

Four Faith Stories

by Carol Duerksen

MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- Copies of the Winter 08/09 issue of With Magazine or the articles at the end of this session, one for each student.
- If possible, create a “cozy coffee shop” atmosphere for this session with hot drinks, pillows, couches, areas to sit comfortably and read.
- Journals for students to take home and keep
- Pens
- The following paragraphs on large poster board, one per poster. Place them in four different areas of the room.

I have sinned against my mom and dad, been to parties, lied to many people, contradicted myself, been suicidal. I don't read my Bible the way I should, and I'm not a virgin. Too much of my life I've lived as someone I wasn't, and yet I still carried that title of being a “godly” person. (From “The Pieces of My Faith Puzzle”)

On graduation night I received my first Bible. It sure looked good but I “knew” I was never going to read it. I had my opinions about God, which were agnostic at best, and the upcoming track and field state championships didn't help me stay focused on God either. (From “Turned Around Completely”)

My skin crawled as I watched bugs inching around the moldy boxes in Ann's basement. My first reaction was to judge her for being such a poor housekeeper. Then I remembered what Darren said about how people who don't have enough tend to hoard what they do have and can't let go. (From “Walking with Jesus in a Wal-Mart World”)

My heart beat hard in my chest as I gasped for air. I was running away from thieves in the mountains of El Salvador. They were shooting at us—my family and friends—and I thought maybe I would never see my mother or family again. (From “Hunted and Found”)

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS/CONNECT:

Welcome students and ask them to check out the four posters in the room. They should read the posters and then sit down next to the one that they'd like to read more about.

EXPLORE THE STORIES:

Hand out the stories to the students based on the choice they made. Invite them to help themselves to drinks and find a comfortable place to sit and read. Explain that when they have completed their first story, they should pick up the other three and read them as well.

When everyone has read the four stories, discuss them:

What impressed them? What resonated with them? Any surprises? Anything they disagreed with?

APPLY/RESPOND:

Ask students to choose a journal that they will keep and take home with them. Ask them to write their own story of a "moment of faith" or a series of faith moments. Encourage them to use the journal to continue to communicate with God with thoughts, prayers, feelings, and favorite verses.

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THE PIECES OF MY FAITH PUZZLE

A true story by Nathan Ensz

Let me begin by saying that I should not be writing this article. Yes, my story is intriguing, but personally I don't believe that I'm committed enough as a Christian to have been asked to write about my faith story. I do believe in God and am thrilled I've been asked to write about my faith story and how Daniel Funke has impacted me, but the problem is that I'm inconsistent. I am not a genuine Christian, so don't make me out to be more than I really am.

I have not always been a good person or Christian. There are still parts of me that aren't, and I'm not afraid to say that. I don't always go by what the Bible tells me to do. I have a problem with the Bible at times, because it seems like a book of rules and there are so many other religions out there ... who is to say who's right and who's wrong?

That doesn't mean that I don't fear God—it just confuses me at times. I have sinned against my mom and dad, been to parties, lied to many people, contradicted myself, been suicidal. I don't read my Bible the way I should, and I'm not a virgin. Too much of my life I've lived as someone I wasn't, and yet I still carried that title of being a "godly" person. I hate it because I know sometimes I do things, many things, wrong. It's fake, un-Christian, and gives me a sense of guilt at times knowing that people see this side of me, but still don't know all of the pieces to my puzzle.

This is why it's hard for me to talk about my faith, knowing that there are a lot of other people out there more worthy of it. People like Daniel—you could just have the entire article about Daniel—he's worthy.

My story really didn't begin until my junior year when I started taking a catechism class at church. I knew I believed in God and at some point wanted to be baptized. To me it seemed like you just took a class and then got baptized. It wasn't good enough for me. I wanted more than just the class; I needed another sign or something to tell me or show me that I was ready to be baptized. That's where Daniel came in. Daniel came to the United States my sophomore year. We knew each other a little bit, but not that much. It wasn't until later that year, and then later when he came back to visit, that he and I really hit it off and I further discovered my faith and how important God is to me.

It really hit hard last summer. We were going to San Antonio, Texas, for our youth trip. Daniel was home; I was excited and couldn't wait to leave. While on our trip, he and I talked a lot about church, God, being baptized, and how to be a good Christian. A couple of nights, we stayed up in the library and looked through books and the Bible. We had a lot of similar views, and that helped me express some true feelings about God and being a Christian, especially since I'm always around Mennonites and don't have the same views on certain things.

We continued to talk throughout the whole trip and decided we wanted to be baptized before Daniel went home to Germany. So one evening we pulled our youth pastor, Doug, into a back corner of the library and asked him. He was shocked that we asked him, but very honored at the same time. We also didn't want this to be some ordinary baptism. We wanted it to be special. So we decided to have it done in a pond of one of our church members outside of Goessel.

Simply put, it was amazing—by far the best day of my life. Not just because I was getting baptized.

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That wasn't that big of a deal to me. Being baptized is great and all, but it's mostly for membership in a church. I was with my best friend. I stood up there with him, walked "down to the river," watched that goofball go underwater and rise as a new Christian, and embraced him numerous times. More than anything, that baptism was special because of Daniel. I wanted it to happen with him and it did. We both talked of doing it, but neither of us knew that it would be so special.

When I was baptized, I was at my highest point with my beliefs and faith. I felt so close to God. I finally decided to completely commit myself to and give my life to God. However, I will say that I used to think indifferently about God. I used to think that God didn't care about me; that he was never there and would never be there for me, and that he had no purpose for my life. I thought God, being the almighty God he is, would just come to me anytime and help whenever I needed it. I acted as though he would take care of it all without any commitment on my part.

Wow, was I wrong and foolish. Looking back on that attitude brought Mathew 10:32-33 to mind. It talks about people having to acknowledge God before he acknowledges them. I used to not acknowledge God and sometimes, perhaps too much, I still don't.

On the upside, my faith has grown considerably but still needs a lot more growing if I expect to become the Christian God wants me to be. Now I take the attitude that God will take care of everything as long as I believe in him and his will for me, whatever it is. My faith has grown considerably because, even though God has dealt me a few tough hands in life, I have overcome the hardships and learned from them and other mistakes, which has helped me grow as a person and Christian.

For me my faith is most important.

My faith is something that nobody, except for me, will ever take away from me. My faith is what keeps me going through the stressful days and weeks. Faith is what has kept me alive.

Like I stated earlier, I used to be suicidal. The winter of my sophomore year I really started to struggle with depression, and I could have cared less whether I lived or died. Oddly, I still carry that attitude. I don't feel this way because I don't enjoy life. Believe me, I love my life, but I'm ready to go home whenever God wants me. I do not live for this sin-filled world, and in no way do I fear death.

Faith is also what keeps me looking up and outward, not backwards. No sense in worrying about the past. I know that through faith everything will be all right. I just have to let God take care of it. You can take anything from a person—family, job, entire life—but you will not take his or her faith. I relate this to my own life. Knowing that I will never be stripped of my own faith, but possibly everything else I live for and stand for, only brings me closer to God.

A few events have affected my journey. The first one was a youth convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. That was a powerful experience, but unfortunately didn't change me enough. A service trip to Swan Lake Camp was also huge for me, but most of all was San Antonio with Daniel. Walking up in front of thousands at Charlotte to ask for prayer, doing service work for the homeless or disabled, and improving Swan Lake have had major affects on me.

Struggles with family members on both sides of my family, my past relationship with a girlfriend that had more than enough bumps in the road, and hardships with friends also ended up bringing me closer to God. I survived the hurt, the fights, the stress, and unnecessary release of emotions.

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In a sense, God has given me a second chance many times—perhaps too many times—but fortunately God is a loving and forgiving God.

I wouldn't have made it along this journey had it not been for my pastor, Corey, whose insight and teachings have been eye-opening. The catechism class was great, and personal meetings with him also helped me see that being baptized is a good thing and being a member of a church is important.

Daniel has done great things for me. Without him I don't know if I would have been baptized yet. I could have, I suppose, but there was something different about the relationship that he and I developed and how we connect and click.

And then there is Doug. Ever since Doug got here, my life in a religious aspect has been different. I honestly don't know how to explain it. He's been like a father for me. Doug is a man I could trust with anything, tell anything to, and know that if I needed someone he would be there. He's a mentor and one of my best friends, a man I will never forget as long as I live.

