



the ENCOURAGER magazine

January 2026



PRISONERS of HOPE

C O L U M B I A C O M M U N I T Y C H U R C H



ON THE COVER

The warm and exuberant smile of CCC church member Keisha Brown melted away the chill during her photoshoot on March 19, 2006.

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If you declare with your mouth,
"Jesus is Lord," and believe in your
heart that God
raised him from the dead,

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A WORD FROM **THE WORD** PASTOR REGINALD L. ELLIOTT

Return to your
stronghold,

0 prisoners
of hope;

today I declare
that I will
restore
to you
double.

Zechariah 9:12, ESV



PRISONERS OF HOPE

This strange phrase – “prisoners of hope” was used by the prophet Zechariah to describe the people of God during a time of great difficulty in their lives. Zechariah’s message contains some of the most inspiring proclamations ever given to a people who needed it, and it still speaks encouragement to believers today.

One of the most difficult things for man to do is to believe God is actually going to do what He has said, particularly when what we see does not in our minds reflect what we think He has promised. To believe God’s promises is to believe them all. God has promised two major things we must believe: 1) sin will be punished, and 2) blessings await those who obey Him. Israel lived as though God would ignore their continual disobedience. Man can accept the promise of blessing but tends to ignore the promise that sin will be judged.


Because of sin, Israel had gone into Babylonian captivity. After God freed them, they went home to rebuild the Temple and the city. Their task seemed so hard that they became discouraged so God sent

...live in
HOPE
believing
that
GOD
will do
what
He
promised.

Pastor Reginald L. Elliott

Zechariah to remind them of the glorious future that awaited them, their Messiah was coming and blessings awaited. God sent Zechariah to give them hope that things would get better. Their task was to focus on God’s promises, in essence to become bound to hope, become prisoners of hope.

Being prisoners of hope would keep them strong in faith expecting God to bless them

abundantly. In difficult times one can either lose hope and throw away their faith or live in hope believing that God will do what He promised. Don’t let your fears hold you in bondage, hope in God – become a prisoner of hope, knowing God is able and will do what He has promised. Become a prisoner of hope. 

WOMEN'S HEALTH

CAROLYN FLEMING, RN

As Spring has sprung, as Mother's Day is right around the corner, and as National Women's Health Awareness Month approaches, I thought it appropriate to focus on women staying healthy. Women often take care of everyone else but put their own health on the back burner. When reviewing airplane safety on a plane, the flight attendant instructs you to put your own oxygen mask on 1st before helping someone else. Here are some tips to help you stay healthy:

Annual Examination

A regular check up with your primary care physician to monitor blood pressure, glucose (sugar) and cholesterol levels is important, as well

as reducing stress, eating healthily and exercising.

Bone Density Test

Osteoporosis (thinning of the bones) is common in women. Taking vitamin D3 and calcium can help increase bone strength, along with weight bearing exercises. Without prior issues, bone density testing can be done after age 65.

Cardiovascular

Heart disease and stroke are number one killers in women, and stroke disproportionately affects African Americans. Reduce risks through diet, exercise and regular physical exams which will include blood pressure monitoring, EKGs, etc.



Colonoscopy

Stools that are bloody, black, and tarry should be checked out right away. Initial colonoscopy exams should occur around the age of 45-50.

Mammograms and Self-Breast Examinations

Examine your own breasts monthly. If you feel something odd, notify your health care provider. Annual mammograms should begin around age 40, unless a family history of cancer might make it necessary to begin at an earlier age.

Exercise

It is not necessary to invest in expensive equipment or gym memberships if you don't have the financial resources. You can get moving by dancing, walking, and yoga. Exercise is great for both the mind and body.

Reduce Stress

Reducing stress helps with overall well-being. It is important to factor in stress relief daily. Find out



what that is for you, but if stress becomes too much to bear, seek professional advice.

Diet

Healthy eating is key. A good start is reducing foods high in fat, and increasing vegetables. Also drink plenty of water.

You know yourself better than anyone else. If you have a concern, seek medical advice. Always be an advocate for yourself.

Stay Healthy! Stay Safe! 

PRISONERS OF HOPELESSNESS

-vs-

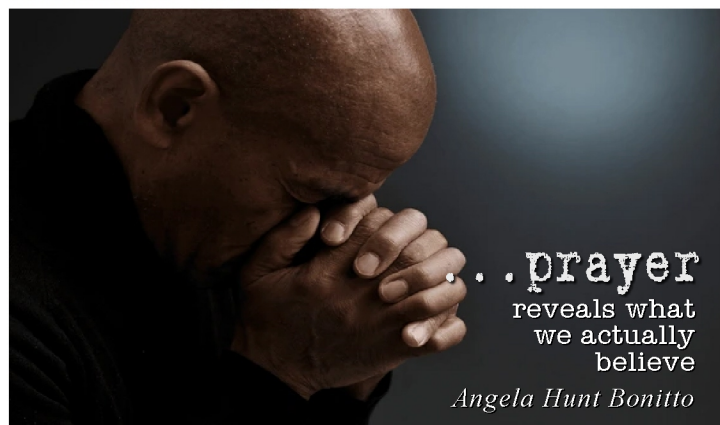
PRISONERS OF HOPE

*I*n Zechariah 9:12, the phrase “prisoners of hope” caused me to pause. At first glance, “prisoners” and “hope” felt like contradictions—but after more research I found them to be powerfully aligned. I also found it wasn’t about wishful thinking or striving for a better outcome; it was about being bound to a confident expectation that God will move. I wanted to shout for joy! To know in prayer, we don’t chase hope—we are held by it. We become anchored, even confined, by the assurance that Heaven is responding, that God is working behind the scenes, and that what He has spoken will come to pass.

