



The Christian life is a journey.

TrailNotes speaks to forward movement, paying attention to the "landscape" we are passing through in this trail-laced, wooded hillside and valley, not to mention the world beyond. *TrailNotes* is an unfolding, ongoing journal of the people who share the trail with us and the things we're learning and doing. This is a monthly publication of Grace Fellowship Church, Mansfield, Ohio.

ElderTalk: Hearing Is a Precious Gift

Eric Byrom

Our hearing is a precious gift. I've noticed with my father that as he has aged, his hearing has worsened. Thanks to the gift of modern technology, he has gotten hearing aids which help amplify the sound to his ear. The interesting thing is that even with the modern technology, he still struggles to hear in noisy environments, like restaurants. He has trouble picking out our voices in the midst of all the other noises.

Unfortunately, many Christians are unsure of how to grow in the process of hearing from God's Holy Spirit. Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." This verse suggests that we can grow in discerning the will of God and discerning what He would want in certain settings. Some would call this hearing from God.

Like a noisy restaurant, there are many voices we hear every day. We hear what the world is saying. We hear what our own thoughts are saying. We hear what the devil is saying, and we hear what God is saying. How do we discern the difference between these voices? The Bible, the Holy Spirit and the Church help us to separate the voices and identify them.

We first want to ask God to speak to us and ask Him to make His voice clear. Then we want to listen for God. This is where the disciplines of silence and solitude can be very helpful. In 1 Kings 19:12 we read that God's voice sounded like a whisper. It was not in the earthquake. It was not in the strong wind. It was not in the fire. Sometimes it helps to get away from the noises and distractions in order to hear from God.

We've talked about asking God to speak to us and then listening. Finally, we want to check what we think we are hearing from God. There is a nice acronym to use: **CHECK**. First, **C, Check the Bible**. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the

man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." What God says to us will not contradict what Scripture says.

Second, **H, Hear the Holy Spirit**. John 10:4 says, "When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice." As we become more used to hearing from God, His voice will take on a distinctive element that we will recognize.

Third, **E, Examine our motives**. Psalm 139:23-24 says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" We can ask God to help us to examine our motives. We can begin to develop a holy detachment from the issue for which we are asking God. As we pray in the Lord's prayer "Thy will be done," we can claim that over an issue for which we may have many personal thoughts. As we continue to do this, we will become aware of our motives and submit them to God's will.

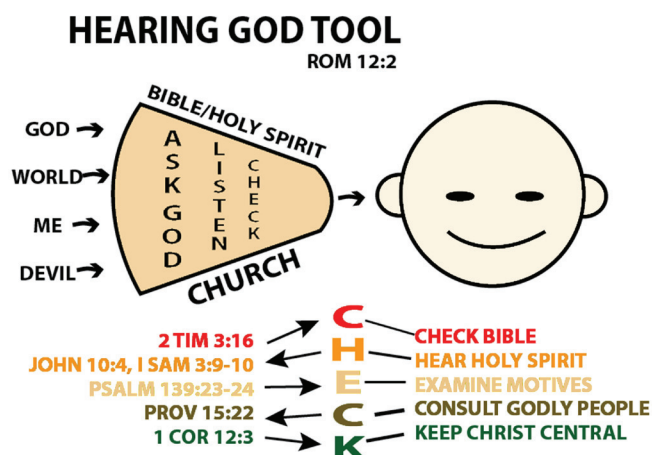
Fourth, **C, Consult godly people**. Proverbs 15:22 says, "Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisors, they succeed." When we feel like God has told us to do something, we can always check that with other godly people. This is one role the Church can play in our lives. We can get perspective on something God is saying from others. They may bring to mind other Scriptures that relate to what we think we heard from God.

Fifth, **K, Keep Christ central**. 1 Corinthians 12:3 says, "Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit." As we think we are hearing from God, we must remember to keep Christ central to this whole process. The Holy Spirit will glorify Jesus and lift Jesus up. His words will not contradict Jesus' words.

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Hearing Is a Precious Gift.

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So, listening to God is an important element of the Christian life. God desires to guide us and to lead us and speak to us. We can check what we think God is saying and discern what His will is. Let's grow in our ability to hear God's voice in the midst of the many voices competing for our attention!

Update from Tamura City, Japan 日本・田村市からの更新情報

Fri, Jul 31, 2026 at 12:21 AM

2026 年 7 月 31 日 金曜日、午前 12 時 21 分

Hello Everyone!

Sorry for the early update, but as of August 1st, I will be flying home for my summer vacation and will be returning to Japan on August 15th. I am excited to spend this time with my family, as it has been nearly a year since I have been home. As for this past month, I am happy to report that all has been well! In July, I have been able to spend time with friends, enjoy Japan's summer festivities, teach English outside the classroom, and even hike Mt. Fuji!



*The coin shrine on Mt. Fuji with "mountain climbers"
Maria and Ann.*

I have been so blessed to share coffee with friends and have strong gospel-based conversations. I ask that you continue to pray that these meaningful conversations lead to Christ. My friend and I have been discussing the meaning of worship songs we sang during previous Wednesday Worship Nights. This has been a great way to explain the heart posture behind why Christians worship and who we are worshipping. Please pray that the Holy Spirit softens the hearts of the Japanese people so that they may come to know Christ. I have also been able to take new friends to try new coffee shops with me. This has been a great way for me to build relationships with others and even learn a little Japanese! Also, during the summer season, Japan has many festivals. As I am very wary of which ones I attend, I have been able to attend two. First was the Lavender Festival. It is very small and located near a local cave. While there, my friends and I were able to pick lavender, climb through the cave, and eat lavender ice cream. This was a fun Saturday I spent with friends, and we made homemade lavender lemonade with the flowers we picked! The second festival was here in town, right down the road from where I live. This festival was also very small and was hosted outside our town's community center. I was able to enjoy the festival drumming, the food (including a chocolate banana recommended by my students), and seeing many of my students. While it was pouring rain, it was fun to watch the people dance and see all the pretty kimonos.

Before summer break began, I taught my students origami after lunch and will continue to do so the rest of the school year. Teaching origami has been a fun way to bring English outside the classroom while I also get to know my students more. The team also assisted with an English Day Camp. Hosted by the Board of Education, university students came in and taught our junior highers (from all local schools) English through games and activities. We helped the university students, and I became friends with some of them! Besides the camp, the team also worked with one of the schools to host a Get-to-know Your ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) where students, parents, and teachers could attend. During this time, the team had its own classroom where each of us answered why we came to Japan, what the journey to becoming an ALT is, and what the most important things are about working abroad other than knowing the language. Although we could not explicitly state the gospel in our answers, we were able to share a glimpse of how God directed our paths to work in Japan within the setting

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Update from Tamura City, Japan 日本・田村市からの更新情報

(Continued from page 2)

of being an ALT. Lastly, two of my co-workers and I were able to join in on an English Seminar held at my school. In this meeting, we taught games, songs, and dances to Japanese English teachers. We were able to build relationships with teachers outside of our district and show creative ways to implement fun in teaching English. All this to say, it has been quite a productive month for our schools! Please continue to pray for endurance as we have seven months left of this school year.

I am also happy to share with you that I hiked Mt. Fuji, and what an adventure it was! With so many things to go wrong, it was truly only through the Lord's provision that we were able to get up and down the whole mountain within our time frame. The goal was to start hiking around 4:30-5 am. My friend Ann and I didn't even start until 10 am due to issues with getting a taxi. From there, we pushed through with very short breaks, being mindful of altitude sickness. We were so blessed with clear skies and no rain, which is uncommon weather at Fuji. As we worked our way to the top, we met a girl from Canada whose brother was already at the summit. Staggering who was ahead, we were able to have short conversations with her as we worked our way up. By the time we made it to the top at around 7 pm, the sun was setting. We were determined to make the trip without staying on the mountain overnight. This meant there was no time to take a break at the top and we immediately turned around, trying to race a setting sun.

On our way down, we ran into six Tokyo University international students who insisted we join their group. Each spoke amazing English, yet none of them came from an English-speaking country! We had great conversations with them, and without them I don't think we would have been able to get down, or at least not at the pace we went. By the time we got to the bottom, it was 12 am. We were able to hike the Yoshida trail of Mt. Fuji in just under 14 hours! The University students were so kind in helping us call a taxi to bring us to our hotel. Overall, we had a great time, and we were able to see some very beautiful sights. The Lord gave us so much endurance, and I am so happy I was able to experience this.

I have attached several photos, so please enjoy!

