

# *Faith* and FAMILY

2015 Holiday Edition

**Inside:**

*Personal stories  
of inspiration  
and goodwill*

THE SAMPSON  
INDEPENDENT

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# My faith walk

**By Beth Bartlett-Best**  
Sampson County

I knew I needed to be the person God intended me to be, so I started another chapter. I applied to Campbell’s Divinity school and resigned my teaching position. Upon my acceptance into graduate school, I began applying to churches as a youth minister. I actually only applied to one, where my application turned into a full time youth ministry position. Youth grew in numbers and in faith, along with adults. The church struggled when the pastor that was there when I was hired resigned after four or five months of my initial hiring; an interim pastor filled the pulpit and was a wonderful pastor to the people, and the mentor I needed to grow spiritually and professionally in my service.

After serving the church for a year, I was approached by a few deacons in the church, as well as the pastor, about my feelings towards being ordained as a minister. I had not only been leading the youth and children’s ministry, but I had also had the opportunity to fill the pulpit on Sunday mornings and Sunday nights, and had Bible study for adults on Wednesday evening when needed. I visited “shut ins”, members who were in the hospital, and shared devotions at a local nursing home weekly. I was excited about the idea that people, men and women, saw God’s leading and leadership within me and my potential to be a minister of the gospel, but I also remembered what my daddy had said about making a living as a minister, and at the time, and sadly, even still today, there was much controversy about “women in ministry”. Through prayer and seeking God’s will, I accepted the

nomination to be ordained. The deacons of the church voted unanimously to support the decision for me to be ordained, an ordination council was established and through the most humbling ordination service of over 400 in attendance, I was ordained....and the battle began....

A small group of people left the church after my ordination. Some families didn’t believe in women ministers. I very vividly remember receiving a phone call at 6 a.m., on a Thursday, from one such member that stated if I was ordained, he would remove his sup-

My heart was  
broken to pieces  
wondering if I had  
done the right  
thing by accepting  
the nomination of  
ordination.

port and money from a local university, and take his family and money from the church. It devastated me. My heart was broken to pieces wondering if I had done the right thing by accepting the nomination of ordination. Before my ordination service, the church, at a regular business meeting, was to vote on my ordina-

tion, and the church pews were full of support for me; there were a couple of small groups meeting to support and denounce my ordination. Unfortunately, there are always hurting hearts and broken people following a war; the group against the ordination got up together that night and left the church to start their own.

In the days that followed the business meeting that rocked the congregation, covering the front page of the town’s newspaper, was a picture of the church that had been ripped completely in half with the title, “Church Splits Over Ordination.” Within the article, people spoke of several differences they had within the church in the past with programs and growth, but mostly the article focused on the ordination of a woman. I have to say, it was one of the

toughest times of my life. I sat in my office reading and rereading the article, reading and rereading scripture, praying on my knees at the altar for peace because I felt as if I had brought down a congregation by dividing the unity that was supposed to bring people together in a place of worship. During this time, people still mailed cards for special occasions or “I’m thinking of you moments”, since texting hadn’t been invented yet. I was overwhelmed by the calls to the church, calls to my home, calls to my personal phone, visits, and cards sent to me in support and affirmation of my divine appointment to be recognized as the minister of the gospel that I was.

I was a little over half way in completing my graduate work, Michael and I welcomed our first son, John Michael, and new a pastor made his presence to the church. Throughout the three years before the new hire, and the calm after the storm, our youth ministry was at its peak, adults programs were growing and I felt like I was right where I needed to be. Welcoming a baby and a new pastor was exciting, but God was about to test me again...




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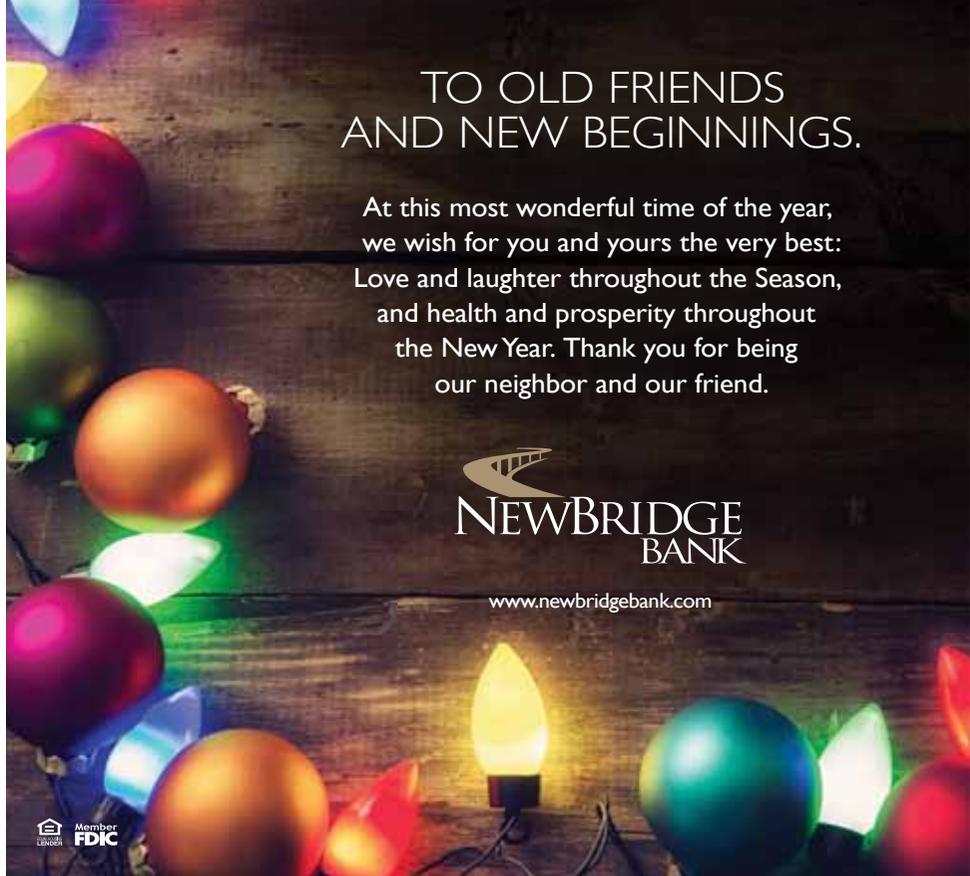
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# Where are you God?