But let’s be honest, many believers today are living in the opposite condition: prisoners of hopelessness. Not bound by chains... but bound by disappointment, delay, and silent conclusions about what God will no longer do. We see it all the time. For example, the woman who has been praying for her child for years. She still shows up to church. She still says the right things. But deep down, she’s stopped expecting anything to change because she hasn’t seen any glimpses of change. She’s already accepted that her child is not going to be saved or

LET US PRAY

ANGELA HUNT BONITTO

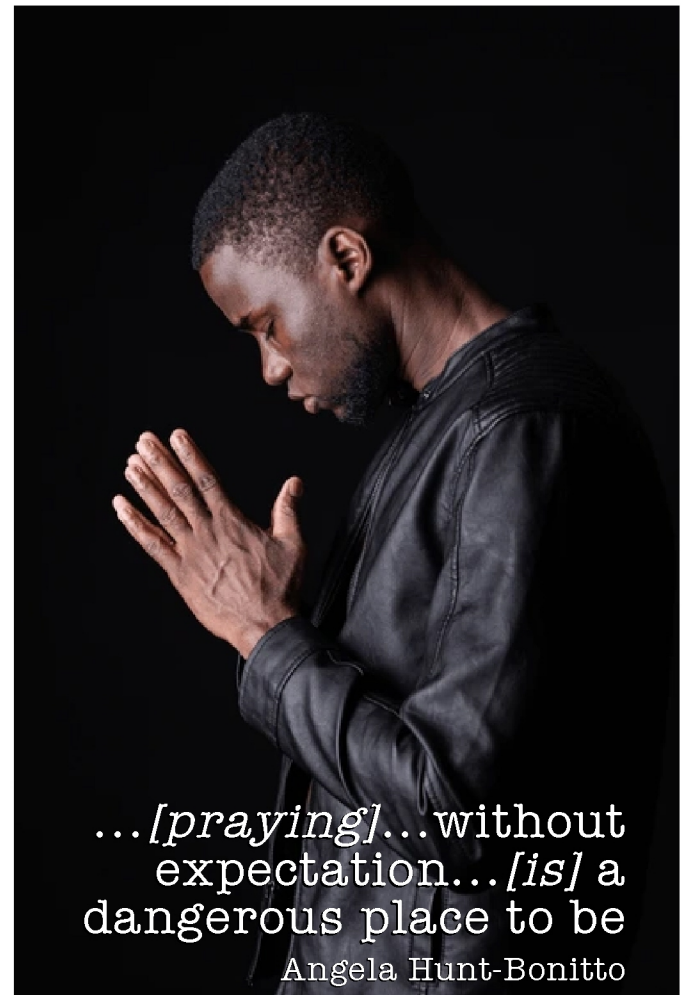


delivered. What about the entrepreneur who felt called by God to build something meaningful? After setbacks and closed doors, they’re still working—but no longer believing. They are working in their own vain. That’s what hopelessness does. It doesn’t always make you quit. It makes you continue without expectation. And that’s a dangerous place to be.

Now, let’s look at the life of Joseph, the dream interpreter, the son of Jacob, the brother who was thrown in the pit by his brothers. Joseph had received a promise from God, that he would be elevated to a position of leadership to save his family—but his life didn’t match the promise. He was betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused, and thrown into prison. If anyone had a reason to become a prisoner of hopelessness, it was him. But Joseph made a different decision. He kept showing up. He kept serving. He kept interpreting dreams while in prison. Basically, he kept living like God was still involved in his life, even when there was no visible evidence.


I believe that is what separates a prisoner of hope from a prisoner of hopelessness. A prisoner of hopelessness lets circumstances redefine what they believe about God. A prisoner of hope refuses to let what they see cancel what God said. And this is where it fits into our lives in a real way – **through prayer**, because prayer reveals what we actually believe. A prisoner of hopelessness may still pray, but it sounds different. They say, “Lord, **if** You can...”, or “Lord, **maybe** someday...”. But a prisoner of hope prays with expectation praying, “God, **I know** You are able. **I’m just waiting** on Your timing.” Saints, prayer is not just communication—it is evidence of expectation. And when expectation dies, prayer becomes routine instead of powerful. A great example of this is in Matthew 6:7 (NIV) Jesus says, “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.”

Joseph’s story reminds us that God is still working, even in seasons that feel silent. What looked like a prison was actually preparation. What felt like delay was divine positioning. At the end of his journey Joseph said that God meant it for good. That’s the perspective of someone who refused to become a prisoner of hopelessness. So now the question becomes: What is holding you? You will



be a prisoner of something. Either your pain...your perspective...or your promise. God’s invitation is clear in Zechariah 9:12: return to Him. Return to prayer. Return to expectation.

Let Us Pray...

*Father, we break every agreement with hopelessness. Where delay has discouraged us, where pain has confused us, where silence has weakened us—restore our expectation. Teach us to pray again with faith, to believe again with confidence, and to live as prisoners of hope. In Jesus’ name, **Amen!*** 

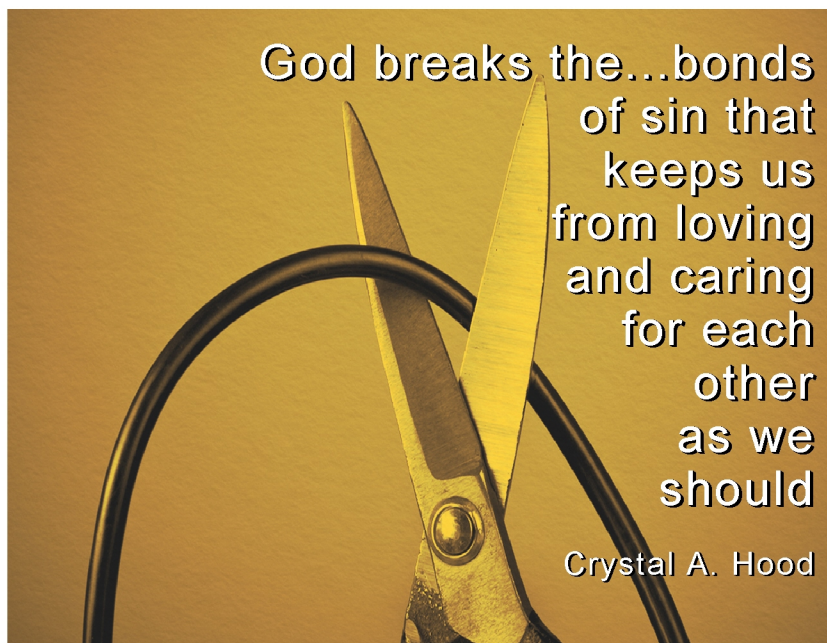
The Lord Cuts THE CORDS THAT BIND

FAMILY FOCUS
CRYSTAL A. HOOD

The challenge of living in the last days is that we live in them. Jesus described many signs to let us know that the time of His return is near; one of them was about families. In Mark 13:12-13 (BSB) Jesus says, “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rise against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of My name, but the one who perseveres to the end will be saved.”

