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Summer Camp Photos

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A Furniture Shop Builds Lives

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 Coleman Moore (left) is a former pastor and the founder of The Custom Cottage furniture shop in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where missionary Rus Lyons (right) has been working since May. Rus intends to open a similar furniture shop in Evansville.

David and Sharon Sklorenko
Barb Stahl
Mary Timler

FRONT COVER
Andy Bowar (Servant Branch) captured the Milky Way rising in the west over the dining hall at this year’s Servant Camp in Cannon Falls, MN, August 7 – 12.

BACK COVER
Andy Bowar encountered these campers hiding from the junior staff during a campwide game on Monday evening at Servant Camp.

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THIS SUMMER, THE COMMUNITY HOSTED camps in six different locations: Buffalo, Kingston, Minnesota, Indianapolis, Evansville and Allendale. Seven hundred and forty-three children attended in all, more than a third of them not from community families. They went to work and to play, exploring God’s glory in the world around them: in canoes and on climbing walls, in lessons on plants and in chemistry experiments, and in his word—acting out Scripture, singing praise songs and practicing forgiveness and reconciliation.

Above: Servant Camp’s Monday evening activity had an Olympic theme. Here campers imitated competitive rowers, moving up and down the field near the main activity tent. Photo by Andy Bowar.

Left: Three-year-old Mac was a member of Bethlehem, the youngest group at Allendale’s camp. Photo by Sarah Loughran.
Top row, left: Rae-lynn, Alynn, Devin, Jaida and Laylah enthusiastically participated in a donut-eating contest in the festivities marking the last day of camp in Indianapolis. Photo by Trish Olson.

Top row, middle: Sam admired Will’s catch at Buffalo Camp. Photo by Bob Scott.
Top row, right: In Kingston, Thalia and Keira decorated t-shirts to illustrate Camp Glory's theme of being a disciple of Jesus. Photo by Maria Mutidjo.

Middle row, left: Matheu, Edwin and Xavier got a little help from Colin Whelpley (in baseball cap) while making a cornhole set in Evansville. Photo by Mary Timler.

Middle row, middle: Eight-year-old Jazlyn demonstrated how much of the Lord’s Prayer she learned at Evansville’s camp. Photo by Mary Timler.

Middle row, right: Servant Camp counselors Alicia McShane and Brad Elliott (back row) and the junior staff organized this year’s Monday night all-camp evening fun. Photo by Andy Bowar.

Bottom row, left: Elijah, Michael and Jack enjoyed canoeing at Buffalo Camp. Photo by Bob Scott.

Bottom row, right: Maricio, Kevin and Adrian mixed yeast and peroxide to produce an explosive compound called “elephant toothpaste” in Indianapolis. Photo by Ellen Putzier.
TRAVEL TEAM

The long and winding service of the Sklorenkos

by Elizabeth Grams

S

ince 1980, David and Sharon Sklorenko have traveled hundreds of thousands of miles on the community’s behalf. Appleton, Cincinnati, Colorado Springs, Dominica, Grenada, Kingston, Memphis, Rockford, Yakima . . . the Sklorenkos have been to them all, visiting prayer groups and branches. (They’ve been to all 21 locations where the community currently has branches).

In June of 2016, after more than 35 years of travel and service, the Sklorenkos made their last official branch visit, to Buffalo. David formally retired from his role as Mission coordinator on July 1, a few months shy of his 80th birthday.

But before all of those trips, in the 1970s, the Sklorenkos were living in Hawaii, where David had founded or run a number of businesses involving road construction, landscaping, property development and warehousing. They had four children. They were founding members of a Catholic parish and were active in a charismatic prayer group. . . . They were an active couple.

Clem and Julie Walters recall meeting them in 1978, when members of the prayer group in Hawaii took them, unannounced, to the Sklorenkos’ home. “There were David and Sharon and all the children, from the oldest to the youngest, working on a very dirty project moving stones,” Clem said. “I thought to myself, that guy can really do something—he can organize kids!” Julie recalls how Sharon immediately dropped what she was doing to welcome her guests to an impromptu meal and visit in their home.