Finally, to my best friend, Daniel Funke: This story is mostly for you. You are a wonderful person, a great friend, and someone I will cherish for all of eternity. Without you a lot of this would not have happened. I'd hate to think where my life would be if you hadn't come into it. Your biblical wisdom is amazing for your age. You know more than many people think you do and have helped me gain knowledge as well. Your insight on life and personal philosophies show you are a very smart and intelligent young man. You will go far in this life.

You mean the world to me. I look forward to watching you succeed in everything you do, whether that's your career, becoming a great husband and father, or living your life for God. When you marry I will be there. When you die I will be there and the last to leave. Whenever you need me, I will be there. I can honestly say you are one of the few people I would gladly give my life for in order to better your own. In this case words do express how big an impact you've had on me and will continue to have. I love you, bro, and look forward to enjoying some "chips and salsa" again soon.

Nathan Ensz is a freshman at Hesston College, Hesston, Kansas.

TURNED AROUND COMPLETELY

A true story by Daniel Funke

Many things in my life turned me into what I am today. By far the most important is the guidance and presence of God, through the work of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures, and of course the atonement of Jesus Christ. But I also was shaped by a group of people God placed in my life and that got the job done and turned me around completely.

When I was 18, in August 2005, I left my home in Germany to go to the United States as an exchange student. I came to a small town in Kansas—Goessel—and went to the high school there.

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I took a bunch of classes, including Choir, although I knew I wasn't the best singer around. That's where I met Nathan. He was standing right next to me in the bass section. He was a sophomore back then and already taller than me—six feet, six inches, I think.

During that school year, Nathan and I didn't spend a lot of time together. We played on different sports teams and when we spent time together it was either in school or at church on Sundays and Wednesdays. But toward the end of the year our friendship grew. We roomed together in Dallas on our Choir trip and had a really good time.

On graduation night I received my first Bible from my host parents. It was a New Living Translation, with a Bordeaux-red cover and Jesus' words in red. It sure looked good, but I "knew" I was never going to read it. Nathan and I met that night at a classmate's graduation party and hung out for the rest of the night. While sitting in the car, we talked about God for the first time. At that time I still had my opinions about God, which were agnostic at best, and the upcoming track and field state championships didn't help me stay focused on God either. A week and a half later I left the United States to return home to Germany.

I grew up as an atheist. My entire family didn't believe in God, and that's what shaped my idea of the presence of God. I didn't think about it that much when I grew up; it was something for religious people, not for me. But as a teenager I somehow developed a theistic or agnostic worldview—things didn't make any sense without a Creator. But Christianity was nothing I believed in, and I never really studied and learned anything about it. Instead I was more interested in Eastern philosophy at the age of 16 and 17.

What happened in Germany the following winter was pretty amazing, given that at that time I hated to read: I picked up my Bible and started to read. I started with Genesis and read completely through it, started Exodus ...

Then my parents divorced, and we moved, and the Bible ended up someplace where I couldn't find it. But something moved me to go into a bookstore and buy a New Testament—the best investment of my life. It didn't even look like a New Testament; it could've been a book about garden plants or a tourist guide to Germany for children.

Reading the New Testament, I became aware of my situation as a sinner, and I also felt the presence of God in my life for the first time. It turned me around—180 degrees.

I went to the United States again in the summer of 2007. This time things were a little different. Church services meant something to me for the first time. In July, Nathan and I went on a service trip together with our youth group to San Antonio. Since Nathan was busy all summer playing basketball, this was the first time we really were able to talk. This trip was definitely one of the most shaping experiences of my life. We would stay up late, hang out at the church library, and read through different books. One evening I talked to Doug Krehbiel, our youth pastor, about the things that happened to me the past year since I left Goessel. We talked about my experiences reading the Bible and what an impact they had on my life.

After hearing me talk, Doug suggested that I get baptized.

I wasn't sure about that, but I knew I had a brother I could talk to. Nathan took catechism classes the spring before but decided that he was not yet ready to be baptized. We talked about it, and

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something assured him that it was the right thing to do, for him and for me. So we went over to Doug and asked him about it.

After the trip, Nathan was still busy playing at tournaments, so there was only one possible date we could be baptized—the day before my flight back. I met with the Tabor Mennonite Church deacons and pastors, Corey and Doug, and they approved my baptism. Although it proved difficult, it somehow worked out that Nathan could be baptized the same day. It was a very special experience. I've never attended a baptism before, and had no idea what to expect, but it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience I will never forget.