By Erica Faircloth

Clinton

Do you sometimes feel alone... even when you're surrounded by loved ones? I am pretty sure we have all felt this way at one time or another. At times like these, we may even question ourselves about our predicaments or situations that we are in...and then, we may even question God? Have you ever questioned Him? I ask Him questions. I speak to Him, probably not as often as I should, but these are the times that we mainly speak to Him, right? When something goes wrong...

What about when things are great or you wake up in the morning or you see another birthday? Do we thank and praise Him and talk to Him at those times? When things are going well, we feel "on top of the world." Nothing can stop us! But then, we hit "a bump in the road." These "bumps" can be minor or major, but one thing is for sure, He is always with us. He is there with us through thick and thin. We need to learn to trust in the Lord at all times, good or bad, and pray and praise Him for everything. 1 Thessa-

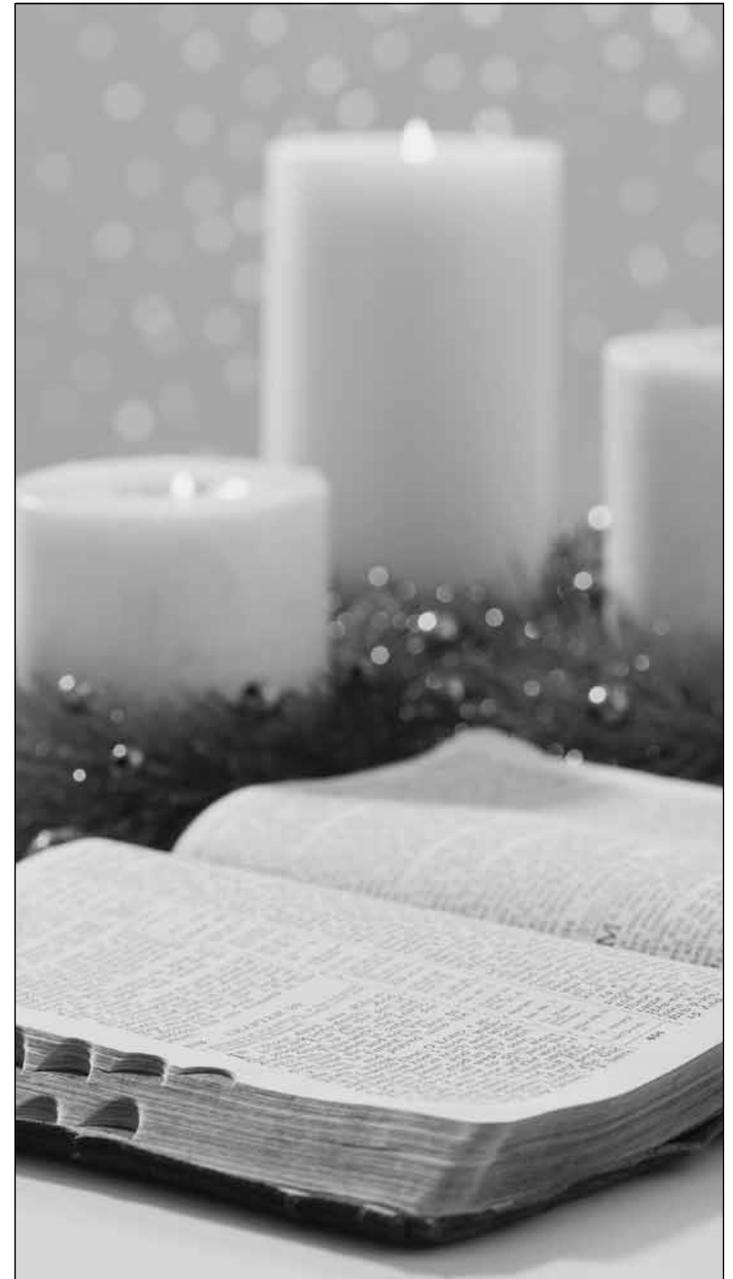
lonians 5:18 In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. He knows what He's doing. He will not give anything to us we cannot handle. 1 Corinthians 10:13 There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

One of my favorite songs is "Oceans" by Hillsong United, which starts off "You call me out upon the waters, the great unknown, where feet may fail." No matter where He leads us, He will always pull us through it. Whether it's to teach us a lesson, learn from a mistake or open a new (and maybe scary) door to our life. As long as your faith is strong, you will always find Him. Trust in Him. My favorite part of the song that speaks to me goes like this: "Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders, let

me walk upon the waters, wherever You would call me, take me deeper than my feet could ever wander, and my faith will be made stronger, in the presence of my Savior." Whenever I am feeling alone or depressed, I always lift my hands and praise Him by singing this song. That is my way of praising Him. I can always feel his presence flowing through me when I truly praise Him by singing this song.