After the Sklorenkos attended the charismatic Kansas City conference in 1977, David felt a tug from the Lord to join covenant community on the mainland. The Sklorenko family moved from Hawaii to South Bend in 1979, leaving behind businesses, family members and friends, as well as the prayer group (which went on to become the Oahu branch of the People of Praise).

“It was a leap of faith,” says Sharon. “It seemed like a lot to leave everything, but the minute I got to South Bend it just seemed right. I never looked back.”

In South Bend, David’s business expertise was put to use for the community right away. He took on management of the LaSalle Building, managed the community’s bookstore and restaurant there, and worked in the conference office of Charismatic Renewal Services (CRS), which was administering national charismatic conferences hosting thousands of people. Sharon worked in the building, too, first helping out in the restaurant, then joining David in the conference office.

In 1980, they began visiting prayer groups and fledgling communities sprouting out of the charismatic renewal to train them in what the People of Praise had learned about community life. That work became part of the Christians in Mission program office after it was founded in 1981, and Overall Coordinator Paul DeCelles later appointed David to be a Mission coordinator. In the following years, the Sklorenkos helped several of those groups through the process of becoming branches of the People of Praise. Over time their work naturally shifted from relating to prayer groups to relating to branches. David became the coordinator responsible for the branches in Appleton, Grenada, Kingston, Rockford and Yakima.

Sharon took on a handmaid-like role, which Dawn Keaveny (Kingston) described: “She was always concerned about every woman in the branch, and on every visit inquired how each was doing. She loved our children and they loved her in return, earning her the title ‘Aunty
Sharon. She shared practical advice about family, marriage, sisterhood and generally what it means to be a godly woman."

They did all this while David served as a coordinator in the South Bend branch, and Sharon both served as a handmaid and worked at CRS assisting Vice-President Pat Rath. At the same time, they were raising their children and opening their home to household members, to David's aunt and Sharon's mother. David was also administering conferences across the US, and he was intimately involved in several key property deals: securing the community centers in Rockford and Appleton, buying the community's first properties in Allendale, and overseeing construction at the LaSalle Company's new warehouse and office.

The Sklorenkos were so often on the road that David eventually became a member of the American Airlines Two Million Miler program. They were known for their undaunted cheerfulness. Maureen McDonough (South Bend), whose friendship with Sharon goes back to the days they waitressed in the Lasalle Restaurant together, notes that she never heard Sharon complain. “She never loved to travel, but she was always ready to go in an instant when the Lord said ‘Go,’” Maureen said.

In September of 1988, Hurricane Gilbert swept through Jamaica, destroying buildings and cutting off supplies. After the storm, David and Sharon took the first flight they could get into the country to support the brothers and sisters in the recently established Kingston branch. In New York’s Kennedy Airport they discovered that the crates of canned goods they brought along wouldn’t be allowed on the plane, so they bought a bunch of duffle bags and hurriedly repacked the food in those.

“In the midst of our difficulties, God sent Dave and Sharon from South Bend to encourage us,” wrote Andre Johnstone in a 1989 Vine & Branches article. “They stayed with us for one week and experienced with us the difficulties of having no water, no electricity, no bread.”

“David and Sharon represented and exhibited the spirit and the lived experience of the covenant that we had committed to,” said Dominic Jeremiah, the head of the branch leaders’ team in Grenada. “When they visited, they would literally put down their bags from a long and exhausting flight and start assisting with laundry or folding clothes or choosing to go visit a brother or sister who needed to chat with them. David’s skillful diplomacy also opened many doors with leaders of the local church and established our community as a positive presence.”

Mike Madden (Appleton) points out that, despite the breadth of David and Sharon’s relationships, “You always feel like you are the only one in the room when they listen to you.”

Jennifer Ambrose (Rockford) says, “When Stu’s father died, they pitched in and helped empty and clean up the house. They’ve been to our kids’ baptisms; we’ve been to one another’s parents’ funerals. They’ve had our backs, administering a hug or a slap—whatever was necessary. And they know how to laugh.”

The Sklorenkos have passed the baton to others. Jim and Beth Bulger (Servant Branch) began relating to the branches in Kingston and Grenada in 2014, and John and Amy Zwerneman (South Bend) began relating to the Appleton and Rockford branches in July, 2016.