When I speak with other brothers and sisters in Christ, this scripture often runs through my mind. Today, it is common for me to speak to someone and have them relay a situation in which division is occurring within their family and in the families of those that they know. Siblings who were once very close no longer speak to each other, marriages are in disarray, and children and parents appear to be at bitter, irreconcilable odds. Although family conflict has been a part of life from the beginning of sin (Genesis 3), the intense magnitude in which spirits of confusion, deceit, lies, hate, and deception overflow is monumental, and those who are God’s children are targets exponentially.

Like one unravels a piece of fabric, it is our



enemy's goal to pull apart strand by strand what God has created, ordained, and blessed. God created a family structure, and He outlines in the Scriptures the love, care, and support we should give to one another. I am currently reading the book of Psalms. When the attacks violently strike at our heart and it seems almost impossible to stand, the thoughts I shared weighed heavily on my mind. Then God said as I read Psalm 129:1-4 (BSB), “Many a time they have persecuted me from my youth— let Israel now declare—many a time they have persecuted me from my youth, but they have not prevailed against me. The plowmen plowed over my back; they made their furrows long. The LORD is righteous; He has cut me from the cords of the wicked.”



According to Biblehub.com commentary, this Psalm belongs to the "Songs of Ascents" (Psalms 120–134), sung by pilgrims traveling up to Jerusalem for the annual feasts (Deuteronomy 16:16). The repeated line “from my youth” suggests the nation's early years in Egypt (Exodus 1:11-14) and later oppressions by Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, and others. Each wave of hostility only underscored God's faithful protection (Jeremiah 30:11).

“Verses 1–2 – Lifelong Oppression, Lifelong Preservation ‘The nation still stands because the LORD stood with her.’” God also stands with us, although it appears that our family is in tatters. He stands with us as we stand with Him.

“Verse 3 – Deep Wounds, Not Defeat ‘The plowmen plowed over my back; they made their furrows long’ (v. 3). The picture is of a farmer cutting deep, straight lines in a field. Israel's sufferings left scars as real as furrows [the hurt and wounds of family cut deeper than any other], yet those wounds never determined the last word.”

“Verse 4 – The LORD Cuts the Cords ‘The LORD is righteous; He has cut me from the cords

of the wicked’ (v. 4). God's upright character guarantees

intervention. Like snapping tether ropes, He frees His people from what bound them.” Through Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, God breaks the chains and bonds of sin that keep us from loving and caring for each other as we should.

I love how God shows His continual protective power through His chosen people, the Israelites. Just as He demonstrates His care to the Israelites through their various forms of oppression, He does the same for us. The family structure is created and ordained by God. Although we are living in the last days and it seems as though things are falling apart and hatred abounds, God sees our oppression, wounds and chains, and He honors His Word.

“Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him” (Proverbs 30:5, KJV).

“So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11, KJV).



KEISHA *Brown*
GETTING TO KNOW
ASSISTANT PASTOR LINWOOD CHILDS



Most people today will toil and fight to retain their freedom. Yet men and women fill prisons and correctional institutions the world over who have paid a high price for insisting upon retaining a certain kind and level of personal freedom. Prisons are known for taking away almost all of a person's liberties and severely restricting the prisoner's choices. But what if God is a special warden and "hope" serves as His guard, with all of His prisoners choosing his "incarceration" instead of the world's so-called freedom. This quarter we look at a journey of a young Christian, Keisha Brown, and how she learned to give up personal freedom to joyfully become one of God's Prisoners of Hope.

Linwood Childs (LC): I am told that you recently had a milestone in your life.

Keisha Brown (KB): Yes! My milestone was graduating college. Oh, my goodness, yea!

LC: Congratulations!

KB: Yes, now I can breathe.

LC: I think many graduates could almost write a dissertation on just their experience of graduating...lol.

KB: Oh, my goodness yes. You know this is good timing for this theme, "Prisoners of Hope", I had jury duty this week.

LC: Interesting.

KB: Oh, yes. I wasn't called for a case. I thought that was hilarious in terms of the timing. One of the court's officers, maybe a bailiff, spoke to the group and told us the following, which actually changed our perspective when it comes to serving. She said life can change in an instant for any of us. But what really matters is that *you* may need somebody to support you one day. The idea of sitting in the courtroom hearing a case, going through a long process is not fun, but the fact of the matter is by showing up you're serving for somebody that you don't know; you're helping in ways that you don't even imagine. She said your presence is important and just showing up can make a huge difference in someone's life. It changed everyone's perspective and atmosphere in the room. I originally didn't want to be called, and I eventually wasn't called but after she said that I really didn't mind serving. Who is to say that one day I may need this kind of help.

LC: When I think about the theme of maintaining hope, the idea of resilience comes to mind. In your
(Continued on Page 11)

No matter
what
happens
you
TRUST
GOD
in the
process

Keisha Brownl





thoughts what does resilience or persevering hope mean to you?

KB: Resilience means to me, pushing through no matter what and not giving up. It means maintaining grit when all odds are against you. And also, it's character development.

LC: Can you think of times which you were transformed by a setback, but you later learned it was actually an opportunity to develop character?

KB: Oh, oh! Buckle up your seatbelt! Graduating college!

LC & KB: (Laughing!)

KB: My final year. Well, it all took place...let's put it like this: It all took place once upon a time at a lovely Bowie State University in the fall of 2024 into spring 2025. I found myself very busy with extracurricular activities and film projects. So pretty much I was helping everybody else to the point that I forgot about me! So, I had to get myself in line and pretty much in a situation so I could potentially graduate in the following semester in the spring of 2025.

LC: Okay, great.

KB: Over the 2024 winter break I needed to finish work and earn a grade to finish coursework in which I had taken incompletes. I met with some professors and the Chairman of the department. We agreed that if I got my work done at a specified time, January 17th, that I would be able to pass the classes in which I took incompletes, and then I could take the remaining courses I needed to graduate that spring of 2025. So, as it happened, I did the work but the professors, being professors, felt as though the work that I submitted was not good enough. But I kind of felt as though they were abusing their position and power. Let me explain. I realize that everything ultimately has a spiritual element to it, but we don't wrestle against flesh and blood. Some of the professors were just not Christian believers, not at all.

LC: (As Keisha spoke, I was rather curious at where she was going but had no idea what she was about to tell me.)

KB: There is one professor that I had to deal with. I felt in my spirit that she was an actual witch. And another professor was a playwright, but he entertained necromancy (the practice of speaking to spirits of the dead, primarily to foretell the future by gaining hidden knowledge or manipulating life) and things of that nature in his teaching. There were a lot of things. He actually had an assignment for



our class to attend his play that he held at a graveyard, right above the graves.

LC: What did you do?!

KB: I didn't go! Something told me not to go. Even if my schedule could allow me to, I was not going.

LC: Excellent! What was this class?

KB: This was for a playwriting class. This professor throughout his whole course kept emphasizing this and worse. He kept focusing on the supernatural, haunting, LBTQ+ plays and the like. We were not expecting this. This professor was hard to avoid since the Acting-Directing department was very small. What was three professors, was now down to two, and the rest are adjuncts.

I did my part, I did the work, but they thought it was not up to their expectations. I was told I would not be graduating this spring. That took a toll on me. Mentally I was ready to get out! Now granted some of it was self-inflicted because I could have said no to the extracurricular activities I was in. I was helping others with their projects, when I should have been pouring back into me and getting myself better prepared. Now I was at a point in my

life where I was running on empty. It was bad! So eventually I ended up taking two classes in the spring while also appealing those grades. I again met with the professors, but they were giving me a bunch of pushbacks, including the head of the department. But he was more nonchalant with the whole situation because he didn't want to get involved. So I felt as though there was some politics going on behind that. It was a lot of me fighting to get that grade appealed, and fighting for my graduation in the spring. But it didn't happen, I appealed to the higher-ups above them. But I let fear creep in. I dealt with so many pushbacks it made my faith waver. I'm still growing in my faith; it was like a breaking point for me. I was saying, "God are you there?" and, "I know you're real, I know you are good; but how do I know for myself that I'm even worthy". So that all came into play with my efforts to graduate and dealing with people who clearly don't know the Lord and did not even care for the Lord. This all had me in a dark space in my mind; I was questioning if I could get through it! What's the point? But fortunately, I just kept pushing and fighting. I had a community helping me and I really do appreciate it. I had half the church helping me out, my mom, Ms. Kim Bolden, and all the saints. Because every time I showed up on Sunday it was like a breath of fresh air. And in my spirit, I was saying thank you so much!

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It was a real battle. At times I almost got so mad at things! My faith was being tested, and I had to still show up at class and school even when I didn't want to show up.

LC: You had to complete material and redo the project?

KB: Nope. I could have but I chose not to repeat the stuff. Now they failed me right before the semester deadline. They tried to make me take it all again, but I refused because I did my part. I saw that they decided just not to do their part, intentionally, in an attempt to "punish" me. I appreciate how Columbia Community church helps set my tone for the week. Also, I had those on

campus who were helping me and encouraging me through the midst of all that. I ended up taking two classes that I needed but not with those professors. But I felt in my spirit to talk to one more professor. I talked to the dance professor.

Let me backtrack. When I first came into Bowie I started as a dance major and eventually, I thought to switch over to acting – directing. And how I thank God for having various assets under my belt. So, I felt in my spirit to ask my previous dance professor, "Hey, can I switch back to dance?" I was still a bit apprehensive thinking about it, but I felt that I needed to go where I'm welcomed, not tolerated. So, I said to myself, "You know I'm just going to take this leap of faith." Now all this

God is watching not
what they've done
to you but how
you respond
to them

Keisha Brown





happens right before the end of the semester!

LC: You were really running out of time. What happened?

KB: I spoke with the dance professor, and she said, “Yes, you’re welcome to come back.” So we discussed everything and pulled up my records. I felt like God works in *mysterious* ways. Because I feel like it wasn’t for me to be in acting – directing. So, she pulled up everything I had taken, looked at all my classes, even the classes that I had not done so well in, and she managed to make it work for me! She asked me directly, “How badly do you want to get out?” And I told her, “Really bad!!!” I told her my time is up! It’s time for me to get out of this cocoon and be a butterfly and not a moth!

LC: You sounded really determined.

KB: She looked over everything and said, “You’ll be able to leave in the fall.” I said okaaayyy. Awesome. I’ll be able to leave in the fall of 2025!

LC: What month was it that she told you this good news?

KB: She told me this in April, with classes ending in May. Everything got situated and I made that

move back to a dance major. On top of all this, it was just so crazy. Let me tell you, earlier in that same semester, I did a show, a production while I was still in the Acting – Directing department. It was a requirement for graduation. Now these were the same professors in the Acting-Directing department that was giving me grief in front of whom I had to audition. It is required for all acting – directing majors to audition for *every* show that was being presented, this was for their portfolio and graduation requirements. Well, I auditioned for the show, and they selected me for the lead role.

LC: You have got to be kidding!

KB: I now believe that God used everything that happened in that semester, even that lead role, to really push me toward Himself. The role was about a young lady who was trying not to go to hell. The story’s theme was about reincarnation and purgatory. It was a bit strange, the lead character, well she died, several times and went to “purgatory” all trying not to go to hell. She was a terrible person to a lot of people and often justified and rationalized how badly she treated them. This lead character kept saying things that was just speaking death over herself.

LC: (Keisha kept mentioning that she was praying
(Continued on Page 15)



for herself while she was trying to act out the role)

KB: This character is the exact opposite of mine. And I was asking myself repeatedly, “How is it that I was selected to play this role?” This play gets even crazier. This play was written by one of my classmates. They usually have competitions among the acting students to write a good play. Several are submitted and whichever one stands out that would be the play for the semester. How was I selected to be the lead of a character that is the exact opposite of me?!

In that semester my faith was being tested; this role and the situation I was going through, caused me to question my perception of myself a bit more than I wanted. I had a bit of an identity crisis of sorts. I’m playing this role and this character is nothing like me. Now, I’m still trying to find my own identity in Christ. I appreciate people telling me who I am in Christ which is nice. But at the end of the day, I have to make it my job to see this for myself – to make Christ my own. There’s nothing wrong with people passing on the message of the Lord. It is important for me to have my own relationship with God so that no matter what happens, I am solid. In that semester I dealt with identity, doubt and unbelief. I’m asking myself am I really going to make it? I’m talking to God asking Him if this is really happening? Is this character development? I feel like it was!

LC: So, you’re telling me from April to the end of December you went through all of this?

KB: Yep! Yes, I went through all of that. I went from my classmates who were happy to see me to people switching up. It threw me a bit because I didn’t know when the switch happened. It was the same folks who were willing to help me all of a sudden kind of turned their back on me.

LC: Did this happen because you simply switched majors?

