad road" as the wrong way: "*In everything, then, do to others as you would have them do to you. For this is the essence of the Law and the prophets. Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many enter through it*" (Matthew 7:12-13).



*I learned that my dad's footprints compacted the trail. If I just traced his steps, I wouldn't sink and best of all, my feet would stay dry.*

Some think Jesus is saying that in the end, very few will “be saved and go to heaven.” That’s not what Christ is referring to. Regardless of our faith profession or final destiny, our Lord is describing *the Jesus Way* in this life in terms of the famous “Golden Rule.” He laments that most people (even most Christians) opt out and instead, face the tragic self-destructive results of following the mob (see also Psalm 1:6).

**5. The way of life vs the way of death** (see Jeremiah 21:8): So, practically speaking, *the Jesus Way* truly leads to life, which includes human flourishing now and eternal life beyond.

Remember my opening analogy: this is not an ultimatum from a volatile God, but the wise counsel of a caring Father. “Look,” he says, “if you walk this way, you won’t sink. But if you walk that way, you could slip and fall to your death! Please, *walk this way*. Follow *my way*. It’s the *way of life!*”

## HOW WE WALK

The Bible tells us *where to walk*, but also *how to walk*.

**1. Walking in the light vs walking in the dark:** First, we are called to “walk in the Light, as he is in the light” (1 John 1:7). The Light, of course, is Christ himself, illuminating the path of life.

The prophets foretell Christ our lamp, lighting up the path for us: “*I will lead the blind by a way they do not know, in paths they do not know I will guide them. I will make darkness into light before them and rugged places into plains*” (Isaiah 42:16, my emphasis).

Yes, Christ is the lamp in whose light we walk, now and for eternity.

“And the city has no need for sun or moon to shine on it, because the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its lamp. *By its light the*

*nations will walk...*” (Revelation 21:23-24, my emphasis).

**2. Walking in the Spirit vs walking in the flesh:** The apostle Paul speaks to how we walk. He urges us to “walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16, Romans 8:1), to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25), and contrasts this to “walking in the flesh,” which he associates with the cravings of our old selves.

Following the lead of the Spirit means no longer white-knuckling external laws. How so? God says to Ezekiel, “*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws*” (Ezekiel 36:26-27, see Jeremiah 31:31-33).

But wait, I thought it wasn’t about obeying commands or keeping laws? That depends. Certainly not if we are asking, “What must I do to be saved?” And surely not if obeying commands is about law-keeping under threat of punishment. Then what does it mean?

**3. Walking in the Jesus Way of Love:** By the end of the first century, *The Didache*, an early Christian manual, summarized *the Jesus Way* as *walking in love*. It opens this way, recalling the words of Christ:

*There are two ways, one of life and one of death, but a great*

*difference between the two ways. The way of life, then, is this: First, you shall love God who made you; second, love your neighbor as yourself, and do not do to another what you would not want done to you. The teaching is this: Bless those who curse you, pray for your enemies, and fast for those who persecute you. For what reward is there for loving those who love you? Do not the Gentiles do that? But love those who hate you, and you shall not have an enemy.... If someone strikes your right cheek, turn to him the other also, and you shall be perfect. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two. If someone takes your cloak, give him also your coat. If someone takes from you what is yours, ask it not back, for indeed you are not able. Give to everyone who asks you, and ask it not back; for the Father wills that to all should be given of our own blessings (free gifts).*

John distilled *the Jesus Way* to this: “*And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love*” (2 John 1:6, my emphasis). Or in Christ’s own words, “*My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you*” (John 15:12).

Sounds impossible—like “take up your cross.” But Jesus meant it—*walking in love* is a real way of life. But it’s a walk empowered by grace—by Christ-in-us, walking his *way of love* through us. □



## One Verb: Tipping

In an online sermon, Jason Micheli points out that Jesus utilized fourteen verbs (in an English translation) to sum up the Good Samaritan's actions in helping "a man who gets mule-jacked making the 17-mile-trek from Jerusalem down to Jericho and who's left for dead, naked, in a ditch on the side of the road."

Here is the passage. Count the verbs.