Try building on to your relationship with God each day. Doing this will not make your life perfect, but it will help your relationship grow with God and teach you to look to and trust in Him. Philippians 4:6-7 Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

"But then, we hit  
"a bump in the road.""



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We believe that the Holy Spirit reveals God to people and that those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.

We believe that the Holy Bible is the inspired word of God, that it is the authority and inspiration for the faith and practice of the Christian life, and that every Christian has an individual responsibility to God to discover the meaning of the Scriptures for his or her own life.

We believe that spiritual regeneration must precede baptism, church membership, and commemoration of the Lord's Supper.

We believe that God created humankind in His own image and made of one blood all nations.

We believe that God is faithful and just to forgive all people who confess their sins and profess their faith in Jesus Christ and that regardless of creed or race, they become the children of God and Christian brothers.

We believe that as a local community of Christians, we are a part of Christ's Church which is universal in scope. Therefore, we believe that we should witness and work for Christ in fellowship with all children of God in an effort to oppose evil and extend the Kingdom of God throughout the world.

We believe that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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Photo courtesy UMO

University of Mount Olive sophomore Sarah Best says Sampson County, UMO, and her faith have shaped her into the person she is today.

## Sampson resident finds academic, faith fulfillment at UMO

### From UMO

MOUNT OLIVE — Sampson County native Sarah Best is an agriculture business major at the University of Mount Olive (UMO). Only a sophomore, Best has already experienced tremendous success and attributes her academic accomplishments and growing faith to UMO.

Best is the daughter of Greg and Paula Best. Her father owns and operates their family farm, and her mother teaches at Hobbton Middle School. The couple always encouraged their daughter to pursue her passion of agriculture, which led her to participate in Hobbton High School's Future Farmers of America (FFA) program.

"Being from rural Sampson County, I developed an appreciation for agriculture," said Best. "I joined the FFA program at my high school. At the North Carolina State FFA Convention, I noticed UMO and learned about their agriculture programs."

After she heard about the opportunities at UMO, Best knew that it would be the perfect fit to merge her love for agriculture and her growing faith. Best graduated high school in the spring of 2014 and began her journey at UMO the following August.

"UMO felt like home. I instantly felt welcomed by the agricultural department and knew that it was the right fit for me," smiled Best. "At UMO, I don't feel that I am just learning out of



Photo courtesy UMO

University of Mount Olive sophomore Sarah Best says Sampson County, UMO, and her faith have shaped her into the person she is today.

a book for the purpose of passing a test. I feel that I am being challenged to succeed and to become an effective business woman."

With the tools she gained through her classes, Best landed a prestigious internship this past summer. She learned of the internship opportunity through Dr. Sandy Maddox, the division chair of the agriculture department.

"I worked with Golden Grove, Inc. and Four County Peanut Services," explained Best. "At Four County, I got to work with farmers and producers on purchasing peanuts, selling seed, and setting up contracts. The peanuts stored here go to Golden Grove, where they are sent all over the world to various peanut processing locations. I enjoyed my internship and was offered a part-time job with them!"

Best claims that her academic success would not be possible without her faith and the support of her church and the Mount Olive community.

"My faith is very important to me. I appreciate the fact that the chapel service is offered weekly on the campus and that prayer is a part of almost everything we do at UMO. Although I

do work hard, I always rely on God to guide me through my academic journey," said Best. "I often refer to 1 Peter 5:7, 'Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.' This helps keep me calm when life and school seem stressful, and I know that my journey here is all part of His plan."

Best lives in Newton Grove and attends Newton Grove Baptist Church. She is also involved with Collegiate FFA and Jordan's Chapel 4-H.

"Sampson County, UMO, and my faith have shaped me into the person I am today by giving me ample opportunities to grow, teaching me the value of hard work, and allowing me to enjoy the beauty of North Carolina," concluded Best.

The University of Mount Olive is a private institution rooted in the liberal arts tradition with defining Christian values. The University, sponsored by the Convention of Original Free Will Baptists, has locations in Mount Olive, New Bern, Wilmington, Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, Research Triangle Park, Washington, Jacksonville, and in Smithfield at Johnston Community College.

For more information, visit [www.umo.edu](http://www.umo.edu).

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## Butler, Hughes & Hayes release new Southern Gospel music video



**By Lamar Butler**

Dunn — Butler, Hughes & Hayes, a Southern Gospel group based out of the Dunn area, have recently completed a music video for their song, “Adopted.”

“Adopted” is from the album with the same name by Butler, Hughes & Hayes and produced by Wesley Pritchard of the Gaither Homecoming Series. The music video was produced by McWhorter Concepts out of Greensboro NC who filmed the family and group in various locations in downtown Dunn, at Old Bluff Presbyterian Church in Wade, the group’s home church: Central Baptist Church in Dunn, as well as Pritchard’s recording studio, MillWest Studios in Fayetteville.