KB: Not that, but because I was willing to advocate for myself and I went to higher-ups.

LC: Did they expect you to just accept it all?

KB: No. I was not going to just twiddle my thumbs. This is the first time that I actually truly advocated for myself. This made me advocate for myself, establish greater boundaries and just not to be fearful. No matter what happens you trust God in the process. Everything that happened from last year until now has been a lot.

During the spring of 2025, I had to learn my lines, in front of the professor who failed me. One professor was the producer of the play. He was not in my corner. I confess I was struggling, but I made it through. I kept going. I was once good with this professor but all of a sudden there was a sudden switch. I’m praying, “Lord he’s a thorn; I am really being poked here!”



LC: All right. What steps do you take to build your resilience?

KB: I prayed. But when I say I prayed, I talked *to* God, like He's really there. I actually call out to Him, "God, you saw what I saw, I need You to help me right now because I feel like I am about to lose it!" Look, be honest and call out to Him. But be honest. Because there are many times I almost acted out of character. I had to really call out to God and rely on my Christian community, my church and my peers. I learned that the thing that you're going through, its spiritual! Your breakthrough is on the other side.

LC: Give me the steps, the one, two, three...

KB: Okay, I talked to my mom, definitely. She was the number that I called, my mom and Ms. Kim – the both of them. Then I go pray to God, because seriously, to keep it authentic we don't always go to God right away. But often to the person nearest us. But they pointed me back to God. They said go pray to God. After I talked to God, I kept showing up. I just kept showing up, even when people try to keep me from showing up. This was not going to stop me. Why? Because I'm fighting the good fight of faith.

LC: By showing up, what are you showing those who are giving you a hard time?

KB: By my showing up I am showing them Jesus, and

kept being myself. You never know when someone is going through something. And you never know when they're at their wits end. Despite how someone else has made you feel you have to make sure you keep yourself in check and aligned with Christ. If something were to happen and you stepped out of character with your walk in the Lord, and representing Christ, you can do some real damage to somebody who is at their breaking point. God is watching not what they've done to you but how you respond to them. It is easier said than done. The short answer is keep showing up and showing them Jesus.

LC: God is doing so much, for us and others around us. He is doing more than we realize.

KB: This may sound crazy, but I am glad they did not let me graduate in the spring. Because in the fall semester, I was able to tell my story! To put on my cap and gown, I was able to show how God moved in my journey at Bowie State. I was able to tell my story and not let someone else determine my story. Although I did not have much help from the leadership of the Acting department; my peers in the Acting department eventually showed up on the day of production.

LC: (Keisha had to produce a full production for graduation for the fall of 2025. She wrote, produced and performed to get it done in time.)

KB: I had certain people in mind I wanted in my production but throughout the summer months they were not able to show up for me, as I had shown up for
(Continued on Page 17)



them. We had people coming and going the closer we got to production date.

All I can say is, God provided. My two best friends Zara and Erica came and stood by my side. The months leading up to production many of my peers did not show up as I had expected. But again, God provided. It went from the three of us to over 14 people who showed up to help the production along. There was so much work, with people dropping out and others who just didn't want to show up. All of this as I was close to my graduation, my breakthrough.

But I *had* to be faithful, I had to cast my net, by asking for help. I was originally scared to ask for help myself, I was willing to help them, but I was scared to receive help. But I cast my net. This whole experience was a stretching; it caused me to stretch my faith. Oh, my goodness I wined up getting sick a couple of weeks before the production. I don't know where I got sick. It was the week of Thanksgiving and realizing it was crunch-time, but I had to keep moving. I used the help that the Lord provided and we kept pushing. Through it all I was able to graduate at the end of the fall semester.

The most beautiful thing of all was how God showed me how He is so intentional. Before I switched my major and all that was going on, I got the green light to do the dance ministry for the church. And then when all the stuff was happening at school when I changed my major, then the academics went smoothly. Oh, was this

where I was supposed to be all along? And I began to see the dots being connected, it was beautiful. I was able to incorporate liturgical dancing into my final project, as the final piece. It was amazing. People at the performance said that it should have been taped.

LC: So, you had enough credits for a different degree with just adding one more semester and the production?

KB: Yes. I recall stating in 2024 that in 2025 I was going to graduate, I was getting out no later than spring of 2025. When things changed, I was devastated. But in the midst of that I still got through to the other side. I was able to get out on time, not my time but God's time. Because I had a beautiful testimony out of all of that, I saw how God moved; I didn't allow the opposition to change my character. I showed the love of God. Someone who was new on campus helped me out with the production. She later said this as she was holding back tears, "Keisha I'm going to miss you." She told me that I had made her experience at Bowie State the best experience. For when she first arrived there, she hated it. People would give her a hard time; they were not trying to get to know her, or include her. And despite everything she said I gave her a chance and made her feel welcomed and wanted. Being able to show God's love conquers everything!

LC: What a great testimony!

KB: And to hear that really touched me and moved me.



I was saying okay God, I get it now. It's real and it is so memorable now. I went through a lot, and it was a great journey for me. I can actually sit here and say hey, my Christmas gift was getting my degree. My Christmas gift was seeing how God moved for me. God made Himself more real to me. And it made me to be more intentional, because God is intentional. He is intentional with His plans. I had a plan, but He said He had another plan otherwise.

A scripture that I definitely want to share that was my theme for my capstone: St. John Chapter 14, verse one. "Do not let your heart be troubled. You believe in God believe also in me, My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." That was my capstone, "Do not let your heart be troubled." Now mind you I had a plan. I came across this pamphlet from one of our women's prayer meetings. I was just randomly cleaning my room, with St John 14, on it, and there it was. I said oh, that's awesome!

