

# WHY CHURCH?



DISCOVER 5 LIFE-CHANGING  
BENEFITS FOR YOU

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To: \_\_\_\_\_

From: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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WHY  
CHURCH?



*Why Church?*

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**INTRODUCTION**

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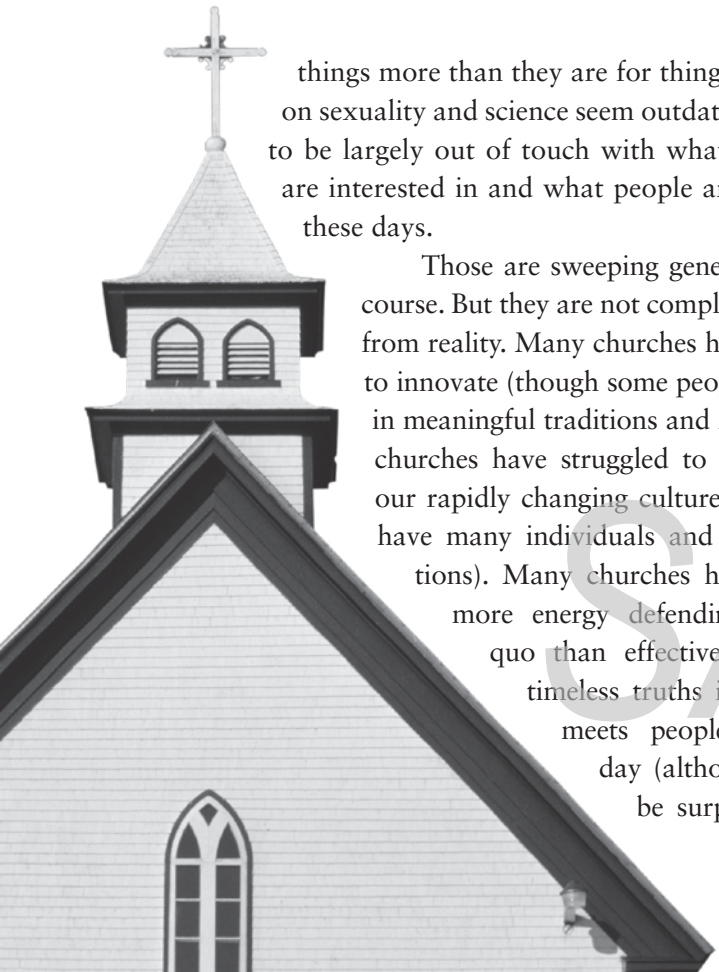
# INTRODUCTION

## WHY CHURCH?

It is a valid question. There are lots of reasons that going to church seems outdated and irrelevant to many people today. To many, churches largely belong to a bygone age of men wearing ties, women in white gloves, and cars with fins. Some churches seem woefully out-of-touch with today's increasingly fast-paced, technology-driven, skeptically minded world. Churches just don't seem to have much to offer in this day and age.

For others, they're just too busy. Or they have a difficult time choosing from so many. Or they had a bad experience in a church.

No wonder so many people have given up on the church. No wonder it seems irrelevant to some. Churches have long given off a distinct aura, and it's not always a positive one. Churches can be stuck in the past. They seem to be against



things more than they are for things. Their views on sexuality and science seem outdated. They seem to be largely out of touch with what most people are interested in and what people are looking for these days.

Those are sweeping generalizations, of course. But they are not completely detached from reality. Many churches have been slow to innovate (though some people find solace in meaningful traditions and rituals). Many churches have struggled to keep up with our rapidly changing culture (but then, so have many individuals and other institutions). Many churches have expended more energy defending the status quo than effectively translating timeless truths in a way that meets people's needs today (although you may be surprised at how

God still manages to do amazing things in people's lives in spite of the church's shortcomings).