Kevin Ranaghan started working with the Sklorenkos in 1996 and has continued to do so ever since then in his capacity as the head of the community’s branch relations team. “The branch relations team and many of our branches will sorely miss David and Sharon,” he said. “They brought teaching, understanding of the wider community and real-life wisdom into each branch. In a genuinely heartfelt way, they have been friends to all, forging bonds of love and care that will outlast their many years of service.”

David and Sharon are celebrating their retirement in a way that should not be surprising: by packing their bags for a trip to Alaska.
The Custom Cottage is a furniture shop in Grand Rapids, Michigan, located in the back of a red brick factory that covers a city block. The factory’s tall, Italianate tower hovers over the surrounding neighborhood like a church steeple. Inside, a thick yellow-green dust has settled everywhere—on the saws, stacks of boards and worktables, on bunk beds, queen beds, bookshelves and dining tables, on a black leather Bible that rests on a small table near the entry, even on the shop’s founder, Coleman Moore.

He is a shorter man of 60, in jeans, a faded work shirt and a pair of aquamarine glasses that bring out the bright blue-green color of his eyes. With two pencils poking out from his pocket, he looks the part of a lifelong furniture builder. But he was many other things—a real estate developer, a student at nearby Calvin Seminary, a pastor and a church planter—before he built his first piece of furniture. Even then, he had no idea that a one-off project for his wife would become a business, or that he would employ ex-cons, alcoholics, drug addicts, homeless men and returned soldiers, training them to become craftsmen.

Like Coleman, this place took me by surprise. When I first came into his shop my mission was simple enough: to plan the construction of a dining room table for my growing family in South Bend. I had no idea that God might want to open a similar furniture shop in Evansville, a place where our neighbors might one day come to find that most precious of modern human necessities—a job.

Coleman Moore grew up in the mountains of east Tennessee. His father was an executive who traveled often, so busy with work that, as Coleman recalled, he only came to one of his son’s baseball games. “If I was going to spend any time with him, the only opportunity was to do what he was doing,” Coleman said. That meant working alongside him in the basement wood shop, where father and son built shelves for the...
house and a pergola for the backyard. The son took to the work, making his own Soap Box Derby car and a pontoon boat from Styrofoam and cedar.

None of this seemed relevant to Coleman’s career path. After college, he became an executive with a real estate development company. He managed a development in downtown Dallas with three office buildings and a 12-story hotel with an ice skating rink in the atrium. By the world’s standards, he and his wife Mary were doing fine, with three children, a house and a cottage on the Gulf of Mexico. They were churchgoers, but largely for their children’s sake.

Then one Lent, Coleman decided to read the Bible straight through. It took him 18 months, but when he got to the end, he told Mary that the Bible had “an absolutely radical message.” He said that they should either start living by it or quit pretending to be Christians. They chose the former, and eventually God called them to move to Grand Rapids, where Coleman enrolled in Calvin Seminary and began studying to be a pastor. To pay the bills, Mary began working full-time on a night shift as a labor and delivery nurse, giving up the time with her children that she had treasured in her former part-time job. “That was a very, very difficult switch for me,” she said. Times were tough for the Moores. “The family went to negative cash flow,” Coleman said.

After graduation, they moved to North Carolina, where Coleman started an interracial church called The River. It was there that he also learned about the charismatic movement. At a charismatic conference, Coleman heard an invitation to come up for prayer to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. He waited until the last moment, then went forward, falling to the floor after hands were laid on his head. For 20 minutes, he had “an amazing conversation with God.” When he got up he had decided he would not speak for one week. In that silence, he began to learn to recognize God’s voice, how to distinguish it from the clutter and noise on one hand and the snarling whispers of the enemy on the other. “I wasn’t the same,” he said of the experience.

The Moores returned to Michigan in 2005 so Coleman could become the pastor of another Reformed church near Grand Rapids. He worked there for five years, until it became clear to him that his charismatic spirituality and the church’s more traditional approach would not meld. He was in his mid-50s and unemployed or, as he puts it, “waiting on my next call.”

He figured that a new call would come from a church, and began searching for Reformed

The Custom Cottage is located in a massive old factory that has housed furniture manufacturers since it opened in 1903, when Grand Rapids had an international reputation as “The Furniture City.”
congregations of a more charismatic bent, but no calls came. Then one day in 2012, Mary asked Coleman if he would build a headboard for their bed, since she couldn’t find the kind she wanted anywhere. “I’d been looking on Craigslist because we didn’t have a lot of money, trying to find a headboard in the shabby-chic style,” she said.

Coleman finished the headboard and posted a picture on Craigslist, figuring that if Mary wanted one, perhaps others would too. A few orders came in and he began filling them in his garage. The fledgling company soon graduated to a four-car garage, then to a 3,000-square-foot space in Rockford, a Grand Rapids suburb. The orders kept rolling in: for beds, for nightstands, desks and entertainment centers—so many orders that he hired seven people.

The business was growing, but Coleman saw it as little more than a stopover. “I’m still thinking, Okay, Lord, when is that church going to open up that you want me to pastor?” That perspective changed on a Sunday in April, 2013. Ryan Walkes, a guest speaker at his church, described the Bridge Street House of Prayer, the inner-city ministry he had founded in Grand Rapids. Walkes made a passing comment about how the people they were meeting needed jobs. For Coleman, it was a revelation. He saw the purpose of his life laid out before him—to provide jobs for people in the inner city. “The Spirit moved, and moved my heart,” he said.

Walking out of church that day, Coleman was asking the Lord what he should do next, when God spoke to him in no uncertain terms: Do nothing for two weeks.

For a man of action, it was a hard message. “I’m not good at waiting,” Coleman said. But he waited anyway. Two weeks later, early on a Sunday morning, he woke up suddenly. God began to speak to him again: Get up now. I am going to give you a vision. Write this down.

“I had a real vision,” he explained, “to move to the city of Grand Rapids, close to where people who were struggling to find jobs would live, near a bus route.” God told him that he would provide the space,
that he would provide the people, and that Coleman shouldn’t worry about either. He gave Coleman a phrase which summed up his mission: “Building lives through building furniture.”

Coleman began to tell his employees and friends that he would be moving the business to inner-city Grand Rapids. “Everybody I was working with thought I was crazy.”

Then, on a Sunday morning in June, 2013, he woke up and heard God speak to him once more. He had the sense that he should drive to a building he had seen on the Internet, an old factory. There, he saw a sign advertising space for lease. He called the number and arranged a tour. “It had no door, only a fire escape entrance. No docks,” Coleman recalled, but the price was “unbelievably low.” He signed a lease and The Custom Cottage opened in the old factory in August, 2013. His first two employees at the new location came from the Bridge Street House of Prayer ministry.

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I first heard about The Custom Cottage in the fall of 2013. Their Craigslist ads showed pictures of dining room tables made from old barnwood, their long planks revealing the curved swirl marks of ancient, steam-driven circular saws. A few weeks later I had to go to Grand Rapids for a conference and managed to stop by the shop. I met Coleman, then realized it would be worth returning with my wife Gretchen. When we came back in January, we both were excited about building a table, but reality set in as we realized we would need to save up the money. It took two years of stashing money from Christmas checks and selling less important possessions, but by Christmas, 2015, we had met our goal.

On a snowy Martin Luther King Day, we brought our whole family to the shop to place our order. We were met by Ross Graveling, Coleman’s right-hand man. Ross helped us finalize our plans for a table that would be seven feet long by 44 inches wide, with two leaves that would take it out to nine feet. It would be made from long maple planks with knots and striations of dark color.

Seven weeks later I returned with Jeremy Osterhouse to carry our table home. As we dusted it off and removed the top for transport, Coleman told us more about his approach to the business. The mission of “Building lives through building furniture” shapes many of the practical details of how the business operates, leading Coleman to some interesting innovations.

One is complete flexibility of scheduling. Each builder has a set of keys and can work any time he wants, 24-7. “If they need to be home to take care of the kids, if they need to go along on a field trip or be there for a sporting event or a play, that’s fine. I encourage that,” Coleman said. This means that Coleman never has to hassle or punish a worker who’s late if a car breaks down or if he needs to leave to see his parole officer.

Another innovation has to do with pay structure. He pays each of the builders minimum wage—$8.50 an hour in Michigan—and then pays them by the piece on top of that. He said a trained builder should be able to make between $15 and $20 per hour. Some of the workers do earn that much, and those who don’t are offered further training.