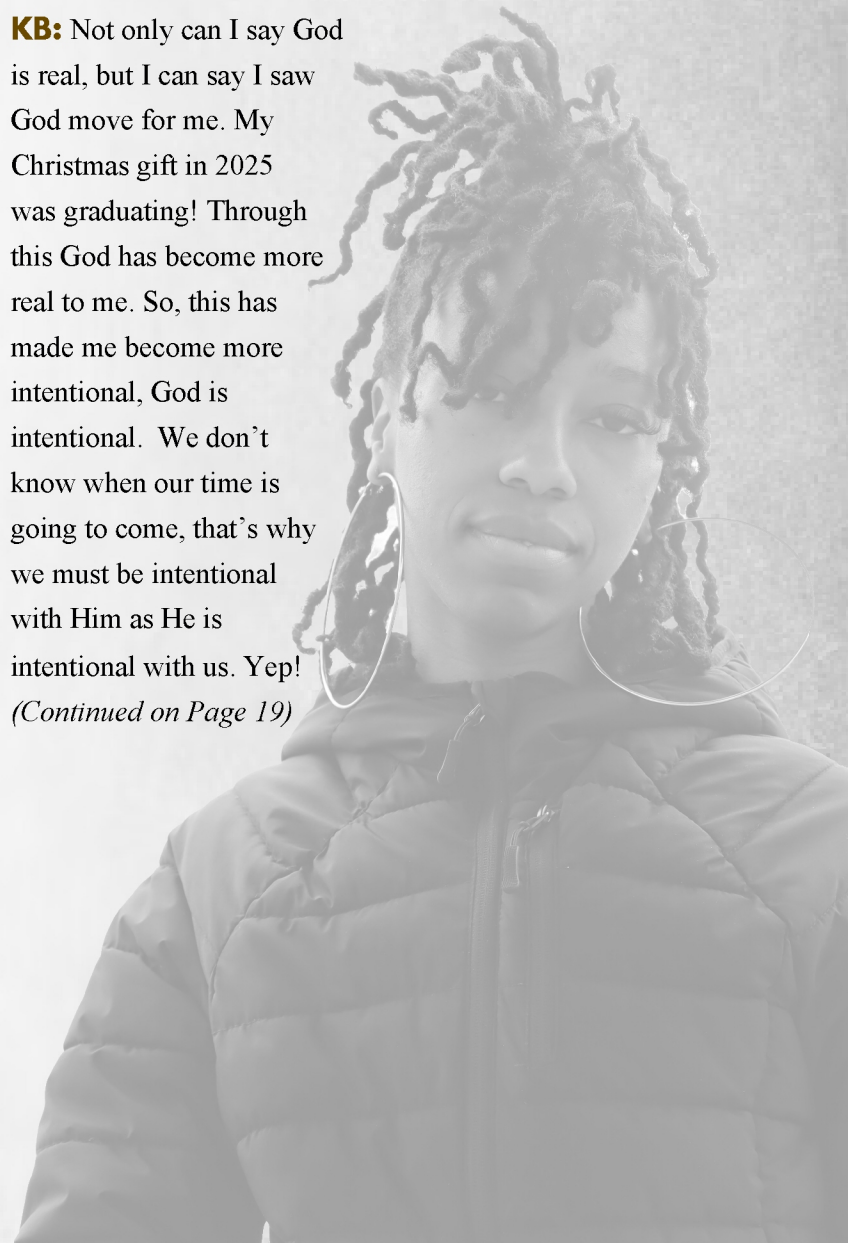
LC: There is nothing like coming through a challenge and learning that God is with you while you're going through.

KB: Yes. I wanted to give up, so many times. I wanted to drop out. At some point I wanted to drop out. I questioned, "What is the point?" But I couldn't do that.

The key is to show the love of Jesus no matter how people treat you. You may think they will not remember but they will always remember. Who's to say that they will see Jesus through you?

LC: Oh, yes God is very real.

KB: Not only can I say God is real, but I can say I saw God move for me. My Christmas gift in 2025 was graduating! Through this God has become more real to me. So, this has made me become more intentional, God is intentional. We don't know when our time is going to come, that's why we must be intentional with Him as He is intentional with us. Yep!
(Continued on Page 19)





LC: But God has a wonderful plan for us!

It is hard to imagine how great a change God can do in us. Even with the most difficult pain.

KB: I wholeheartedly agree, but the confidence and trust in God and trusting God's plan it is for our good. When you operate out of your own sense of merit, you're saying God I don't need Your hand in this, unaware that we're pushing God's hand away. If you're operating under God's grace, you're saying God I am not pushing Your hand away, take my hand, and hold my hand because I don't know where You're taking me but I'm going to trust You with that. God will actually open the doors for you, that benefit you, but also give Him the glory and win souls for the Kingdom. So, we can plan all that we want to, but at the end of the day His plan will override our plan. So, you may as well buckle up and go for the ride!

LC: I think about how saints have no idea of what God wants to do because they're looking at difficulty thinking that the difficulty means God has left them. And that is not at all the truth, God is literally taking the difficulty to reveal Himself, but we have to stay with the Lord.

KB: Not only that but when we are dealing with difficulty God is trying to mold us into His image, He is trying to prune away some of the things that are in us that doesn't model after His Son's heart. This means when we go through, it involves a lot of character development. When we say God, I want to be more like You, I want to have more faith, then He is going to

allow us to go through certain things to test our faith, to see if we are going to rely on Him. If we say yes to Him, if we believe that He is our Lord and Savior, that He died on the cross for us, nine times out of ten we are going to go through some things which will actually mold us to be more like Him.

LC: Suppose you had gotten a favorable grade from those professors back in 2024. Knowing that God can do anything, yet realizing the path that God just took you through; God orchestrated such a shift and brought you into a better place.

KB: Yes, he actually *took me* through that. God knew that I wanted a better and deeper relationship with Him. My heart was definitely crying out to Him. God actually allowed certain things in my plan not to work out so He could show me who He is. Ultimately, so that I could know God for myself, instead of having someone else tell me who He is because of their *personal* relationship with Him. It is pointless to know God through somebody else – just relying on their relationship, you can steward your own. That's what God really wants, for us to know Him. We make time for what we want to; why can't we simply make time for God? We might as well do it and not take it lightly. We don't know when our time is going to come; therefore we need to be intentional with Him.

LC: Is there a song that helped you through these times?

KB: Oh, my goodness. The song that definitely helped me was, actually two songs, "Encourage Yourself" by Donald Lawrence by the Tri-City singers. Also, Kierra



Sheard's song is called "Rain". They helped a lot. I can say that I enjoy singing even though I am not much of a singer. I enjoy singing at home in front of my cats! Even though they look at me strangely and ask why are you singing so loud? I remember singing on the church choir when I was a teenager.

LC: Those early days are so valuable for later on in life.

KB: Things like that help shape your core foundation. You go through things and you do think back to those songs you used to sing. And you just start singing them and they get you through.


LC: I was so proud of you when you refused to go to the gravesite.