Churches today are as varied—and as flawed—as the people who inhabit them. But believe it or not, every one of them has value. Every Christ-centered church has a role to play and a divine purpose to fulfill.

### **WHOSE IDEA WAS IT, ANYWAY?**

From trees and mountains to animals and people, God has created many good things. And one of those good things is the church. During an event that happened two thousand years ago called Pentecost, three thousand people decided to become followers of Jesus, the risen Messiah, and charter members of the first church in history.

A lot has changed since then, of course. But the church that exists today is the same organism God created less than two months after Jesus was crucified, buried, and rose from the dead. In some places, it may seem outdated or irrelevant, but it exists around the world and speaks hundreds of languages. To



some people, it may not seem all that appealing or applicable to life in the twenty-first century, but it was God's idea not only in first-century Jerusalem. The church is crucial to God's hopes and dreams for people to this day.

### WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS BOOK

In this book, we will explore some reasons why going to church can meet the needs of both you and the world around you, including: the need to ask questions and seek answers; the need for an anchor, the center, the point of reference in life; the need to figure some things out, to gain a new perspective from time to time; the need to fit in, to belong, to forge some kind of community; the need to feel alive and more intimately connected with God; the need to learn and grow and feel like I'm going somewhere; the need to feel useful; to pursue what matters; to rest and heal; to express what is inside them; and more.

Those are the things this book will address. Each one is an answer to the question, "Why Church?" Each one is intensely practical, hugely important, and utterly applicable to your life now—today.

# EXPLORE

“After all these years, I am still involved in the process of self-discovery. It's better to explore life and make mistakes than to play it safe.

— Sophia Loren

Entering a church for the first time can be a little intimidating. People are thrusting paper programs into your hand. Everyone is chanting and singing together. Someone shouts “Amen!” while the pastor is preaching.

Only a few minutes in and you’re already making a mental note to dash out as soon as the service ends.

Like most new things, entering a church for the first time can be slightly nerve-wracking, which is why some people choose never to return. They’re not sure how to dress. They’re afraid they might be singled out. They worry they might do something wrong, something embarrassing.

It shouldn’t be that way, of course, but it is. Not necessarily because we are shy or insecure; and not necessarily because churches aren’t sufficiently welcoming or open to first-time visitors. In some cases, it’s just that church is a new experience. It is uncharted territory and only the most adventurous types of people like to enter such places.

But all of us want a safe place where we can ask questions. You sense that you’re on some sort of journey and you wouldn’t mind a little help—and a little company—along the

way. You wouldn’t mind being able to explore things like God, Jesus, and the Bible, without being judged or made to feel stupid. But can you realistically expect that from the church?

## CHURCH IS A PLACE FOR ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE

From the very beginning, the church has been a place for all kinds of people. The church was born on a Sunday in Jerusalem when thousands of Jews from around the world gathered for one of the major yearly festivals (called Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks). That was the occasion God chose to send his Holy Spirit to fill Jesus’ first followers and enable them to speak to people from every part of the known world—“Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians”<sup>1</sup>—in their own languages! God was making it clear that this new thing we now call “the church” was intended to include all kinds of people.

And that was only the beginning. A few years later, Philip—another of Jesus’ earliest followers—went to an area called Samaria to tell people about Jesus. The people of that area were despised by people of Jewish descent so much, in fact, that a sort of apartheid existed between Jews and Samaritans. Yet, when Philip reported to the rest of the church’s leadership in Jerusalem that the Samaritans had reacted warmly to his preaching, “they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. . . . Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, God followed up the Jewish Pentecost with a Samaritan Pentecost because his intention for the church was that it should be a place of acceptance.

But that’s still not all. Just a few years after the Samaritans received God’s Holy Spirit (thus becoming part of the church), the same Peter was invited to the home of a Roman centurion in a town called Caesarea. In those days it was unacceptable for a Jew (which Peter was, ethnically and culturally speaking) to enter the home of a Gentile, let alone that of an officer in the hated armies of Caesar. But just the night before,

God spoke to Peter in a vision, and told him that he was no longer to consider any person “unclean.”