Darren and Margy Hughes traveled to Nanjing, China in 2011 to bring their daughter, Sophia, into their home and family. “Sophia is a bundle of joy who loves people and loves to laugh” relates Darren, “we have a better understanding of God’s love for us, not only by being first-time parents, but also by being part of the miracle of adoption.” The song tells Sophia’s story and also the story of every follower of Jesus Christ who God adopts into his family. The Hughes’ are now in the process of their second adoption from China.

The music video is available on YouTube by searching “Butler, Hughes & Hayes, Adopted” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRKcgsf4mEA> or on the groups website, [www.butlerhughesandhayes.com](http://www.butlerhughesandhayes.com).

“Sophia is a bundle of joy who loves people and loves to laugh.”

Lamar Butler, Darren Hughes and Michael Hayes began as a group in 2006 out of their home church, Central Baptist in Dunn NC later becoming a quartet with the addition of Matt Parker in 2010. BHH

travels a limited number of dates each year in order to maintain balance in their lives with their families and remain connected with their church

Darren Hughes and his family during a photo shoot.

Courtesy photos

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First UMC Clinton has recently been recognized as one of the top 100 churches for its programs of innovative and dynamic ministry.

The church is over 675 members strong, and continues to grow with new families each month. The membership is well balanced with all ages and stages in life represented.

With the church’s dynamic music program representing a choir that has given concerts around the world, the new pipe organ, new youth house with a strong and growing youth ministry program, and with ministries to families and children, including an after-school care five days a week, First UMC Clinton continues to be a well-balanced church with ministries for everyone.

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Reverend T.R. Miller

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Courtesy photos

Lamar Butler of the Southern Gospel group Butler, Hughes & Hayes lays tracks for the group's new CD.

family. The group has had the opportunity to share the Gospel in song in many churches as well as concerts with Bill & Gloria Gaither, Greater Vision, The Isaacs and others. Adopted is available on iTunes, other

digital media outlets or online at [www.butlerhughesandhayes.com](http://www.butlerhughesandhayes.com). Find BHH on Facebook or follow them on Twitter. For more information about Sophia's story, visit [www.darrenandmargy.blogspot.com](http://www.darrenandmargy.blogspot.com).



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# The Golden Envelope – ‘Invitation to Israel

**Sharon Racsko**

It was a strange dream in April of this year when the golden envelope came bombarding into my view. It was accompanied by a loud, official sounding, no-nonsense voice which was trumpeting “INVITATION TO ISRAEL!!”

“INVITATION TO ISRAEL!!”

I reached for the envelope and opened it with great care. Sure enough, the font of the card was covered in decorative Hebrew letters that were embossed in gold. As I proceeded to open the card, on the inside a man’s name appeared.... nothing else....just a man’s name. I have never heard of the man or seen his name before. Then, I woke up!

Once awake I said to myself, “Wow!” “This is like the Willy Wonka movie and

the Golden Ticket.”

I then went straight to my computer and “Googled” the man’s name. He was an assistant pastor of a large Christian Ministry from Arizona. I emailed him and told him my dream. He then emailed me and said he had already been to Israel and didn’t believe the dream was for him. Next, I sort of panicked (as I was afraid he would miss his blessing by not going to Israel) and so I called him using the ministry contact number from Google.

However, once on the phone he said maybe the invitation was for me to join

Maybe this invitation is for me after all.

the “Women on the Front Line” on their ministry trip to Israel in November of this year. And so I thought...Yeah! In reality, it was the man whose name was on the inside of the invitation who actually INVITED ME! Go figure!

So, I decided to go. I used my income tax check and booked the trip. Thank-God for refunds!

I wasn’t exactly sure why I was going, as this trip would be my 7th trip to Israel since 2002. In any case, I love to travel and as an English as a

Second Language (ESL) teacher I feel it helps me stay compassionate and long suffering to my students. It helps me

appreciate other cultures and people’s everyday struggles.

I have been to Syria, Turkey, China, Cambodia, Guatemala, Panama, Honduras, South Korea, Scotland, England, Italy and yes Israel. The highlight of my trip of course was saying a prayer for Sampson County Schools to be protected, to be used by God, and to finish strong like Sampson in the Bible. Yes, I even wrote it on a piece of paper and stuck it into the Wailing Wall.

We don’t know what is coming down the road to America, but we do know that the God of Israel is also the God of America, and of Sampson County.

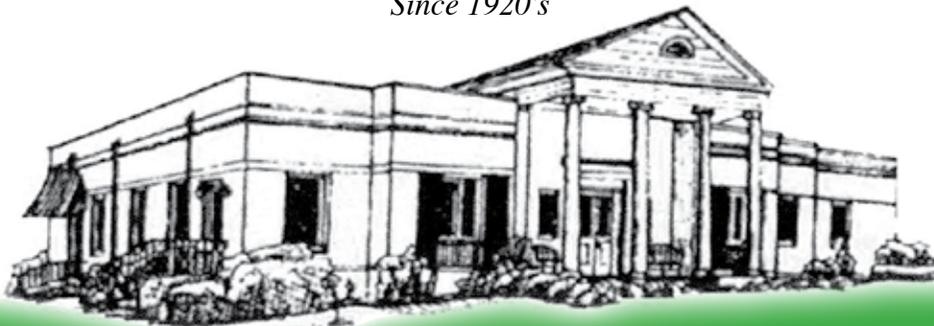
May Sampson County live strong, stand strong, and finish strong!