*He comes near the man, sees him, is moved by him, goes to him, bandages him, pours oil and wine on him. Puts the man on his animal, brings him to an inn, takes care of him, takes out his money, gives it, asks the innkeeper to take care of him, says he will return and repay anything else.*

I hesitate to even ask myself if, by this standard, I have ever actually been a Good Samaritan. How many verbs have I employed helping strangers? I can actually think of a few times when I've used up perhaps a half dozen, maybe more. But fourteen? I cannot recall even one incident. So I utilize one verb to *feel* guilty, maybe another to *berate* myself.

But maybe there is another way to chalk up verbs—less than fourteen at a time—in ministering to strangers. I'm reminded of an incident in the life of South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

We know that apartheid had a stranglehold on his country when he was growing up. Racism was a way of life. As a small child, he quickly became aware of how badly his people were treated based solely on the color of their skin.

Educational opportunities were severely limited for black children from elementary school to college. And even when they excelled in spite of their deficient education, they were not permitted to even interview with what was then known as the Academy of Achievement.

Employment was also painfully restrictive. His mother was a cook and housekeeper at a school

for the blind; his father was a teacher but, of course, only in a poor black segregated school.

Despite this blatant discrimination, however, his family was not sullen or angry. Indeed, there was both hope and happiness in his home. And there were infinite opportunities to help families who were worse off than they were. In fact, we should not assume that Good-Samaritan verbs are utilized only by those who can financially afford them.

But there was an incident in Tutu's childhood that cost a single verb and not a penny more—one so minute it might have been missed.

**Tutu recalls one day when he was out walking with his mother when a white man, a priest named Trevor Huddleston, tipped his hat to her—the first time he had ever seen a white man pay this respect to a black woman. ...It is difficult to imagine what that one verb *tipped* meant in South Africa in the 1930s.**

*Tutu recalls one day when he was out walking with his mother when a white man, a priest named Trevor Huddleston, tipped his hat to her—the first time he had ever seen a white man pay this respect to a black woman. The incident made a profound impression on Tutu, teaching him that he need not accept discrimination and that religion could be a powerful tool for advocating racial equality.*

It is difficult today to imagine what that one verb *tipped* meant in South Africa in the 1930s. It was particularly a British tradition involving men expressing respect or recognition, perhaps gratitude. A man of lower social class was to take his hat off when greeting a man of higher class, the upper-class man merely touching his hat in return. And, of course, polite men tipped their hats to ladies. But to tip a hat to a black cleaning woman in Apartheid South Africa? Such a courtesy was unheard of. So it was that the boy Desmond never forgot that a white man of status tipped his hat to his own beloved black mother.

One verb: *tipping* a tender mercy. □

—Ruth Tucker



## Quotes & Connections



"To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."—Martin Luther

A woman was asked to lead in prayer before the city council started its weekly meeting. She was interrupted by a man who yelled, "Please speak louder. I can't hear a word you are saying." She looked up and replied, "I addressed my prayer to God—I'm not talking to you."

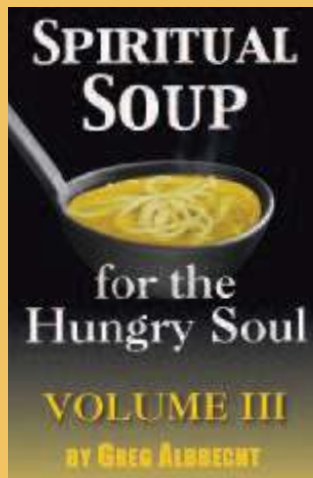
"I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me seemed insufficient for the day."—Abraham Lincoln

"We don't need religion to love our neighbor. But we do need religion to disregard our neighbor and still feel good about ourselves."—Ben Fullerton

"The most important thing that ever happens in prayer is letting ourselves be loved by God... It's like slipping into a tub of hot water and letting God's love wash over us. Prayer is like sunbathing... (Sun bathing?)"—Brennan Manning

## SOUP'S ON!

As we go to press with this issue of *Plain Truth*, Greg Albrecht is working on final edits to *Volume 3 of Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul*. Look for it this fall!



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**MANAGING EDITOR:** Laura Urista  
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**PUBLISHING AND CIRCULATION DIRECTOR:** Dennis Warkentin  
**DESIGN CONSULTANT:** Marv Wegner  
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