So he went to the home of that centurion, whose name was Cornelius, and began to tell him, his family, and friends about Jesus. Before Peter even finished speaking, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too.”<sup>3</sup> A third “Pentecost” had taken place, making it clear that even people with no Jewish blood or background were to be included in this new thing we now call “the church.”

It was God’s intention from the very beginning for “church” to be a place—a group, a gathering—for all kinds of people. And, though churches have often strayed from that ideal through the centuries, it remains God’s intention today.

### **CHURCH IS A PLACE TO ASK QUESTIONS**

The book of Acts, the fifth book of the New Testament, tells the story of the church’s birth and development in the first

three decades after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. We will continue to explore this fascinating book in the chapters to come.

If you were to survey every chapter in that story, you would find that the church did not just come into existence unquestioned. Many people wanted to understand this new identity, this new group. Some wanted to challenge. Still others wanted to help correct.

Too often, people in the church feel like they have to have all the answers. But that wasn't true in the early church, and it isn't true today. Pastors and teachers in the church may have some answers to some really important questions, but churches that are most like the early church are a great place for people's questions.

Even many characters in the Bible—from the great king David to Jesus' apostle, Thomas—had some hard questions for God and his community because they knew that this was supposed to be a safe place for their doubts and curiosities. A church community can provide a great opportunity to ask sincere, searching questions. It can be a safe place to voice

your doubts, a place for all sorts of questions, just like the early church.

## CHURCH IS A PLACE FOR PEOPLE ON A JOURNEY

The book of Acts relates a fascinating incident in the early days of the church. Philip, one of Jesus' first followers, met an Ethiopian man on a desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza. The traveler, a high official in the court of the Ethiopian queen, had made a pilgrimage to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, and was on the return trip.

Philip, under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, approached the regal chariot and saw a scroll open on the man's lap. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

Without being embarrassed, the official replied, "How can I unless someone explains it to me?" He invited Philip to climb into the chariot and travel with him.

The Ethiopian was on a journey. He hadn't arrived at his destination yet when Philip met him. He was still in the middle of his journey when Philip joined him and traveled with him.

Even after Philip left, the Ethiopian had miles to go, but that was okay.

The church is a place for people on a journey. Identification with a church doesn't mean you have arrived. Involvement in a church doesn't mean you've reached your destination. It is, however, a way to join others who are on similar journeys. Like the Ethiopian, you may have miles and miles to go, but that's okay, because church is a place for people who are on a journey, regardless of how far they've traveled or how far they have yet to go.

### **CHURCH CAN HELP YOU DISCOVER GOD**

After his resurrection, Jesus met his closest followers on a mountain. He told them, "Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."<sup>4</sup>



Soon after that, in the event that gave birth to the church, Jesus sent his Holy Spirit to energize and equip his followers for that task. In the days, weeks, months, and years ahead, the church began to do what Jesus had said, helping people of all kinds discover God and his ways.

On one occasion, two followers of Jesus named Paul and Silas were spreading the news about Jesus in a town called Philippi. They were arrested for disturbing the peace, beaten, and chained in a local prison overnight.

Sometime after midnight, an earthquake shook the prison to its foundation. The chains broke free from the walls, and the cell doors clanged open.

In the silence that followed the tremors, the jailer appeared at the entrance to the prison and saw the outer door lying atop rubble. He peered into the dark and saw no one. Supposing that his prisoners had all escaped, and knowing the penalty for his empty jail would be death, he drew his sword. He turned its point on himself.

“Stop!” Paul’s cried from the darkness. “Don’t hurt yourself. We are all still here.”

Relieved and astonished, he approached Paul and Silas, simply asking, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

They answered, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”

That Philippian jailer discovered the path to God that day. The path to deliverance, to salvation, to new life, and to the kind of power that can open prison doors and set prisoners free.