KB: It was for a grade too! A lot of those professors are into that and other stuff like New Age. Also, when they're in power, they can decide whether to pass or fail you, if they feel as though you're being defiant. They are the ones who say they are open to "all things." Yet, they are not open to all things. And that professor that had the assignment at the gravesite said in class out of his mouth that he didn't "rock" with Jesus. He also tried to get a student to say something against Jesus for a good grade. And I'm so glad that my classmate didn't say anything, because it's not even worth it. So go ahead dock my grade teacher, because you're not gonna knock me down!

LC: Oh, yes Lord! Standing for Jesus is more about what you do and then let the words follow.

KB: People watch the totality of what you're doing. If you can walk the walk, then you can talk the talk. So, I was afraid to be a doer because everybody wants to be "liked" and "accepted" and be included. But it all stems down to knowing who you are in Christ, which goes back to your identity and your foundation. If you know who you are in the Lord, whether they accept you or not, that's not going to move you. You need to recognize that you are on a mission, to do our heavenly Father's will. You can't let anyone stop you. If they are not receptive of you, you just keep on moving. Know you have planted a seed and when their time comes they're going to remember what you told them. Somebody else may come along and water that seed. Leave it to God to provide the increase. The thing is don't be discouraged if they seem not to be receptive at that time because they are not ready. God knows when a person is ready. People can come to the church as much as they want to, but there's a point in their life when they are ready and then they will come to Christ.

LC: Wrap up, I am grateful that we are able to talk today. You know what the Lord has done for you, but I'm excited for what we don't know. We don't yet know all the things that God is going to build on this because you are a Prisoner of Hope!

KB: Yes, definitely yes. 


Human beings – Christian, Atheist, Agnostic, or otherwise – would be hard-pressed to identify times or instances when becoming a prisoner would be considered a positive development. Throughout the Bible (and history), people from one nation have captured, imprisoned, or enslaved the people of other nations... almost always to the dismay and

captives is almost entirely negative, because from a secular point of view, there is very little positive about captivity. As followers of Christ, however, we know that the pervasive worldview has little to no bearing on God’s plans. God is sovereign in all of His ways, so much so that He can turn us into voluntary and triumphant ‘prisoners.’ The Bible



tells us that “... faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1, KJV). When we look into what that Scripture is really telling us, we can see that our faith is built up by our hopes. When we talk about our faith – or more specifically the strength thereof – we are talking about our belief

detriment of those being led into captivity. The very nature of captivity is an antithesis to the freedom of will that God bestowed upon mankind at the moment of our creation. Academically, the word ‘prisoner’ applies to anyone whose liberty is restrained by another. Those of us with even the smallest understanding of the judicial and penal systems in most countries are also fully aware that this state of being is almost always involuntary. In short, the pervasive worldview of prisoners and

that God has the power to fulfill our hopes. The Bible also tells us that all good things come from God (James 1:17), and for the most part, people tend to hope for good things (at least as far as it concerns themselves). As prisoners of hope, rather than relying upon ourselves, we have decided to let God take control of our hopes and dreams. Our hope is not in the things of the world, but in the unchallengeable power of God. 



CHRISTIAN COMEDY CORNER

CHRISTELLA JACKSON

REMEMBER

"A merry heart doeth good like a medicine"

Proverbs 17:22 (KJV)

How do we know God likes coffee?

Because the Bible says, He brews.



Why wasn't Boaz a nice man before he got married?

He was Ruth-less.

Need a boat?

I Noah guy.

What type of car would Jesus drive?

A Christler.

How do we know God loves baseball?

Well he started his book "In the big-inning"

Directions

A little boy was waiting for his mother to come out of the grocery store.

As he waited, he was approached by a man who asked, "Son, can you tell me where the post office is?"

The little boy replied, "Sure, just go straight down the street a couple of blocks and turn to your right."


The man thanked the boy kindly and said, "I'm the new pastor in town, and I'd like for you to come to church on Sunday. I'll show you how to get to Heaven."

The little boy replied with a chuckle, "Awww, come on; you don't even know the way to the post office!"



Pastors in Germany

Q. What do they call pastors in Germany?

A. German Shepherds. 

WHO DO I CALL

WINNIE LaFRANCE-CHAMBERS



When you're having a bad day and need someone to talk to, who comes to mind? For some of us, it's a family member, childhood friend, or even a stranger on the internet. People are more accessible than ever. Direct messages (DMs) on social media apps, text messages on our cell phones, alerts on watches, and the phone ringing in our cars, disrupting the ride are just a few of the very common ways we try to reach someone in the heat of the moment, and because of the way society is now, there is pressure to make yourself available. If no one is able to connect with you, it can lead to an emotional spiral.

It's natural to be concerned about what is going on in your life and in the world as a whole. We've all experienced our share of trials, and sometimes it feels like the chaos will never end. No matter the circumstance, we are never alone. Even when we can't get human engagement. It's important to remember God is in control and lean into communication with Him.

Luke 12:25-31 NIV

Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? "Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor

was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

Psalm 46:1 KJV


God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Psalm 54:4 NIV

Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me.

Hebrews 13:6 ESV

The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?

Come near to God, and He will come near to you. Taking time to pray and read God's Word makes a difference. It can take time before it becomes a habit, but do your best to seek peace, guidance, and comfort in the Lord. The Bible is full of instructions to help your journey through life. Take a deep breath and embrace God's goodness. 



LIBRARY HOURS
Every 1st & 3rd Sunday
after service until 1pm

Location:
At rear exit of
the Old Sanctuary

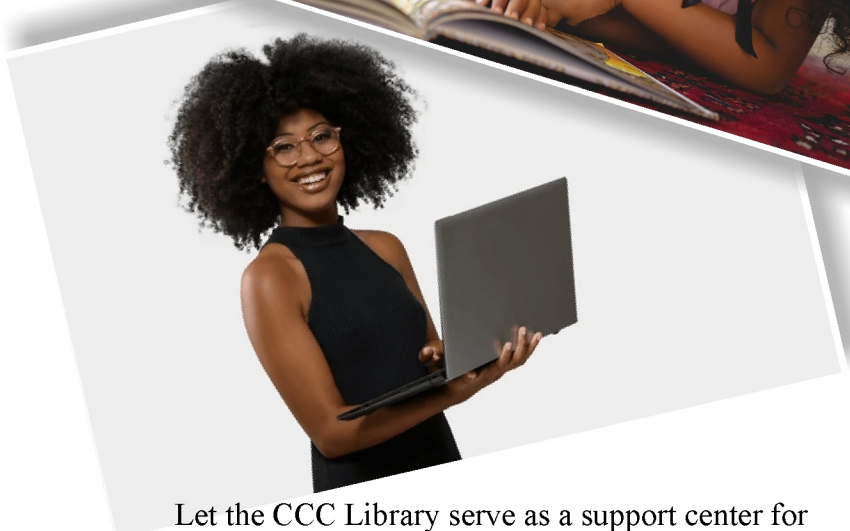
THE LIBRARIAN'S DESK
DESIREE COLLINS

**"REIMAGINING"
THE CCC LIBRARY**

**"A wise man will hear, and will
increase learning."**
Proverbs 1:5a, KJV

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ! I am happy
to announce that the CCC Library is undergoing a
transition. Some of the exciting changes include:

- ONLINE LIBRARY TRAINING**
- LIBRARY INTERNET CAFE**
- AUDIO RESOURCES**
- GAMIFIED READING PROGRAMS**
- MAGAZINES, CDs**
- VIDEO TUTORIALS**
- INTERACTIVE DISPLAYS**
- CCC BOOK AUTHORS / WRITERS SERIES**
- GAMES AND BOOKS**



Let the CCC Library serve as a support center for
your church ministry, activity or program!

**COMING SOON...Stay Tuned for
Updates!**

GOD CARES

FEATURED **ARTICLE**
KIM ODOMS-BOLDEN

While driving two very small bugs that looked like mosquitoes with shallow, clear wings attached themselves to my windshield at my eye level. My first thought was, no need to spray water on the windshield and use my windshield wipers to remove them.

Having nothing to hold onto and grasp, they will not be able to withstand the wind of the highway. Surely, they will not last long.

Remarkably, they lasted for miles. Seeing how something so small and frail withstood winds of more than 60 miles an hour was incredible. I was reminded of the scripture, Luke 12:22-24, 27-28 (NIV) states, “Then Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn;

yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! ... Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the

field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you – you of little faith!”




Looking at all the things going on, not just in the U.S., but in the world. It can be very frustrating, cause anxiety, and diminish the hope of a well-centered person. It can also be challenging for a Christian, in word and actions. As the world embarks on the what may transpire into World War III, suicide rates occurring every eleven minutes (2025), church attendance lower than 21% (in-person lower), high unemployment rates,

as described in the Bible, as tribulation. But God! Titus 2:13 (NIV), “while we wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,” we can “Rejoice greatly, Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your King comes to you... He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit. Return to your fortress, *[return to the LORD, your first love]* you prisoners *[those feeling*

trapped in this thing called life on earth]. Return to your fortress, you prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you” (Zechariah 9:9-12, NIV).

The next time you see a mosquito or small bug remember how much more God cares for you, your needs and your protection.

“Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God” (Psalm 146:5, NIV). 



MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

MICHAEL R. SPRY

P

raise the Lord and Greetings to Our Valued Readers! I am honored for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you as we end the first quarter of 2026. On behalf of The Encourager Magazine and staff, we thank Pastors Reginald and Juanita Elliott for their support of this ministry. It's amazing to witness the faithfulness of ordinary people whose combined effort create such an extraordinary collection of inspirations that the Lord uses to comfort and encourage you with each printed issue. This year marks the 14th year since the inaugural issue printed in January 2012. Thank you to the dedicated and anointed writers and contributors. Special thanks to Bro. Rodney Samuel for posting each of the issues on the CCC website, and to Janet (my beautiful and supportive wife) for never complaining of the time required each quarter to prepare for the production and distribution of each issue. Thank you to our readers, without whom this ministry would not exist. All praise and gratitude to the Lord Jesus Christ for inspiring the pens of each staff writer to be His hand extended to impart wisdom, love, guidance, and encouragement through the written word... to God be the glory!

Three months into the New Year gives us all reason to align our lives as "Prisoners of Hope". Pastor Elliott often reminds us that "things are not going to better" as we navigate life, but we can rejoice because the Lord has promised to always take care of His own, that He neither sleeps nor slumbers, that His eyes are on the righteous, and that He will

always provide for His own. In fact, the Bible teaches us to "...think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you" (1 Peter 4:12, KJV). Consequently, we should be strengthened and encouraged by that scripture because God also tells us in His Word that we are not ignorant of Satan's devices. As believers, God has given each of us the mind of Christ. So, as prisoners of hope, whenever trouble comes, we can stand by the power of Jesus Christ against that ole devil and he will flee! We can be like the Apostle Paul and profess that we, too, "...reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

Let me encourage you, our valued readers, that as we yield not to temptation, keep our hands in God's hand, trust and obey we can "Count it all joy, my brothers *[and sisters]*, when you meet trials of various kinds..." (James 1:2a, ESV) knowing we are fully equipped to meet the joys and challenges of life as we journey through 2026 because "...we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

In Love & In Christ



ON THE INSIDE COVERS

Inside Front: Longtime CCC member and proud aunt, Lisa Smithson, cuddles with her niece during pre-service fellowship on March 8, 2026

Photography By: Michael R. Spry © 2026

Inside Back: It appears that congregant Ann Malcolm has spiritual influence over her beautiful granddaughters as they reverently partake in corporate prayer during service on March 15, 2026

Photography By: Michael R. Spry © 2026

COLUMBIA COMMUNITY CHURCH

8516 Thomas Williams Way
P.O. Box 2292
Columbia, MD 21045

SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

EVERY SUNDAY:

10:00 AM Church School (All Ages)
11:00 AM Meditation & Prayer
11:15 AM Morning Worship

COMMUNION SERVICE:

1st Sunday of Every Month

EVERY WEDNESDAY:

Noon-Day Prayer 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM
Noon-Day Bible Study 12:00 PM - 01:00 PM
Evening Prayer 07:30 PM - 08:00 PM
Evening Bible Study 08:00 PM - 09:00 PM

1st & 3rd WEDNESDAYS:

Youth Bible Study 07:00 PM - 08:00 PM

GENERAL INFORMATION

CARE & COMFORT MINISTRY

Sis. Linda M. Byrd: 410-313-9673 / Sis. Donna Givhan / 410-997-3276
columbiamdcareandcomfort@gmail.com

CHURCH CONTACTS

Phone: 410-465-7040 / Fax: 410-465-0943
Church Website: www.columbiaccmd.org

CHURCH LIBRARY

Open every 1st & 3rd Sunday after service until 1:00 PM
Library Website: <https://columbiacommunity.library.site>