Sharon Racsko is an ESL teacher at Plain View Elementary School.

*We ought to weigh well,  
what we can only once decide.*

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# An 8-year old's explanation of God

By Danny Dutton

One of God's main jobs is making people. He makes them to replace the ones that die, so there will be enough people to take care of things on earth. He doesn't make grownups, just babies. I think because they are smaller and easier to make. That way he doesn't have to take up his valuable time teaching them to talk and walk. He can just leave that to mothers and fathers.

God's second most important job is listening to prayers. An awful lot of this goes on, since some people, like preachers and things, pray at times beside bedtime. God doesn't have time to listen to the radio or TV because of this. Because he hears everything, there must be a terrible lot of noise in his ears, unless he has thought of a way to turn it off. God sees everything and

hears everything and is everywhere which keeps Him pretty busy. So you shouldn't go wasting his time by going over your mom and dad's head asking for something they said you couldn't have.

Jesus is God's Son. He used to do all the hard work like walking on water and performing miracles and trying to teach the people who didn't want to learn about God. They finally got tired of him preaching to them and they crucified him. But he was good and kind, like his father, and he told his father that they didn't know what they were doing and

He used to do all the hard work like walking on water and performing miracles and trying to teach the people who didn't want to learn about God.

to forgive them and God said OK. His dad (God) appreciated everything that he had done and all his hard work on earth so he told him he didn't have to go out on the road anymore. He could stay in heaven. So he did. And now he helps his dad out by listening to prayers and seeing things which are important for God to take care of and which ones he can take care of himself without having to bother God. Like a secretary, only more important.

You can pray anytime you want and they are sure to help you because they got it worked out so one of them is on

duty all the time. You should always go to church on Sunday because it makes God happy, and if there's anybody you want to make happy, it's God. Don't skip church or do something you think will be more fun like going to the beach. This is wrong. And besides, the sun doesn't come out at the beach until noon anyway.

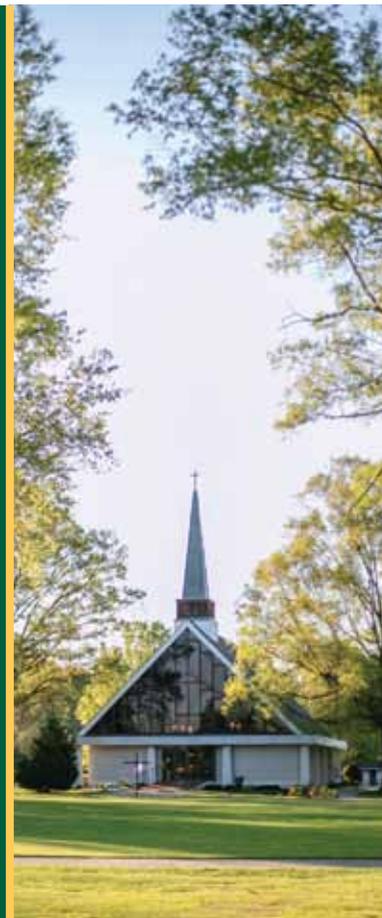
If you don't believe in God, besides being an atheist, you will be very lonely, because your parents can't go everywhere with you, like to camp, but God can. It is good to know He's around you when you're scared, in the dark or when you can't swim and you get thrown into real deep water by big kids. But... you shouldn't just always think of what God can do for you. I figure God put me here and he can take me back anytime he pleases. And this is what I know about God.

University of  
MOUNT OLIVE

*Lives Transformed*

At the University of Mount Olive, we believe that faith transforms lives. We are here to educate and guide students as they prepare for service in their community and the greater world. The University offers convenient and affordable graduate and undergraduate programs in both seated and online formats for recent high school graduates, college transfers, and adult students.

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# Dancing through faith

By Lindy Bustabad  
Clinton

I am Lindy Bustabad, and this is my faith story.

In 2010, I was diagnosed with scoliosis. This meant that rather than having a straight spine, mine was shaped like an "S" and my rib cage and hips were rotated. Knowing this diagnosis didn't stop me. I continued to dance for the next year until my condition progressed. In the fall of 2011, I was put into a back brace. This large plastic back brace was to be worn 16 hours each day underneath my clothing. This was a difficult time for me because I was going through those "awkward middle school years." On top of that pressure came the pressure of not being able to wear the cutest outfits to school and ripping holes in all of my new shirts. I soon switched to a larger, more aggressive brace in the winter.

This brace was only worn at night. After a period of time wearing this brace, my x-rays seemed to be stabilizing, and the threat of surgery was diminishing. I was taken out of the brace and given freedom to continue my life as it was before.

Until this past year, I almost forgot I even had scoliosis. At the beginning of

last summer, I went to my doctor for a routine checkup, and he gave me the devastating news that my curves had progressed dramatically. Each curve of my spine was around 45 degrees, the point where doctors prescribe surgery to correct it. I remember sitting in my doctor's office with my doctor and my mom crying. We cried for hours, well past time for the office to close. I didn't understand how I could go from being stable to falling apart with one x-ray. My doctor had me sign the release form for surgery and read out the possible risks

and their probabilities. I stopped listening halfway through and signed through my tears. The surgery was scheduled for July 21, 2014. I had half of the summer left to enjoy before my surgery. My doctor predicted a two-week recovery period before I would be back to normal. I didn't believe him.