The jailer didn’t have to go to church to discover those things. He found God through the church, nonetheless, because the church came to him—in the persons of Paul and Silas.

So it is today. Some people discover God and experience salvation through Jesus Christ during a church service. Others, however, discover God while watching a television show. Some do so at their kitchen table or at a concert or festival—even on a street corner or in a jail cell. In all but the rarest of instances, the church still played a part. They may have come to church—or the church may have come to them.

In fact, that very thing may be happening for you right now. However you received this book, God has used the church to get it written, published, and into your hands. He

may be drawing your heart closer and closer to his. If that is the case, then you may want to begin a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ. One way to take that step is to simply pray words like this:

*God, you are so much bigger than I am and you are doing incredible things in this world. I want to be a part of it. But I know that I'm a sinner. So on the basis of what Jesus did on the cross, I ask you to forgive me and cleanse me of my sins.*

*Despite any questions and doubts that I may still have, I want to begin right now to know you and follow Jesus from this day forth. Make me a part of what you're doing, come into my life and give me your Holy Spirit to live in me and help me. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If you prayed that prayer, the Bible says that you are a “new creation.”<sup>5</sup> You have a brand new start. You have access to God by a “new and living way”<sup>6</sup> that Jesus provides for you. And, in many ways, your journey of discovery has only begun.

## CHURCH CAN HELP YOU DISCOVER YOURSELF

One of the reasons the church exists is to help faulty men and women experience Jesus in all his perfection and purity . . . and to help them “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Many refer to this process as “spiritual growth.” It is a learning process. A growing process. A journey of becoming more and more of what God designed you to be.

C. S. Lewis once wrote:

*The more we . . . let [God] take us over, the more truly ourselves we become. . . . [O]ur real selves are all waiting for us in Him. It is no good trying to “be myself” without Him. The more I resist Him and try to live on my own, the more I become dominated by my own heredity and upbringing and surroundings and natural desires. In fact what I so proudly call “Myself” becomes merely the meeting place for trains of events which I never started and which I cannot stop. What I call “My*

*wishes” become merely the desires thrown up by my physical organism or pumped into me by other men’s thoughts or even suggested to me by devils. . . . I am not, in my natural state, nearly so much of a person as I like to believe: most of what I call “me” can be very easily explained. It is when I turn to Christ, when I give myself up to His personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own.*<sup>8</sup>

This process of discovering and becoming who God created you to be is likely to be as unique as you are. No one is exactly like you, and your journey of discovery will involve finding the practices and habits that help you grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. These may include: private and public worship; Bible studies and accountability groups; private prayer practices and corporate prayer gatherings; acts of service to God and others; giving your money, time, and talents to God’s work; spiritual disciplines, such as fasting and meditation; sacraments (e.g., baptism and communion), rituals, and reminders; or ministry and leadership.

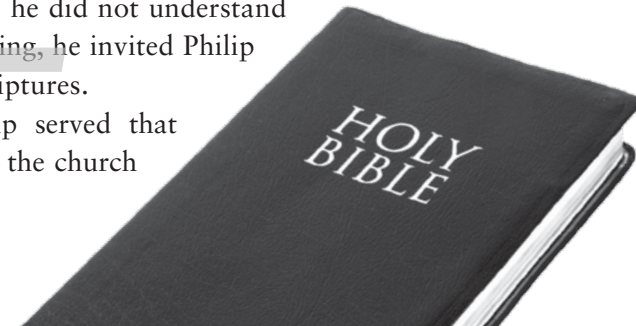
Some of the above will be touched on later in this book. However, all are available in and through the life and work of the church and provide the means for your spiritual growth and development.

## CHURCH CAN HELP YOU DISCOVER GOD’S WORD

When people talk about finding God in nature, they are referring to what theologians call natural revelation. There is another way, however, that is both more specific and more comprehensive: special revelation. This refers to the Bible, the main way God has revealed himself to us in writing.