Maria

Maria M. McCreadie

マリア・マクレディー



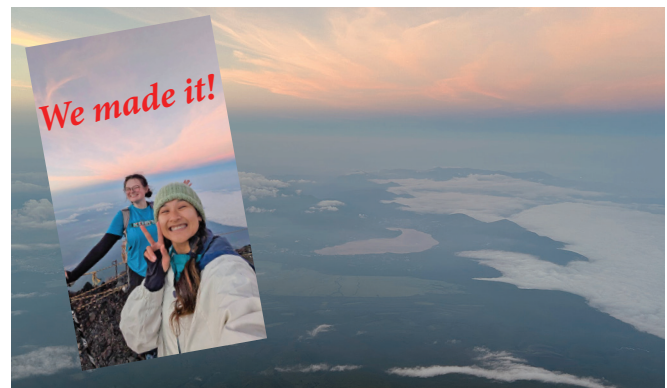
Ann and Maria ready to begin their Mt. Fuji climb.



We're halfway up!



Three-fourths of the way up!



View of Lake Yamanakako from atop Mt. Fuji.



Hannah, Maria, Lelo, Ann enjoying the Lavender Festival.

Caveat from the Elders: Kindly note that the following may reflect more of an Eastern Orthodox viewpoint and is not necessarily the official position of Grace Fellowship Church.

Facing up to Mary *Peter E. Gillquist*

(Continued from the August 2026 TrailNotes issue)

THE VESPERS PRAYER

Near the end of the Vespers Service in the Orthodox Church, the officiant says, “O holy Mother of God, save us.” What does this mean? The Orthodox Church has taught from the very beginning that Mary is the supreme example, or prototype, of what happens to a person who fully places trust and faith in God. Everything we aspire to become in Christ, she already is. We are all to “receive” Christ (John 1:12). And as we noted previously, Mary was the first human being who did receive Christ. Out of the millions of “decisions” made for Christ, Mary’s was the first. Therefore, whatever promises the Holy Scriptures hold for us, Mary already possesses them. If the sacred Scriptures declare that we are all kings (Revelation 1:6), is it so strange that the Church refers to Mary as Queen? If the Holy Bible promised that you and I shall judge angels (1 Corinthians 6:3), is it so odd that the Church should sing that Mary is “more honorable than the cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim”?

If we who are called “holy brethren” (Hebrews 3:1) are commanded to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:15, 16) and are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1), is it so unthinkable that she whose holy body was the recipient of God Incarnate should be called “most holy” by the Church? If Saint Paul instructs us to “[pray] always . . . for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18), is it so outrageous to confess with the Church that Holy Mary (along with all the saints who have passed from death to life and continually stand in the presence of Christ) intercedes before her Son on behalf of all men? Mary volitionally relinquished her will to the will of God, thus cooperating fully with the purpose of God.

So the original question, “Can Mary save us?” leads to another question: “Can we save others?” Again, the Holy Scriptures speak with resounding clarity. Here are some examples: “Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Timothy 4:16). “Let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:20). “And on some

SEPTEMBER 2026

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13	14	15	16	17	18	19
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2 Pastor Eric Byrom preaching on Matthew 7:13-20.

5 Ladies' Lunch at Bob Evans on Hanley Rd. at 1:00 PM.
Games Reach Family Game Night, at GFC, 6:30-8:30 PM.

6 Pastor Eric Byrom preaching on Matthew 3:13-17.
Honor Sunday School teachers.

6-13 Week of Global Prayer, 24-7!

9 Connect Groups for teens and adults resume.

12 Worship Dance Workshop at GFC, 9:15 PM–11:45 AM.
Men's retreat at Harvest Christian Church, Elyria, Ohio.

13 Pastor Eric Byrom preaching on Matthew 4:1-11. 

20 Elder Jadaé Fox preaching:
It's Back-to-Church Sunday!

25-26 Women's Workshop at GFC:
“The Hovering of Hope.”

27 Pastor Eric Byrom preaching on Matthew 4:12-17. 

have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire” (Jude 22, 23). Fire saves (1 Corinthians 3:15), prayer saves (James 5:15),
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 Eric Byrom Presiding Elder/ Pastor
(A complete list of church functionaries will return next month.)



Several years ago, Heather and I accepted the role of Mentor Leads for OPEN USA, an organization that supports men and women using business to create jobs, strengthen communities, and share the hope of Christ in places where traditional approaches are often difficult.

The concept is called Business for Transformation (B4T). Rather than separating business from ministry, B4T recognizes that Scripture does not divide life into “sacred” and “secular” callings. Whether someone is a teacher, doctor, pastor, counselor, or business owner, every vocation can be an act of worship and a means of serving God and others.

In this understanding, a healthy business is more than a profitable enterprise. It provides meaningful work, treats people with dignity, contributes to the well-being of the local economy, and creates opportunities for authentic relationships in which faith is lived out naturally through everyday life.

But I’ve discovered something important over the years. Businesses alone don’t transform communities. The people who run them do.

Why We Mentor

People occasionally ask why Heather and I have invested so much of our lives in mentoring. The answer is simple: because others invested in us.

For many years, Patrick and May, the founders of OPEN USA, walked alongside us as our mentors. They listened well, asked thoughtful questions, encouraged us through challenges, and modeled what it means to care deeply for people over the long haul. Their influence shaped not only our work but also our marriage, our leadership, and our faith. We most

likely would not have lasted long in India without our mentors.

When Patrick and May began thinking about retirement, they approached us and asked if we would be willing to carry the mentoring ministry forward. We were deeply honored by their confidence in us, and after much prayer, we accepted. Today, much of what Heather and I do is simply an extension of the investment they first made in our lives.

That experience has convinced us that one intentional mentoring relationship can change the trajectory of a person’s life. Having received that gift ourselves, our desire is to pass it on to others and to help those we mentor become mentors themselves, continuing the cycle for generations to come.

What Does Mentoring Look Like?

Today we mentor couples and individuals serving across North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, India, and other parts of the world. Heather and I travel together, allowing us to invest in both husbands and wives. Each year we spend several days with each family in their own setting.

We see their businesses, meet their employees, share meals around their tables, and observe life as it really is. Between visits, we continue meeting online throughout the year.

Our conversations cover much more than business. We talk about marriage, parenting, spiritual growth, leadership, emotional health, finances, relationships, and the unique challenges of living far from home. Our goal isn’t simply to help someone build a successful company. It’s to help them become healthy, resilient followers of Christ who lead well over the long haul.

Multiplying the Ministry

One of the most encouraging developments has been seeing those we’ve mentored become mentors themselves. Several of the newest mentors in our network are people Heather and I have walked alongside for years. They are now investing in others using the same principles that were poured into them, just like us. That multiplication is exciting because it means care can spread much farther than any one couple could ever accomplish alone.

To support that vision, we’re developing additional mentor training, continuing education, and practical resources to help new mentors grow in this important role.

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Investing in People

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How You Can Pray

Please pray for the business leaders we serve as they seek to honor Christ in every area of life. Pray for wisdom as they make difficult decisions, for strong marriages and healthy families, and for endurance as they navigate unfamiliar cultures and unique challenges. Pray also that God would continue raising up men and women who are willing to invest deeply in others. The apostle Paul wrote, “The things you have heard me say... entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.” (2 Timothy 2:2)

That simple pattern of investing in people who will invest in others has become the heartbeat of our mentoring work. It is a privilege for Heather and me to participate in what God is doing around the world, one business, one relationship, at a time.



Heather and Jay on the tarmac at an airport somewhere in central Asia. (Their QR code, too)



Jay and Heather Shifley with their mentors, Patrick and May in 2025.

Editor's note: In addition to your prayers, Jay and Heather could also use your financial support for their work. You can do this through the GFC office or by using the QR code above.

Facing up to Mary (Continued from page 4)

angels save (Isaiah 63:9), baptism saves (1 Peter 3:21), preaching saves (1 Corinthians 1:21), the Apostle Paul saved (Romans 11:14). New life in Christ, or salvation, is both personal union with Him and an incorporation into the wholeness of the Body, the Church. Salvation is a Church affair, a Church concern, because we are all affected by it.

In another biblical image, salvation is seen as a family matter—God's family (“the whole family in heaven and earth” – Ephesians 3:15). Everybody gets into the act, so to speak. Therefore, under Christ we each have a part to play in the corporateness of His saving act. We do not save alone; Mary does not save alone. Jesus Christ is our wellspring of salvation. And He said, “Without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). But, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you” (John 15:7). Mary has a unique role in our salvation because she provided the physical body of Christ and thereby became the “mother” of all those who would be saved. That is why Jesus, while on the Cross, said to His mother, “Woman, behold your son!” and then said to Saint John, “Behold your mother!” (John 19:26, 27).

(To be concluded next month)



Mary at the Cross, by Rogier Van der Weyden, 1443, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Editor's note: Permission granted and excerpted from Facing Up to Mary by +Fr. Peter Gilquist, from Ancient Faith Topical Series. Published by Ancient Faith Ministries (formerly Conciliar Press), 1987, second edition 1994. Full copies, as well as other publications by +Fr. Gilquist, are available at this site: store.ancientfaith.com.



A number of us at GFC will fondly remember the author of this article, who we knew as just “Pete Gillquist” back in the 1960s and 70s before he joined the Antiochian Orthodox Church in 1987.