The summer went by a little too quickly. I

went to Washington, D.C. with the youth for a mission trip, and there I gave my heart to Jesus. I thought that this mission trip would change my outlook on the surgery and give me more faith in God as I started my battle. I couldn't have been more wrong.

**"I ended up with 23 screws throughout my spine, from the thoracic to lumbar region."**



The morning of July 21, my family drove with me to the hospital. They put the IVs in, and all I wanted was for the doctors to put me under so I wouldn't feel anything anymore. I was terrified. My doctors were amazing. They came in right before wheeling me back and prayed with my family. I felt safe with them. The next thing I remember was waking up in recovery, and I remember the stuffed animal one of the doctors gave me. It was a Beanie-Baby angel bear, and I still have it today. After the glory of anesthesia wore off, the only thing I can remember is the pain. The doctors took out the spinous processes of my vertebrae, inserted two titanium rods and screwed them into each one of my vertebrae. I ended up with 23 screws throughout my spine, from the thoracic to lumbar region. This surgery isn't a minor surgery, it was definitely major. The moment I started to feel the pain in the hospital bed, I grabbed my dad's hand and started crying, "Why Daddy! It hurts!" In the hospital, I didn't eat as much as I should've, considering I was on three or four different kinds of pain killers at all times. I didn't have a morphine pump, and I was nauseous constantly from lack of food. The first day after surgery, this major surgery, the physical therapists made me try to stand and walk. Everything felt different, and EVERYTHING hurt. They made me

stand while I cried and screamed, and they made me walk all the way down the hallway and it hurt. It hurt so badly. I spent part of the week in the hospital, but I didn't spend long enough. I went home, and I continued to get worse. Along with 24 hour nausea, I couldn't stand or sit up for very long. Showering was a blessing and a curse because I continued to pass out in my mom's arms each time we would attempt to shower. I can't really explain how it felt, but every position I tried to sit in, every position I tried to lay down in, everything hurt. Everything felt new and uncomfortable and painful. Also, my scar, which was around 14 inches long, was not healing properly. My mom took me back to the doctor multiple times, and they continued to work on my incision, in the doctor's office. Multiple times. Finally, around time for school to start, things started to plateau. I started back in dance classes, which probably only hurt my feelings rather than it did help them. Dancing, the one thing I truly loved to do, wasn't the same. And it never would be the same again. As the months passed, my problems seemed to get worse again. My back muscles would spasm at uncontrollable times. I couldn't sit in my desk at school without being in severe pain. I was attending school each day, once again, on pain killers and muscle relaxers. It got to the point where

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no teenager should have to go through that during their life. My doctors were continually perplexed as to why I was in so much pain all the time. I had a CT scan done in the winter, and the doctors believed that one of my vertebrae was cracked and my spine was collapsing. They also saw some loosening around one of my screws. So, we had to schedule another surgery for the middle of December. I had to miss school for four weeks in a critical time period before exams. Also, I had to stop dancing for the rest of the season. I had to quit my competition team and give up my position in every dance. This was the worst part of the already terrible news. The day of surgery, I went in thinking my spine was falling apart, but the doctors realized that I had an infection around my screws rather than a cracked vertebrae and collapsing spine. My doctors took out as much of the hardware as they could to reduce the infection. They cleaned the area and made sure that the fusion was all still strong. They left in about an 8-inch section of hardware where my bones were

still fusing. I woke up from this surgery and immediately, I felt a difference. No more spasms in my muscles. I thought I was good to go, until I started getting headaches while in the hospital. My head would hurt with migraine strength for hours, and I wasn't sure why. My doctor believed I had a spinal fluid leak, and he reserved the OR for me the next day to go back into surgery once more. I had to lay completely flat in my hospital bed for 24 hours in hopes that it would repair itself. This was my breaking point. I was unbelievably angry with everyone. I was angry with my doctors for messing me up, angry with my parents for making me do this, angry with other patients that had been through the surgery with no problem, angry with everyone back at home enjoying school

**I yelled at God for making me go through one more thing that I felt like I couldn't handle.**

and sports and dance, angry with myself for being angry at everyone. I yelled at God for making me go through one more thing that I felt like I couldn't handle. I knew I couldn't handle it. I screamed at Him to make it all end, one way or another. And it made me feel worse when my

parents were upset. The worst thing in the world for me is seeing my Daddy cry. I have tried to forget some of the awful things that went on in the hospital during that stay. I have tried to forget, but I know some of them I can't forget. The only thing that kept me sane while laying in bed was my Daddy, when he turned on

Andy Griffith on the hospital room TV. I couldn't open my eyes long enough to watch it with him, but I remember laying through the pain, hearing Opie and Aunt Bea and Barney's voices. And I remem-

ber that was one of the only ways I could go to sleep. God must have known that I was tired of the pain. I woke up the next morning without a headache. My doctor put a picc line in my left arm, and prescribed 4 to 6 weeks of IV antibiotics to kill the remaining infection. I went home with my mom as my doctor, and that's pretty scary. Because I didn't have the same length of the hardware in my spine, I had to wear another brace, which many of you saw me in, until I finished fusing. I wore this brace 23 hours a day, and it was horrible. But after my second surgery, I felt miraculously better. I was able to sit up and watch TV and catch up on my schoolwork, and I was even able to attend Christmas with my family. Things started to get better.

I said earlier that I gave my heart to Jesus in Washington, D.C. last year. But truthfully, it feels as if it were for nothing, because I lost touch with Jesus during the following months. I just couldn't understand why it had to be me to go

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# Hopewell UMC



## SUNDAY SCHEDULE:

Sunday Devotion & Children's Devotion: 9:45am

Sunday School: 10:00am

Worship Service: 11:00am



**Adam Brinkley,**  
Pastor of Hopewell UMC

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*"Life without God is like an unsharpened pencil - it has no point..." ~ Unknown*

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# Take time to reflect

Do you reflect upon your blessings or burdens while wrapping gifts, decorating the tree, caroling, cooking, going a mile a minute, and generously giving to those in need during this season of love? One Christmas tradition that brings reflection is watching *The Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens. The message reminds people that true happiness comes from reflecting on blessings, living righteously, and helping others with a spirit of love. I can see old Scrooge now, counting his money with misery as his only friend.



Spell

Scrooge learned that greed haunts happiness. The happy ending comes with Scrooge and family celebrating Christmas together with joy and good cheer for everyone.

Reading a quote from Charles Dickens, in *Bits and Pieces* and the calendar in my pantry - on the same morning - was a sign to write this story. These words remind us to live righteously, reflectively, and closely connected to the Lord and loved ones.. Dickens' classic shows how humility, honor, and happiness come to us when we give with compassion and concern for our fellow man. Charles' words ring loud and clear in this sacred season of Christmas. Do we live like Scrooge, holding and hoarding our treasures and talents? Surely, a living dream of going to hell could change our hearts and habits too?

Crime and corruption, terrorism, wars and rumors of wars, hatred and heartaches permeate our planet as Christians celebrate the birth of Christ our King. Though we do not understand, we realize signs are fulfilled and time is ticking closer to the end. Now, is the time for repentance, renewal, and revival to begin. Reflection on where we have been

and realization of where our world is headed should wake up sleeping Christians to stand up for Jesus as soldiers of the cross. Rampant sinful living, ungratefulness, hoarding and not helping those in need displease our Father. Ramifications come when warnings to get right with God go unheeded. Refusal to honor God and live righteously leads to destruction. Sodom and Gomorrah were wiped off the face of the earth for sins found in cities all across this land we love and call home. There were sexual sins, unrighteous living, but what angered God most was people having too much and not sharing with those in need. Selfish lifestyles open the door for evil to progress. Let us heed God's warnings and change our ways. Now, is the time to turn our eyes upon Jesus and make things right with Him.

Wise men should follow the star to God's Son for true happiness and life eternal in heaven. Shepherds should prepare their sheep, preaching the Word with passion and power. We should never assume another holiday season will come.

As we sing 'Joy to the world the Lord is come, let earth receive her King; let every heart prepare him room...,' let us prepare room for Jesus to live in our lives and share His bountiful blessings with others. He is in charge of everything. When the bells of Christmas ring, make sure your heart is in tune and your life is committed to Christ.

"Reflect upon your blessings, of which every man has plenty, not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some." Dickens penned these words long ago; they still ring true today.

Each of us has plenty of blessings

and some past misfortunes. The past haunts those who refuse to let it go. The present is a gift from God we should open daily and enjoy, honoring and obeying the Giver who giveth and taketh away. The future is coming like Red Rover, ready or not here it comes. We may not know what tomorrow may bring, but we can be prepared for glory when we belong to Him.

In reflection, think of these things from His Word. Matthew 6:33

"Wise men should follow the star to God's Son for true happiness and life eternal in heaven."

reminds all nations to be holy and enjoy the blessings from a loving Father. "First of all, look for the holy nation of God. Be right with Him. All these other things will be given to you also."

Scrooge learned this in the nick of time, "He who trusts in his riches will fall, but those who

are right with God will grow like a green leaf." Proverbs 11:28

Terror tries to steal the sacredness of this Holy season. Nations meet in bewilderment wondering what to do. Some mock the Master by publicizing messages of hate saying 'God can't fix this!' Christians know the truth of His great Love Story...and the ending! YES, GOD CAN!

As Christmas approaches, may the words found in Romans 8:32 remind us to thank God for His grace and goodness, free gifts for the asking. "God did not keep His Son for Himself but gave Him for us all. Then with His Son, will He not give us all things?"

God gives and is pleased when His children acknowledge His gifts and share them with those in need. Give Him a great gift this Christmas: your heart.

Becky Spell Vann is a long-time columnist for the Sampson Independent's Faith & Family section and owner of the outreach ministry Tim's Gift.

## Dancing

From page 13

through all of what I had to go through. One of the things that reminded me that Jesus was with me was when I received your cards. I read each and every one of them, and made sure I knew exactly who it came from. If I didn't, I made mom show you to me in the church directory. I still have all of my cards. I am so thankful to have a church family that loves Jesus like you do and cares enough about me to send me a card with a short hand written note in it.

Truthfully, I wish I could've told you about how I saw angel in the hospital room, or how I heard God speak to me in my ear while sleeping on the couch with pillows piled around me. But I can't. Because it hasn't been until the past few months that I really felt my connection with God strengthen, especially this summer at Vacation Bible School. I have helped Mrs. Donna Landes with Missions class for the past five years, but I wasn't able to help last year due to my surgery. Being able to go back to VBS and teach my first class has taught me so much about God and how great He is. I have learned that even if you lose touch with God, He is always there for you, you just have to reach out to Him. I have also learned that I am not alone. I am not the only one who had to go through this much of a struggle. There are kids far worse off than I am, and I truly need to be thankful for that. I am thankful for being a part of the mission project this year with Duke Children's Hospital during VBS. Just like your cards lifted me up and helped me through a difficult time, I want the children in the hospital to be lifted up and reminded that God is with them, because I know I needed a constant reminder of that in the hospital.

So that is my faith story, and, in truth, it's still being written. I am trying to grow in myself as daughter of Christ as well as grow in who I really am. No matter how hard I may try to forget the events of the past year, I know that they will stick with me for a long time, and that is probably a good thing. If I don't remember, I won't be able to tell others and show others that God does heal. Before surgery, I took for granted little things like being able to bend. At camp this summer, I had to practice getting in and out of a loft bed because I couldn't move quite like I was supposed to. Last week, I celebrated my one year anniversary of my surgery, as well as starting dance classes for the first time since December. However, it's not completely over. I continue to worry about my spine, and I anxiously await each doctor's appointment. I appreciate all of your prayers during this continuing process. I am thankful to God for his grace, and I am thankful to my church for its support.



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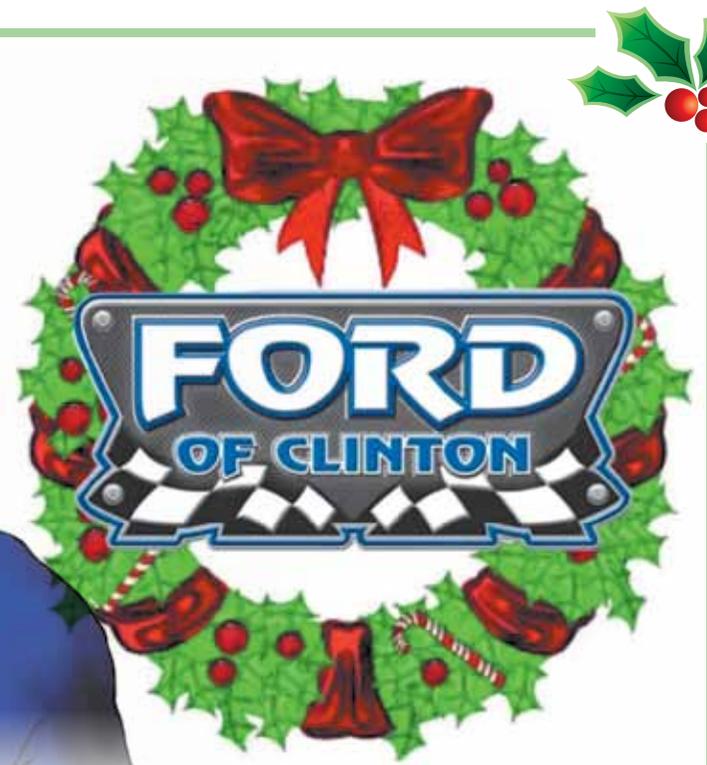
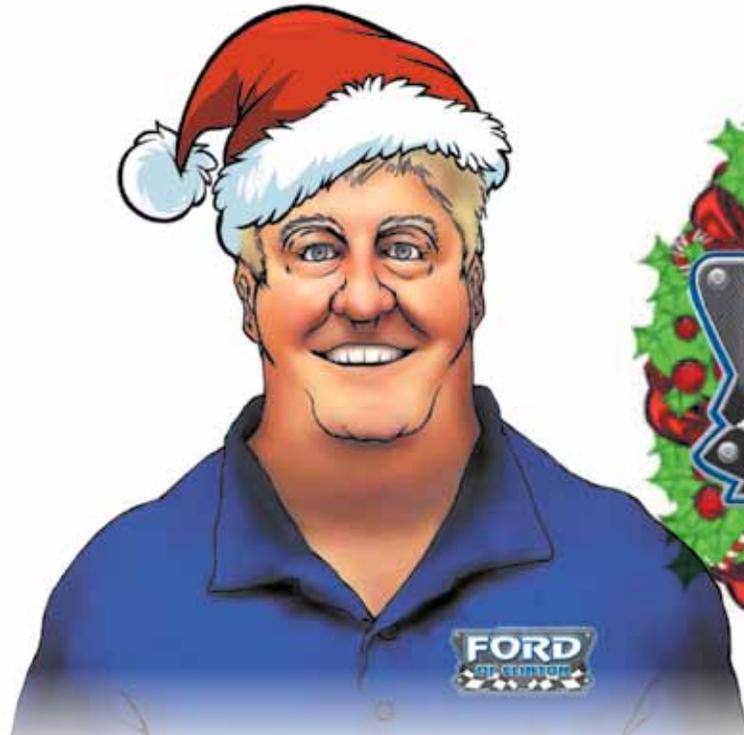
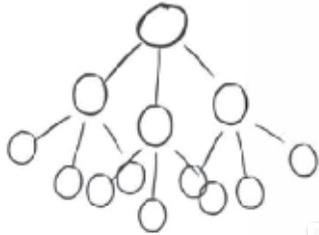


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Ford of Clinton's Larry McPhail, foreground, flips the 'cakes and hams it up-Kiwanis Pancakes



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