When Philip met the Ethiopian on the Gaza road, as mentioned earlier, the man in the chariot was reading from the writings of Isaiah, one of the ancient Hebrew prophets. Because he did not understand what he was reading, he invited Philip to explain the Scriptures.

Just as Philip served that Ethiopian official, the church





today can serve you by helping you discover God’s Word, whether it’s in a sermon or a Bible study or even in a conversation with others who share what they’ve been learning from the Bible. As Paul once told his younger coworker Timothy:

*There’s nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.*<sup>9</sup>

In just sixty-four words (in the above paraphrase), Paul mentions six treasures to be discovered in the Bible.

***The Bible can show you the way to salvation.*** As the Bible reveals, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”<sup>10</sup>

***The Bible can show you truth.*** The sixty-six books of the Bible contain poetry and proverbs, songs and hymns, history and philosophy, parables and prophecy, letters and dreams and visions. It takes study and skill to understand and interpret it, but as Paul told Timothy, it is “God-breathed,” truth upon truth from beginning to end.

***The Bible can expose your rebellion.*** When the first humans rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden, the Bible says they “heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.”<sup>11</sup> But God called out to them, and asked a series of questions that helped them confront their sin. His written Word today does what his spoken words did in the Garden: It helps us confront the ways we have rebelled and sinned against God—not to make us feel guilty, but to lead us into forgiveness and freedom.

***The Bible can correct your mistakes.*** When a group of Jesus’ critics were trying to trip him up with a theological question,

he answered, “You are mistaken, because you do not know the Scriptures.”<sup>12</sup> Bible study and Bible knowledge won’t prevent every mistake, but together with sincere submission to God, it can correct many of your mistakes and help you to make fewer in the future.

*The Bible can train you to live God’s way.* A baseball outfielder shags one fly ball after another. A boxer pummels a punching bag. A musician practices scales over and over again. They do these things to train themselves to catch, fight, or play well when the time comes. Similarly, reading and studying the Bible trains the human heart, soul, and mind in “being holy and good before God as long as we live.”<sup>13</sup>

*The Bible can assemble and shape you for the tasks God has for you.* Believe it or not, you possess talents and skills that God wants to use in the church and in the world. Not only that, but if you have experienced new life through faith in Jesus Christ, you have been given a spiritual gift that God wants you to discover, develop, and use to serve him. Reading and studying the Bible is one way to do that.

## CHURCH IS A PLACE TO RECEIVE (AND EXERCISE) ACCEPTANCE AND PATIENCE

A fairly common attitude of people looking at churches from the outside is that they are filled with hypocritical, messed-up people who act like they have all the answers.

Others hold the opposite view. They think that churches are full of perfect people, people without problems, people whose lives bear no resemblance to the gritty, chaotic, reality-based lives the rest of us live.

Whatever your impression of church is, you’re probably right. But it’s likely that there is more to the story than you might expect. Whether a church hosts fifty worshipers every week or sees five thousand in attendance, you can expect to find people fitting both descriptions—and everything in between.

Even in the First Church of Jerusalem there were: spiritually mature people, like Andrew, James, Philip, and Mary<sup>14</sup>; physically-challenged people<sup>15</sup>; former (and current) convicts, like Peter and John<sup>16</sup>; religious professionals (priests and Levites)<sup>17</sup>; hypocrites, like Ananias and Sapphira<sup>18</sup>; widows and

foreigners<sup>19</sup>; problems and problem-solvers<sup>20</sup>; and leaders, managers, and followers.<sup>21</sup>

And that was just one church! These days, even the most homogeneous church is likely to include people of all sorts, making it an ideal place to receive—and exercise—acceptance and patience. For example:

*Everyone in the church has sinned.* The Bible teaches that every human being is in the same boat: “Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard.”<sup>22</sup> It doesn’t matter if we think this doesn’t apply to us, or if we have found forgiveness in Jesus, or if we lead exemplary lives, everyone in every church has sinned. This is why, not only can we find forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ, we should extend that same kind of forgiveness to others.