"As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17 NIV).

There is so much truth in that verse. I know that the thing that shaped me the most is my walk with God. I try to base my life on God's will as I encounter it in the Scriptures. But I am aware that my faith also was shaped by the people in my life.

As an exchange student you expect to be placed in a family with parents in their 40s, with two or three kids your age, or at least close. My host family was a bit different. I was placed with Rudy and Nola Schmidt—both were 82 when I met them. You'd expect a lot of trouble living with people that are more than 60 years older than you, but the only trouble I ever had in that family was remembering the names of all their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren ...

I learned a lot from that experience and am so grateful that they took up the challenge of taking care of me despite the difference in age and worldview. They are outstanding Christians and great people, and they really included me in their family. Their gift, as well as their counsel and love, changed my life in a way I never thought possible.

I also was shaped by my pastor, Corey Miller, and my youth pastor, Doug Krehbiel. Whenever I needed to talk to somebody, they were there. Corey is a very energetic preacher—you'd have a hard time falling asleep during his sermons. But seriously, I love to hear him preach; he brings the message across, and you can really feel the Spirit's presence in his life whether he is behind the pulpit or just visiting at your house.

Doug is just a perfect example of a youth pastor, as well as a good friend and brother in Christ. You can have fun with him all day long, and his enthusiasm for Christ and the youth is just phenomenal. He is the reason I'm considering pursuing a career in youth ministry.

The youngest of who shaped my life and faith is Nathan. He is a little younger and a bit taller and will probably beat me at basketball anytime unless I have him blindfolded. But the bottom line is that he is my best friend ... and more than a friend—he is my brother.

And whenever he is seeking guidance, having questions on his mind, I try to answer them. Occasionally that requires some research and helps me with my own understanding of my faith. It's a blessing to be responsible for somebody, even on a small scale. But that's part of the body of Christ and part of being a disciple as I understand it. You are taught, and then you pass it on. And I know that he is there whenever I need him, for any reason. Nathan gave me so much, and I can't wait to hang out with him at his house again, to fall asleep watching a movie after eating tons of chips and salsa.

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There you have it: Three generations and all three of them had a huge impact on my life. Of course there are others, but those five are cornerstones on my way to Christ.

So now I'm a Christian and I love Bible study, but there is much more to it than that. I love sports and good movies and cooking; I'm your average 21-year-old guy with a big interest in Scripture. I'm still seeking a closer relationship with God and a better understanding of the Bible. For me, being a Christian is a process that will last until the day of Christ Jesus when we are made perfect.

I have enough reason to rejoice on a 24/7 basis. I have a wonderful congregation that's more like a family to me, I have the gift of grace, and I feel chosen by God—those things count far more than my circumstances.

My favorite book in the Bible is Philippians. Paul wrote that letter while under arrest in Rome. He spent his time there in prison, chained to a Roman soldier 24 hours a day. He awaited the results of his trial, and he was well aware that he might be executed. But in Philippians you read a letter written by a joyful man who knows that the things that surround him are nothing compared with his relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ or his brothers and sisters in Philippi or elsewhere. That's how I want to live.

"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:7-11).

Being young doesn't mean to live a life aside from the gospel. There are so many examples in the Bible of young men and women who made a difference, and they inspire me to do the same: Joseph, Joshua, David. I know that I'm not in a place where I can save the world or minister to thousands, but if I can make a small difference, that's all that matters.

"How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word" (Psalm 119:9).

"One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14).

Daniel Funke is a student at Gymnasium Heepen in Bielefeld, Germany.

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WALKING WITH JESUS IN A WAL-MART WORLD

By Emily Kennel as told to Laurie Oswald Robinson

It didn't take me long after our church youth group began its service week in Canton, Ohio, to realize that my middle-class life wasn't going to help me much. Though I had all the things money can buy at Wal-Mart—iPod, cell phone, computer equipment—that stuff couldn't buy me any new friends there.

Sure, I had seen some poor people on the streets of Kitchener, Ontario, where I live. But we lived where Wal-Mart is where you shop rather than work. The service trip made me see that people who were cashiers at places like Wal-Mart struggle to pay their bills, even after working two jobs that pay lower wages. What did I really know about all that? Usually, those cashiers were nameless and faceless to me as I rushed in and out of the store.

I felt really clueless about how to even begin thinking about poverty and how I should respond as a Christian. But during that week, God brought people into my path who helped me take a few first steps with Jesus to places I had never gone before.

The first God-send was Darren. He was the youth pastor at the Mennonite church where we came to do some cleaning to make way for a renovation project for the congregation. We also did Bible study and classes on poverty and reflected on how to respond. In our morning sessions, he told us how Canton has some very poor neighborhoods. He told us how easy it was for people to stay in a vicious poverty cycle and never get out.

He took us on a tour where we saw a lot of for-sale signs. People were rushing out of Canton as owners of its many factories moved to Mexico for cheaper labor. The weird thing was, the Wal-Marts stayed. There were three of them in the area. Wal-Mart employs all kinds of people. But many of those people are what Darren termed the "working poor." They have enough money to live but not enough to save and get out of a rut. Often, a family of four in this category makes \$24,000 a year before taxes and lives in rundown houses.

He also took us to downtown Canton, pushing to renovate every inch to put a pretty face on a city taking a hard hit. Just a few blocks beyond this glamour were crumbling brick buildings and gang violence. As shocking as this was, Darren knew that showing us buildings and talking about social problems was only the beginning. He wanted us to build relationships with people who were living on those rundown streets.

One of those people was Ann.* She was my second God-send, although it didn't feel like it at first. My skin crawled as I watched bugs inching around the moldy boxes in her basement. My first reaction was to judge her for being such a poor housekeeper. Then I remembered what Darren had said about how people who don't have enough tend to hoard what they do have and can't let go. He also had encouraged us to listen to others' stories rather than judging their behaviors. So I tried.

"I came from a conservative background and wanted so badly to get out," she said, as sweat poured down our backs in the hot room. "So I left home and got heavily involved in drugs and hit financial trouble. I want to break free, but it's really hard."

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I saw the pain in her eyes as she told us more of her story. The more she told, the less I felt I had to give her of my own life. I was sinking fast, but then a neat thing happened. We asked if there was anything we could do to help her. She cried, "Help me clean!"

So as we scrubbed and waded through stuff, the joy on her face grew. "This just really feels good," she beamed, as we finished our work and filed out the door. "You don't know how much this meant to me today."

I smiled at her, feeling joy inside too. It all began to click. I realized that Ann and others like her have been burdened down so much. It was hard for them to break free from their sense that things are never going to be any better, no matter what they did. She had a great heart and good intentions to tackle her basement. But she hadn't developed the skills to plan her time to actually get it done.

It took a relationship for both parties—both Ann and our group—to take steps toward understanding people different from ourselves. Ann had learned to trust us to ask for what she truly needed. And we had held back from rushing in and giving her what we thought she needed. We showed respect for her by letting her take the lead in asking. Darren had said that when someone is in poverty, the worst thing you can do is throw money at them. We needed to model the value of lasting relationships.

I realize that I may never see Ann again; we hadn't exactly formed what you would call a lasting relationship. But it was a step in the right direction.

A third God-send helped me take one more step. It happened when we met some young kids who told us stories about where they live. Some of them have to cross gang territory on their way home from school. Some of them are hungry. We learned there are a lot of elementary and middle schools in Canton, but only two high schools, because the dropout rate is so high.

Again, I had the same feeling I had with Ann. What could I really offer these young people? How could I relate? None of us from our youth group could call ourselves wealthy, by any means. But we never had to worry about missing a meal or getting hit by a bullet. I realized that middleclass North American teenagers, with all of their privileges, don't represent most of the teenagers of the world. Many struggle with having money to buy bread, let alone finding the best pizza. They use energy to dodge bullets rather than do their homework.

Fortunately, Darren didn't pressure us to have all of this figured out before we went home. But on the long ride back, we reflected a lot about our trip. Both the new education and the new relationships helped me see that if I say I love God, then I also must love my neighbors—all of them, not just those who live in my clean, safe, well-fed neighborhood. As a Christian, it's not enough to say I have Christ in my heart. He must also be reflected in compassion and a concern for equality among people.

I must try to feel people's pain and put myself in their shoes. I must reach out to others not as service projects but as people created by God. I realized that having equal relationships means friendship is a two-way street. I don't have to try to make myself beneath everyone, but I also don't have to treat them as if they are beneath me. Though our educational and economic levels may be different, people like Ann and I still have a lot in common. We both need the love of God and others. We both need to grow in areas in which we are weak.

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Even though I'm home and living my busy, safe life in Kitchener, Canton still lives in me. It's given me a hunger to learn more about the working poor and to relate to them as people with names and faces and purpose. That may mean finding ways to provide life skills and better education for people who want to break out of generational patterns of poverty. But more than that, it means I grasp the power of listening. In the Gospels, Jesus was constantly drawing people into conversation. But those conversations never began with what he could do for them. It always began with him listening to their story.

In listening to Ann, I got to know her and look past her basement and into her heart. After Canton, it's a bit easier for me to look past the outer trappings of anyone—my well-to-do-friends or the clerks at Wal-Mart. I'm learning to see that what really matters is not the stuff or lack of stuff we own and call "mine." It's the relationships we share.

Emily Kennel is a freshman at the University of Ottawa. She attends Erb Street Mennonite Church and her hometown is Kitchener, Ontario.

HUNTED AND FOUND

By Oscar A. Ramos Geron

as told to Laurie Oswald Robinson

with assistance from Nita Wilson, Wendy Andrabe, and Rosie Guvman

My heart beat hard in my chest as I gasped for air. I was running away from thieves in the mountains of El Salvador. They were shooting at us—my family and friends—and I thought that maybe I would never see my mother or family again. I had gotten separated from her, and I felt so alone. I was afraid I'd die—all alone.

As bullets whizzed past me in the dark, I hid in the trees. My life had been very hard, but nothing was as scary as this. We ran and ran and ran. The thieves finally gave up. We ran all the way to Mexico, where I got separated from my friends and was thrown into jail. I smelled really bad because I'd been running and hadn't showered for five days. I was glad to be alive, but very scared to be alone behind bars in a strange country.

I did get back with my mother again, and she decided we should go to Dallas to live with my father. In El Salvador, we faced a lot of gang violence and problems with drinking in my extended family. Even so, I didn't want to go to the United States. The only way of life I knew was El Salvador. It was home.

In Dallas I went to high school as a freshman. A neighbor who lives in the same apartment complex invited my family to come to their church. I went to church in El Salvador, but I'd never met anyone who talked about knowing Jesus personally. But in this new church, I saw the joy of Jesus in others' lives. I wanted that too.

I wondered if my loneliness and running away could be replaced with love and belonging. I

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wanted that so badly. One night our pastor gave an altar call for those who wanted to accept the Lord. At first, I felt something holding me back, but something stronger called me up front—something beautiful that I've never felt before and that none of my past life could block.

The pastor asked if I wanted to accept Christ as my personal Savior. As I said yes and repeated the prayer of salvation, I experienced something amazing. I felt loved by God. I felt important, as if I meant something to God. Suddenly, I no longer felt alone and hunted down. I felt found, and I felt safe. I felt I had the freedom of life rather than the fear of death. I finally understood for the first time how powerful the Word of God is.

Now I feel a love for God and from God that is so real to me. God is there to protect me at school and at the apartment and to keep me from drugs and alcohol. At the same time, God doesn't prevent me from struggles. For example, I must work hard and hand over my money to my parents. That responsibility can feel heavy when I have so many other adjustments in learning English and a new culture. And though I have many friends at school I can laugh and joke with, many of them don't have the deep-down peace I've seen in the youth from church.

In the middle of these struggles, God has given me a church family to belong to. This church family is my safe place. I go at least four times a week for worship services and to take English classes. Because of these classes, I can now ask what I don't know or understand without fear and shyness.

The faster I can learn the language, the better, because I want to share the love of Jesus in ways other people can understand too. Though young people in the United States may never have had to run for their lives, they have pain in other areas. I'm studying God's Word so I can preach.

And I'm learning to play the guitar so I can help with worship. I can't pay for the lessons, but I got a book and am teaching myself with help from the musicians at church. I'm determined to learn and am writing songs. I asked the youth leaders what it takes to teach youth on Tuesday nights, or to preach. They told me that whenever I'm ready, I can. And I'm beginning to do it!

My goal in all of this is to encourage others to keep going, even if they feel they're being hunted down by bad things. Keep running toward God, or let God catch you! Just as God didn't allow me to get killed, but spared me, God can spare you. God can help you in the same way. God sees you hiding from all that threatens to rob you. God is running after you to seek you from death and to find you for life.