He also set up the business so that he rarely will have cause to fire someone.
Coleman said there are only two reasons he would consider letting someone go. First, if a builder, after getting trained, demonstrates no aptitude for furniture making. Second, if he simply never shows up, holding a place that could go to someone else. This means that no one will be fired for drinking on the job, cussing out the boss, messing up orders or getting tossed in jail for a couple of nights. “I can handle getting cussed out,” Coleman said.

The shop employs 10 people, and Coleman said turnover is very low. Business comes in with help from Craigslist, Facebook and word of mouth, but Coleman said that God ultimately runs their marketing department, and Coleman relies on God to bring in enough orders to keep everyone busy. “There have been times when we’ve had lots of orders to fill,” he said. There have been slow times, too, but “we’ve never had a time when there has not been at least one order on the desk to fill.”

Impressed, I told others in the community about Coleman and the shop, including Nick Holovaty, who is responsible for the Mission program office, and my boss Paul DeCelles, who has overall responsibility for our mission work. We had been talking about how we could employ our neighbors in our mission locations, and we wondered whether Coleman’s model might work. Paul suggested I return to the shop and write this story.

I returned in March, hoping to meet some of the builders and learn about their experience. I arrived in time for lunch, which the builders eat together each day. They share stories from their lives in an atmosphere of brotherhood that reminded me of a men’s group. A time of prayer follows lunch, with one of the workers reading a Bible passage and a short reflection.

Elijah Mosley is a 37-year-old African American, a husband and father of seven children. He’s the most experienced builder and the natural leader on the shop floor. He said he’s built every kind of piece the shop produces, and he has a fierce pride in his work, borne out in the pictures he takes and posts to Facebook. “To build something you have to see it in your head,” he told me. “It’s like a big puzzle. That’s the whole joy of what I do. You are able to take something and make it your own. It’s a craft.” He told me the story of a woman who saved her money for 15 months to buy a bedroom set, then came in and paid for the whole thing in cash, rather than putting

* * *

He saw the purpose of his life laid out before him—to provide jobs for people in the inner city.
down a deposit like everybody else. Eli saw the joy she had when she finally received her furniture and would not forget it.

Eli also had a warning for me. He wanted me to know that not all the employees had troubled pasts, and even those who did should not be seen in light of those pasts. They are builders now, and the mission of the shop belongs not just to Coleman but to them. “I feel it’s us, the workers, that keep the company driving, keep Coleman on his toes,” he said.

Another builder, Mark Petersen, 59, is clean-shaven in jeans and a gray t-shirt. Like Eli, he also posts pictures of his work to Facebook, and he talked proudly of a barnwood table with a trestle base painted light green that is featured in The Custom Cottage ads. When I met him, Mark had been working at the shop for a little more than a year. He said that two years earlier, he’d spent time in jail on a drunk driving charge. He’d been out of jail for only a month when he learned that he had stage three cancer in his neck. After chemotherapy and radiation treatments, it took him more than a year to recover, then he went to work at The Custom Cottage.

“I live by myself,” he said. “I don’t have a family and because of my past my financial situation isn’t the greatest, so it’s nice to be able to make extra money when I need to. It also keeps me out of trouble. You live by yourself, you get bored at home, you get tired, and a lot of times it’s like, man I need to get out of here, I need to go do something, and you end up doing something you might regret, go to the bar, but instead you just go to your job, make some money and keep yourself out of trouble. It’s been a very good plan for me.

“I’m still on parole right now. I’ve got about six months left. There’s just no way I want to take any chances. Getting into the system is extremely easy. Getting out is extremely hard.”

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Two weeks later, I was back in the shop. I had asked Coleman if he would take me through the same training he gives the
other builders. I brought along Rus Lyons, one of our missionaries, who wanted to see if something like this shop might work in Evansville. Coleman said we would begin like all the builders do, by making a bed. He got us started by sketching a plan for the bed, a job the builder himself would normally do. (Planning is one of the hardest skills to master, and Coleman wants each builder to learn how to do it.) Next, he explained the shop’s system of building, which involves putting wood together in layers. By the end of the first day, with Coleman standing close by to answer questions, I had finished putting together the headboard, while Rus had begun working on a set of storage cubbies that would slide under the bed. The next day I built the end rail and began the long, slow process of sanding everything.

While working on the end rail, I made my first big mistake. I was using a power hand planer to smooth the top of a leg so the three layers would be flush. The planer hit a ridge and kicked back, sending a crack through one of the leg boards. I thought I had ruined it, but Coleman said we would glue it. He told me that a lot of builders expect to be punished when they make mistakes, and they’re surprised when they aren’t. Coleman sees this in light of the gospel. “How many chances does Jesus give us? Two, three, four, in essence an infinite number of chances. So how many chances are we going to give each other?”

When the bed was finally ready to assemble, Mark came by and gave it a shake. It had quite a wobble, and my heart wobbled along with it. I figured a legion of rookie mistakes had added up, creating a permanent instability. But the story wasn’t over. It turned out we hadn’t secured the brackets properly. Once they were locked down, we shook the bed again and it hardly moved. Mark gave me a fist bump.

The thrill of building is hard to describe. It felt like a runner’s high and stayed with me for some time. I could only imagine how good it would feel to someone who had spent years in prison or living on the streets—a thrill that no drug or crime could induce and that no Boss or Government Agent could ever take away.

Before Rus and I headed home after our training, Coleman said, “I tell you what, you guys sure qualified to be builders.” We would have made the cut, and that only added to the thrill. We were pumped!
more. After praying and talking with Nick, Paul and the other missionaries, he accepted an offer from Coleman to apprentice at the shop. In May he moved to Grand Rapids for six months to a year. Coleman will teach Rus every aspect of the business: building the pieces, painting and staining them, fixing mistakes, marketing and advertising, sales, accounting, etc. Rus's intention is to open a furniture shop in Evansville on The Custom Cottage model, and Coleman has agreed to help him get it started.

Coleman told me that talking with Rus has expanded his vision. He very much likes the idea that a furniture shop in Evansville would not only be transforming individual lives, but be part of "something bigger that God is doing"—the transformation of an entire neighborhood and community.

In one of our later conversations, I asked Coleman about the name of the business. He told me it was inspired by a parable in C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*:

"Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense.

"What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building a quite different house than the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself."

The parable is a fitting metaphor for Coleman's life—a real estate developer turned pastor who fully expected to build a church of a certain predictable type. But it turned out God wanted to build something else, a dusty palace, a place where each day he would go to work alongside his friends, Coleman, Eli, Mark and the others, building lives and building furniture.

The building continues. Rus said, "When I was driving from Evansville up to Grand Rapids for one of my first visits, I saw one of my neighbors, who right now is homeless, has a son and spends more time with his son than quite a number of folks who have houses and jobs. I was filled with this searing love that the Father has for him, and overcome with this desire to help him provide for himself so that he could provide for his son. And I knew one hundred percent that the Lord was calling me to start a business where he could do that."
This fruit pizza is easy, festive and very adaptable. Trish Olson (Mission, Indianapolis) has made her crowd-pleasing recipe for many parties and large gatherings in the community.
She says the recipe was inspired by one from her mom, Anne Brewer (South Bend). Once, when Trish and her siblings were young, Anne made a fruit pizza for her family to celebrate the resurrection after an Easter vigil service. The kids insisted on making it a tradition for every Easter vigil, so it stuck.

Anne made her fruit pizza with a sugar cookie crust and sprinkled it with watered-down jam. Trish adds chocolate. She makes a chocolate chip cookie crust and drizzles chocolate on top. The dessert can be made on a round pizza pan or a rectangular baking sheet. Trish adapts a Martha Stewart cookie recipe, but you can use your own favorite recipe or a premade cookie dough.

Tip: If not serving immediately, avoid fruits that brown over time. Berries, kiwis and mandarin oranges all work well.

FRUIT PIZZA
MAKES ONE PIZZA

Chocolate chip cookie crust

Ingredients
2 ¼ cups all purpose flour
½ teaspoon baking soda
1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter at room temperature
½ cup granulated sugar
1 cup packed light brown sugar
1 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
2 large eggs
2 cups chocolate chips

Topping

Ingredients
1 8-ounce package of cream cheese, softened
½ cup powdered sugar
1 tablespoon vanilla
Sliced fruit of choice
¼ cup milk or dark chocolate (optional)

Directions
1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a small bowl, whisk together the flour and baking soda; set aside. Combine the butter with both sugars; beat with mixer on medium speed until light and fluffy. Reduce speed to low; add the salt, vanilla and eggs. Beat until well mixed, about 1 minute. Add flour mixture; mix until just combined. Stir in the chocolate chips.

2. Spread cookie dough onto an ungreased cookie sheet or pizza pan, about ½ inch thick, and bake 10 to 15 minutes, making sure not to overbake. It should be a soft crust.

3. When crust is completely cooled, mix cream cheese, powdered sugar and vanilla well and spread on top.

4. Decorate the pizza with sliced fruit, creating your own design.

5. For chocolate garnish, place ¼ cup chocolate in microwave. Heat for 30 seconds, then stir. If not completely melted, heat for additional 15 seconds and stir. Repeat until melted, then drizzle on top of pizza.

W hy is Abraham walking? Why is he moving his entire clan from Aram, a city located near Haran, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, 500 miles to the northeast in modern Turkey? Why has this wandering Aramean moved into the new and dangerous region of Canaan?

The reason is this: Abraham has had an encounter with God.

He has a profound intuition that the Lord God has asked him to do something . . . something that is both surprising and strange: pull up stakes, cut ties, leave home and move to Canaan. God also made him a remarkable promise: “I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great” (Gen. 12:2).

Then, the Lord God added, “Your descendants are going to be numerous, and through you I am going to bless every nation on earth.”

This moment is a turning point in the history of the world. God has made a decision. He has acted. He is going to rescue the fallen, messed-up, painful world, which has resulted from free human choices to do evil, and he’s going to do it through this man, Abraham, and his family.

God could, of course, set things right through an exercise of sheer power. He could overwhelm human freedom, get the job done. But God does not want automatic, programmed-in, forced obedience from the men and women he has created. God wants their free response. So, how does God radically transform the world, from the roots up, without destroying freedom?

God chooses to do it this way: Start small and take time.

Video and audio versions of the full talk, as well as of the rest of the series on the Story of the Bible, are available on the online file library. To access them, go to https://peopleofpraise.org/file-library/76/ and log in. If you need help logging in you can email directory@peopleofpraise.org.
Ken Larsen
By Jack Weiland

Ken was a renaissance man. His life was filled with high achievements focusing on his faithfulness to God, his family, his profession and the community life he loved from the beginning. He and Sheren married in 1961 and they raised five children. After finishing dental school, he served with the Army in Germany for four years and then practiced dentistry at West Point for a year. His practice had its ups and downs, but he fought on. Over time, he became our unofficial community dentist, and he was a pioneer in preventive dentistry.

He did a lot of research on mental health, which led him to cofound Mental Health & Happiness, a William Glasser-inspired organization that promotes good life choices. He developed a blog and pretty much taught himself videography so he could write, develop and film short programs. His presentations now on the Internet cover issues related to mental health and happiness and Christian life.

Not everybody knew the depth of character and talents Ken possessed and exercised. Back in the early eighties, the leaders in my area met weekly in his dental office basement. He always arrived early to make certain the coffee was on, the temperature was comfortable and there were goodies to be had—a man just as faithful in little things as he was in big things. He truly was a servant. The things he and Sheren initiated in the community and in their family will continue to bear fruit until the Lord comes in glory.

Gene Schmelzer
By Ruth Schmelzer

Our brother Gene possessed a deep love of God’s word and a great enthusiasm for discussing scriptural issues and research. Michael recalls discussing theological issues with him as they toured St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome!

Gene grew up the third of seven children on a dairy farm near Decorah, Iowa. After six years in the Navy as an electronics technician, his longing to know the ways of the Lord Jesus more deeply led him to Faith Baptist Bible College. Afterward he returned to the Navy for four years as a chaplain’s assistant. While stationed in Israel, he was baptized in the Jordan River and renewed his commitment to Jesus.

After military service, Gene joined family members in Appleton and immediately attended a Life in the Spirit Seminar, where he met Karen Stepniak. They were married June 26, 1993, and in 1998 they adopted twin boys, Jacob and Matthew, who graduated from high school this year. Gene loved spending time with his family camping, traveling and teaching his sons practical skills around the home.

He was always an eager helper, capable of working with all sorts of tools. His attitude was always “I can do that!” and he appreciated and emulated the simple life of the Amish whom he had known in rural Iowa and northern Wisconsin.

His generous spirit and his quiet service were much appreciated by neighbors, by fellow members of Christ the Rock Community Church and by everyone throughout the branch. Our good and faithful brother searched diligently to know Jesus, and he has gone to meet the Lord whom his heart loved.
Births:
John Damien and Clare Agape, born June 9 to John and Colleen Bowar (Mission division, Allendale).
Charlotte Zelie, born June 11 to Marcus and Rebekah Nayo (South Bend).
Xavier Fox, born June 16 to Chris and Rose Marquis (Servant Branch).
Magdalene Nancy Susan, born June 20 to Josh and Mary Claire Canef (South Bend).
Monica Grace, born July 9 to John and Eileen Timler (New Orleans).
Beckett Graham Joseph, born July 13 to Rebecca (northern Virginia) and Patrick Rooney.
James Patrick, born July 26 to Joe and Mary Ridenour (northern Virginia).
Timothy Christopher, born August 18 to Micah and Rachel Olson (Servant Branch).

Weddings:
Congratulations to Peter Kracklauer and Sarah Klose (both Appleton) who were married July 8 at St. Pius X Catholic Church in Appleton.

Graduations:
Congratulations to these recent graduates:
Mike Busekrus (northern Virginia), M.Ed. in administrative leadership, Marymount University.
John Meehan (New Orleans), M.A. in teaching, University of New Orleans.

Work and Achievements:
CJ Newburn (Rockford) has a new job at NVidia, planning future products for high-performance computing.

Congratulations to Melanie Decker (South Bend), who retired from 35 years teaching in Catholic elementary schools in Mishawaka, IN. Melanie was one of the winners of the Jean Ellen Brown Award, presented to “individuals who give generously of their time, talent and treasure to serve in the Mishawaka area Catholic parishes and schools.”

Liz Slattery (New Orleans) is the author of the new book Mom’s Psalms, a collection of short poem-prayers reflecting on many aspects of a mother’s life.

Louis Grams (Servant Branch) has authored a new book, The Healing Stories of Jesus: Signs of the New Creation, part of the Keys to the Bible series published by The Word Among Us.

John Meehan (New Orleans) has a new job teaching at St. Mary’s Academy in New Orleans.

Deaths:
We’ve received word of the deaths of these members of the People of Praise. We pray for their families and friends in this time of loss. Tribute articles will follow in an upcoming issue.

John Hupp (South Bend) died July 26, 2016.
Mary Asselin (northern Virginia) died July 28, 2016.

Executive Office Announcements:
Hannah Canef was transferred from the branch in Colorado Springs to the branch in South Bend, effective June 14, 2016.
John and Kim DeCelles were transferred from the South Bend branch to the Colorado Springs branch, effective August 24, 2016.
Orest and Susan Holovaty were transferred from the South Bend branch to the Mission program office in Evansville, effective August 1, 2016.
Terry and Kathryn Kelly are being transferred from the South Bend branch to the Mission program office new start in Indianapolis, effective upon their arrival there.
Dave and Maggie Temeles were transferred from the branch in northern Virginia to the branch in South Bend, effective August 20, 2016.

Colin Whelpley was transferred from the Mission program office in Evansville to the South Bend branch campus division, effective August 19, 2016.

Buffalo:
John Gehl has been appointed to a three-year term of office as area coordinator, effective March 10, 2016.

Colorado Springs:
Keith and Cathy Houin were released from the covenant of the People of Praise on August 22, 2016.

Servant Branch:
Diane Stevenson was released from the covenant of the People of Praise on June 22, 2016.
Kevin Daly was released from the covenant of the People of Praise on July 10, 2016.

South Bend:
Phillip and Monique DeLee were released from the covenant of the People of Praise on July 6, 2016.
“If you seek him, he will be found by you” (1 Chron. 28:9).