*Everyone in the church is a hypocrite.* A common criticism of the church is that it is full of hypocrites. A hypocrite is a person who puts on a false appearance of virtue, or a person whose behavior contradicts what he or she claims to believe.

According to that definition, all of us—in the church or outside the church—are hypocritical to one degree or another. That is, none of us lives in a way that is a hundred percent consistent with what we believe or say we believe.

For example, many people believe (and teach our children) that lying is wrong; yet we lie far more than we like to admit, excusing our dishonesty in all sorts of ways (“It won’t hurt anyone,” we may say, or “everyone lies about that”). Or, to choose another example, some of us believe that God exists, and that he hears and answers prayer. But we seldom pray. If we were totally consistent with our beliefs, wouldn’t we pray much more than we do? None of this is intended to excuse our hypocrisy, but simply to acknowledge that none of us lives completely consistent with our beliefs and ideals. One of the reasons struggling people attend church, however, is to enlist in the process of growing to be more like Jesus, who commands and teaches his followers not to be hypocritical.<sup>23</sup>

*Everyone in the church is broken.* From the very start, the church has been a gathering of sick and broken people. The

earliest chapters of church history say, “[People] came from the villages surrounding Jerusalem, throngs of them, bringing the sick and bedeviled. And they all were healed.”<sup>24</sup> Miraculous healings may not seem as common in most churches today, but the church continues to be a gathering of broken people. In almost any church, you will find people who are hurting and sick. You will see people who have endured divorce or depression. People who are dealing with difficult children and aging parents. People who are overwhelmed by worry and fear. People who are trying to cope with dysfunctions and disorders. You will also find people who are being healed, who in their weakness and brokenness are finding God’s strength and experiencing His power in their lives.

These realities open the church to a lot of criticism. Mahatma Gandhi, the “father” of an independent India, is often quoted as saying, “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ.” His words still resonate today, more than a half-century after Gandhi’s death. Every church in the world is likely to include people who are unlike Christ. That is an indictment, certainly; after all, Jesus said, “Students are to be

like their teacher, and slaves are to be like their master.”<sup>25</sup> True followers of Jesus should be growing every day more and more like their Teacher and Master.

But there is another side to that story. Since every church is filled with hypocrites and broken people who are trying to be more consistently like Jesus and are experiencing God’s healing power in various ways, every church is also a fine forum for receiving acceptance and patience.

You may approach church with some reservations. You may be all-too-aware of your own faults and failings. You may fear judgment and rejection. You may imagine that the church is filled with people who have it all together in ways that you do not. But you may be surprised. You may find acceptance where you expected judgment. If so, it shouldn’t be all that surprising, because everyone you meet in the church is dealing with sin, hypocrisy, and brokenness, too.

And there is one more facet to the exploration process. The church not only offers a chance to experience acceptance and patience from others, it offers ample opportunity to extend acceptance and patience to others. You may encounter Hazel,

who sits in the same pew every Sunday, and snores through the pastor's sermons; you may have the chance to flash her a smile when she wakes in time for the last few minutes of the worship service. You may run into Bruce, who seems to have a knack for saying the wrong thing and rubbing people the wrong way, but whose day may be brightened by your willingness to listen. You may meet Seth, who breaks away from his single mom and dashes for the parking lot; you may be just in time to steer him back to safety.

It is strange how people can simultaneously see church as a place for perfect people and a gathering of awful people. In truth, of course, it is neither—or both. The church is a gathering of all kinds of people, a place to ask questions and seek answers, a place where everyone is on a journey of some kind, and a place that provides the opportunity to experience acceptance and patience—and a place to pass those things on to others as well.

# BELONG

“Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name.

— Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo