

# **Character Counts**

***Seeing the Positive  
In the People Around Us***

***By Timothy A. Johnson***

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*Timothy A. Johnson*

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## **CHARACTER STILL COUNTS!**

There is a certain conventional wisdom that has developed over the last years in America that it really doesn't matter how you live your life; only the professional results of your work are what matter. If in the end you are considered some kind of recognizable success, then the kind of person you are is not so important.

This premise has apparently been borne out in the minds of many with the example of more than one president of the country who has been careless in personal behavior and yet politically successful. Sexual escapades, sketchy financial deals, and shabby treatment of other human beings are not sharply condemned because these personalities survive and in some demonstrable way "succeed".

In the arena of politics and big business this may seem plausible, but we all know that it falls short in the real life of interpersonal relationships. Inconsistency, hypocrisy, and unfaithfulness expressed in friends, spouses, and employees still has consequences. We distance ourselves, sometimes even through the draconian measure of divorce, from people whose character does not measure up.

On occasion, we are blessed with an example of a person of character who is so heralded, their consistency itself becomes what they are known for. I was moved toward the end of 2018 to watch the memorial services for President George H. W. Bush. The common testimony of all those who knew him and worked with him was that he was a man of character, dependability, fairness, kindness, love, and faithfulness. With great emotion many gave witness to the powerful impact he had made in his life. No matter what you may have thought of President Bush's politics, his reputation was sterling and his funeral services gave us hope that true character may still be possible even yet in this world.

I am convinced it is not only possible...but necessary. If any of us is going to accomplish real success in our lives, we need to take care how we live so that we will be reliable sources of truth, love,

and direction for others. We also need to surround ourselves with other people of character who can positively influence us.

I believe that EVERY person we get to know has some character quality that is instructive to us. No human being is perfect; no one has all aspects of life in order. But...EVERY person has something positive that we can emulate for our benefit.

It is a healthy discipline to look for that positive characteristic in all of our friends. This helps us to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative in our thinking about everyone we know.

In January of 2019, I took a break from the Minnesota winter to travel to Florida where I visited a group of eight friends over a period of several days. As I mused about each of these relationships, some key character qualities in each of these people came to mind. It was heart-warming for me to see how each of these friends provided compelling examples for me to follow.

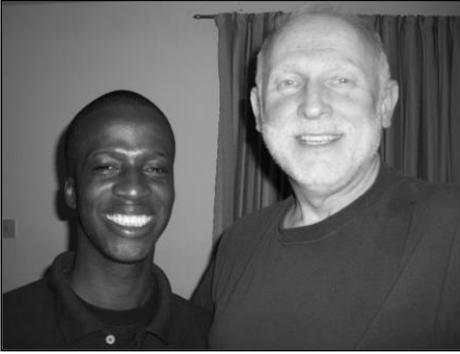
Character from a Christian perspective is ultimately the work of God the Holy Spirit developing the character of Jesus in us. It is fundamentally a spiritual work of God which we must, by the application of our will, nurture throughout life.

Even those who do not claim to be Christian, however, according to the Scriptures are created in the image of God and therefore have imprinted on them a moral sense even in their natural state. Therefore, we may actually see admirable character and behavior in those who may not testify to any connection to God.

So where good character, behavior, and moral example is in front of us, we can benefit from that influence. It is up to us to get to know others to glean from them life lessons and insight...and, in turn, offer to them what we can contribute for their good.

It is with this sentiment that I invite you to consider these eight relationships that have nourished me. These personalities inspire this booklet--*Character Counts: Seeing the Positive in the People Around Us*.

## **BALANCED THINKING**



On my way to Florida, I passed through the Washington, DC area for two nights in order to visit a Ghanaian friend, Graham.

He has been a good friend ever since one night at the University of Ghana in Legon Accra he provided a

special service for me. I was scheduled to speak to a student group that night and much to my chagrin, all of the restrooms were closed down because the water was not running on campus. I asked my host where could I go to the bathroom. He apologized and then said he had a friend who could help me.

A minute later Graham showed up to give me a ride to his church where I could use the facilities. In that brief 10-minute car ride together we became quick friends. This graduate student was very engaging, obviously bright and well-informed, and instantly likeable. We exchanged contact information right then and began a friendship that continues to grow and deepen to this day. We enjoyed several face to face conversations in Ghana subsequent to that first meeting and got to know each other well.

A couple of years ago he started grad school in Canada and although he was thousands of miles closer to me, we had not met on this side of the ocean until his special invitation now in January 2019. Recently, he was engaged to be married to the woman of his dreams and he wanted me to meet her and also be a part of the ceremony to be scheduled later.

And so...off to Washington, DC I went enroute to Florida. I was met at the airport by Graham who was again my driver taking me to another destination...a hotel where I would enjoy a couple of

nights of lodging and special fellowship with him and his fiancée Jennifer.

We had a delightful dinner together that first night. It was encouraging to see how this first-rate gentleman had discovered a first-rate wife to be! They are matched very well intellectually, temperamentally, and spiritually. It is wonderful to have confidence that a couple will do very well as they build their life together.

As I enjoyed that dinner and lunch again the following day with Graham, I was reminded freshly of the depth of character and wideness of his perspective. He is such a fine person. The broadness of perspective he expressed in our conversations back in Ghana before has only expanded with his travel to North America.

Graham has many admirable strengths, but an over-arching characteristic is balanced thinking. His course of study has centered on political science and international relations. He has an ability to see the various streams of geopolitical thought and clearly analyze what really is at play in these situations, recognizing the validity of more than one side of certain issues.

This ability to see things from all sides applies too in his attitudes regarding matters of faith. He has his own convictions but can discern and understand the convictions of others who may disagree. In the end, his grasp of the entirety of Christendom and even other alternative religions gives him the ability to converse and relate to a wide range of people.

This balance has been seen even in his personal relationships. Although very sharp and impressive in his own right, he maintains a humility about his own strengths and realizes that not everyone is going to love him and want to be his friend. He has the grace to recognize the dignity of other human beings who may not appreciate or celebrate the same things he does.

Graham has become a great example to me of clear and balanced thinking. He seeks and achieves understanding in his life by

exploring and weighing all sides of an issue and coming to his own conclusions and convictions while still allowing others to pursue their own path. Combined with this mindset is genuine sensitivity and compassion for people. There is an almost innate kindness in him that enhances his relationships.

We live in a season in this part of the 21st century in which extremism is seen on every hand. There are bold and unrelenting voices that make pronouncements that unnecessarily divide and enflame. On all levels...from international geopolitical circles right down to the local coffee shop, we need to consider the character of Graham who sets a pace in analyzing reality with balanced thinking and extends himself to others with diplomacy and grace.

## **GRACIOUS ACCOMMODATION**



The first stop on my Florida excursion was to visit my brother Paul and his wife Carol in Stuart. This was the third time I had visited them there and it is always a good time in their home.

Paul is the first-born in our family and therefore has always held a special place of honor and respect. He was a rising intellectual star very early in his life; he was a born entrepreneur, initially evidenced by very successful paper routes in his younger years--more recently with an impressive hobby of maximizing frequent flyer miles and hotel points. His accounts of his worldwide travel all accomplished with very little cash investment are truly break-taking.

As he and his wife have built a home and enjoyed two children who are now pursuing their adult careers, they have maintained ministry in a church of a different denomination than mine. It is a

very inclusive environment in which a multiplicity of backgrounds and traditions are combined under one roof. Naturally, this leads to some challenging tensions along the way. Yet even with those tensions, my brother maintains an amazingly even-handed approach. He does not compromise his own integrity and honesty and yet he accommodates differences of opinion and perspective in the people around him.

I find that even in some of the differing theological understanding between the two of us. We do not agree on all points, but he still graciously affirms me as a brother and as one conscientiously pursuing my own faith and ministry. On many issues of church work, the challenge of working with people, the dynamics of organizing and promoting programming, there is so much commonality that positive and helpful conversation continues between us.

It seems to me that this kind of accommodation of the beliefs and convictions of others is absolutely necessary at any time in history and maybe even more so in this season of our national life. We need to approach others not with suspicion or dismissiveness but with recognition that every human being is created in the image of God and has a story and perspective that is valuable to us.

We will probably fail to meet anyone in life that believes and behaves exactly as we do. But that is a blessing to us because each of us needs to be stretched in our perspective. It requires that we make a commitment to love and respect every other human being as inherently worthy of our regard even before we utter the first word in conversation with them. My brother Paul has modeled this character quality of accommodation and as a result we enjoy a relationship of cordial encouragement as we both move forward in life.

## **POSITIVE VIBRATIONS**



Several years ago, I was invited to offer a motivational talk at a church workers appreciation event at one of the congregations in our network of churches. It was a very nice Saturday morning gathering in which several dozen teachers and workers were celebrated for their

volunteer service. One person I met for the very first time that morning was the new pastor of the church, the man who would become a very dear friend, Ivan. I immediately noticed that he had an extremely engaging smile and warm spirit. During my talk his hearty laugh and infectious smile continued to be on display, lifting the spirit of the entire room.

From that day, Ivan became a highly valued friend. We started to spend time together, sharing meals, playing tennis, collaborating on training programs, serving together on our organization's board of directors, travelling to Africa together, and connecting as often as has been practical. I have experienced some of the most pleasant fellowship of my life with him. We have shared the ups and downs of family life, church life, and organizational work.

Whenever I have travelled to Florida in recent years, getting together with Ivan has been a goal since his work with the denominational mission he leads is based in Orlando. And so, on this trip once again we planned ahead to meet for dinner at a steakhouse.

I entered the place and there again he met me with that award-winning million dollar smile, warm greeting, and hug. Ivan has the ability to brighten every room he walks into. And because of that positive vibration brings joy and energy to every situation. It is an amazing gift.

As we sat at dinner that night another couple was seated at the next table to us who happened to be missionaries working in the same organization. Since they knew each other they cracked wise on a couple of inside jokes and again that hearty laugh and disarming smile flashed through the room. That vibe brought life to everyone.

Radio personality Dennis Prager often says that happiness is not just a state of mind but it is a moral responsibility. We do not have the right to drag down other people's lives by our own unhappiness and sour attitudes of the moment. Ivan has learned how to inject into every situation and every conversation the life-giving ingredient of his positive disposition.

This requires intentionality and grace to accomplish in any one of our lives...especially for those who may be more sullen by nature. But even forcing ourselves to smile, greet people pleasantly, and aim to be positive in spirit puts our own sphere of influence in a much more positive state of mind. This is Ivan's lesson of character to us.

## **FAITHFULNESS**



From time to time our organization has had the opportunity to be the clearing house for individuals who have liquidated stocks by donating them to us and then having the proceeds of the sale be distributed to a number of non-profit ministries. It

makes it easier for these distributions to be made by only one organization having to have the stock account to make it happen. On one such occasion, we had issued a check to a nationally

known missions organization and I received a call in the office from a fund-raising representative for them thanking us for the donation. I did explain to him that this was a donation made through us by another individual. But I was so taken with the person on the other end of the phone that a lifelong friendship ensued from that point on.

My new friend Olu first of all had a striking, broadcast quality voice over the phone. It was so smooth and pleasant I was almost tempted to make another donation myself to his cause! But, combined with that voice was a gracious spirit that showed genuine interest in me and our work.

In the course of our conversation, I discovered that his distinctive name indeed had a Nigerian root to it...his father is Nigerian, mother is African American. And so my circle of acquaintance with those with Nigerian blood (which is extensive given my many travels to that part of the world) was expanded again here on American soil.

Following that initial phone call, I took opportunity to talk with him more than once just to catch up with him on what was happening in his organization and his family life. Then on one particular visit to Florida we made plans to meet face to face.

That first get-together was a great time. We enjoyed a round of tennis, dinner together, and a visit to his family at home. It was great to connect with him in several settings, getting to know him in his workplace, home, and community.

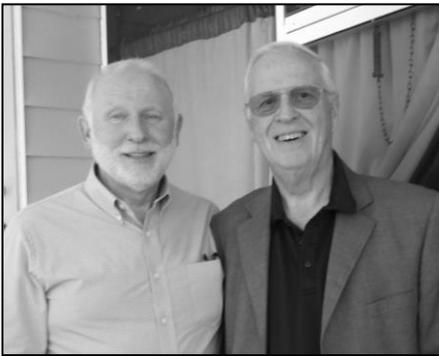
Since that first visit, I have had occasion to meet him on several trips to Florida and fortunately, his schedule allowed us the chance to meet up this time as well. He still is maintaining his athletic physique and good health. His kids continue to grow and develop in their schooling and extracurriculars. He also remains on the job in continued service to the ministry he represents. I thoroughly enjoyed the conversation and appreciated another building block in our friendship.

When I think of the character quality that stands out in my friend Olu, I must say that faithfulness rises to the top. There is a constancy of attitude, service, and commitment that does not flag in him. Even with the natural ups and downs of life, he remains reliable and consistent in his work, in his relationships, in his God-honoring attitudes, and in his transparency and humility.

Olu is a man you can count on. If given an assignment or responsibility, you know that it will be completed with thoroughness and finesse. He is eager to serve others and meet other people's needs. His long-term relationship with me has proven his trustworthiness over time.

In this period of American history there are many very fickle people; their tastes, preferences, and commitments change with very little warning. By contrast, God Himself is described in scripture as having "mercies new each morning, great is your faithfulness." That divine quality is reassuring to see in the human beings around us. My friend Olu sets a pace for us in faithful reliability and constancy...character we need in this season.

## **RESILIENCY**



When our family began to attend our home church--Prairie Hill Church in Eden Prairie, MN, one of the first personalities we encountered was our friend Wolf. He was a colorful and brilliant member of the community who has touched our lives in distinct ways.

Wolf actually was born during World War II in Germany; his father was an army officer, his mother a shopkeeper. Through an

interesting set of circumstances, he eventually moved to Minnesota, met his wife Alleene and began his career in our area.

Wolf is an amazing man. He has one of the sharpest intellects you will ever encounter. He knows something about almost everything...and many times has detailed understanding of a vast range of topics. You may use that phrase "it doesn't take a rocket scientist." Well, in Wolf's case that's really what it is about...because that is what he was in his professional life!

With that kind of brainpower, he became a recognized leader at a number of levels. He served a long stint as mayor of Eden Prairie, he became a key leader in our church, and was willing to roll up his sleeves and do work in both church and community that others were not willing to shoulder.

When we came on the scene at our church, he was chairman of the search committee for our new pastor who has now stayed with us for over twenty years. Wolf's leadership was felt wherever he went.

In anyone's life, of course, changes take place...especially when heading toward retirement. For years, Wolf's dream was to buy an RV and travel the country without the burden of a local residence to tie him down. It took a while for his wife to agree to the idea...but finally they made the big move. They sold their house in Minnesota and headed for Florida.

He and Alleene enjoyed more than one housing arrangement in their experience there. They began with owning both an RV and a permanent home. They soon concluded that the roving home was all they needed and settled for most of the year in a park where they had all the comforts of home in their large RV. I had occasion to enjoy an overnight visit in that unit and found it quite comfortable and accommodating.

In the course of time, Alleene contracted cancer and had ups and downs through her treatment and eventually lost that battle, leaving

Wolf alone to forge ahead into the future. At the time of my early visit to his home in January 2019, he was living in a very nice mobile home in a well-maintained park with his daughter living just down the road from him.

As he has taken up residence there, Wolf once again has become a leader in his homeowner's association and in his local church. My visit was prompted by an invitation he arranged for me to speak at his church on this trip. It was a very enjoyable Sunday morning with a great response to my message.

My friend Wolf is an amazing example of resiliency. Even though he by nature is an extremely disciplined man--his German sensibilities of cleanliness and orderliness have never been sullied --he has pursued the last season of his life with remarkable flexibility. He was willing and able to relocate from the familiar environs of Minnesota to establish a life in Florida; he entered into new housing situations offering to assist in the homeowner's associations; he made transitions to more than one church along the way; he lovingly cared for his wife in her battle with cancer; he entered into widowerhood with courage and anticipation of new and different things in the future; he continues to bloom wherever he is planted.

That character quality is one that all of us need as the future unfolds for us. The rate of technological and sociological change is so great in the 21st century that we need Wolf's flexibility in order to cope with change that is ahead. May God grant that grace to us.

## **RIGOROUS RELIABILITY**



Back in the days of the old Northwest Airlines, there were a number of work slow-downs that occurred that affected the service of that carrier. On one occasion when I was trying to return to Minneapolis from Albuquerque, the only

route available from the airline was via Colorado Springs, the first leg of which was on a puddle-jumper airplane.

When I boarded, I was seated just kitty-corner from a handsome young man who appeared to be entering the military. Indeed, it turned out that he was about to enter the Air Force academy. I observed that he was reading a compact Bible as we flew. I engaged him, saying something like, "You have some good reading material there!"

That was the beginning of my friendship with Michael, one of the most remarkable men I have met in the last twenty-five years. From that first conversation, when he was only about 18 years old, I could see just what a motivated person he was. He had started flying earlier in his teenage years, had developed the goal of entering the Academy, and eventually flying commercially someday. He also explained that he was a Coptic Orthodox Christian with his Egyptian heritage and his family had been very involved in the Church throughout his upbringing.

The next years offered several opportunities for us to stay in contact. Usually it was a phone call every few months that kept us connected. Michael was very free to share the ups and downs in all areas of his life with me. He valued me as a mentor and close friend. He was also quick to express that in very loving terms.

Along the way, he did become a commercial pilot, met his wife, has produced a beautiful family with four gorgeous children, and continues to serve as a leader in his church. Throughout these years, I have had a standing invitation to visit Michael and his family whenever I am in Florida. He has even been gracious enough to offer me buddy passes from time to time to make the trip down there from Minnesota.

On this Florida visit, I had an overnight stay with Michael and his family and once again enjoyed their hospitality.

My friend Michael is a man of great intelligence. He is knowledgeable about many things; he is a man of many talents. As a commercial pilot he has been trained to be reliable in maintaining safety for hundreds of people everyday.

In fact, he is rigorously reliable in every aspect of his life. He is conscientiously dedicated to his family, his church, and his career. With his strong mind, he holds strong opinions about right and wrong, about political issues, and about personal responsibility.

It may well be that a man who is responsible for the lives of hundreds of people at 30,000 feet applies the standard of reliability and dependability in every other area of life.

As I think of Michael thirty years from now, I anticipate that he will continue to have the same actively engaged commitment to everything and everyone he now pursues. I can depend on him to be consistent in character; rigorously reliable...a character trait we all would benefit to foster in ourselves.

## **HUMBLE COMPETENCE**



My conference work in Africa has required that I ship books, Bibles, and materials ahead to countries in which we are holding programs. For several years, we have connected with a shipper based in Fort Lauderdale that has helped us move these books via air cargo to various countries in Africa.

In the process, I have gotten to know my friend Ralph.

At first, our friendship was based simply on fulfilling the requirements of business. Ralph has a very good telephone manner, he explains everything necessary for the shipping process in great clarity, and he and his team follow-up systematically. He does his job well.

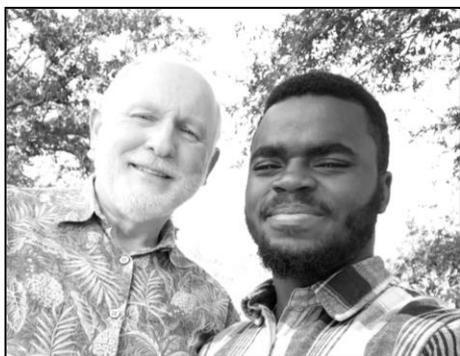
A few years ago, when I was in the area on another trip, I met him for dinner and heard a bit more about his life. He shared the joys and challenges of raising his two sons, he revealed the fact that he shared similar faith and values as I did, and he was very open about many aspects of his life and work.

And so, it has been a great experience getting to know Ralph both on and off the job. On this visit we met up for dinner once again. We enjoyed another good round of conversation, discussing family, faith, politics, and business. He is a great conversationalist and just a very good man. He oozes kindness and graciousness.

It occurs to me that those kinds of qualities predispose people to success in whatever business they are in. Business people who know what they are doing and yet have comfortable people skills and are able to engage customers effectively are well positioned for good results.

Ralph does have a spiritual motivation to do his job well and we see that in his attention to detail, his responsiveness when there are issues to be clarified, and his general communication ability. That competence combined with a humble spirit makes him a compelling person with whom to do business. Nobody likes an arrogant hotshot! My friend Ralph avoids that pitfall by maintaining a humble spirit while offering good service...a winning combination!

## **CARPE DIEM!**



On a flight from Lagos to Calabar Nigeria in 2017, I saw a young man a couple of seats behind me when the plane landed. He was a sharp looking guy with a spark of personality that intrigued me in response to my greeting to him. It was like many other on-the-fly meetings I have

had over the years...I knew I wanted to have a longer conversation with him soon. So, before we had collected luggage, we exchanged contact information I was able to call him back and set up an appointment for him to meet me at my hotel. This was my new friend James.

What ensued in that first meeting was an amazing nearly two-hour conversation that covered a wide range of topics. This man, only 18 years old at the time, had started his university education at only 15 years of age. He was already in his third year at the University of Calabar.

In the course of the conversation, I learned about the difficulty of his parents splitting up along the way and the shocking murder of his father just a few months prior to that time. I also discovered

the remarkable way that he expressed himself. He is a very articulate person who has well thought-through ideas on many topics. His insights on Nigerian culture, politics, and family life were illuminating. In addition to this, I was impressed to find that he had already established an NGO working to benefit street kids in Nigeria.

So, with such an impressive start to our friendship, we began a correspondence that lasts to this day. Interestingly, he won a fellowship to study at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida. He started there in September prior to my January visit. We made up our minds to get together again...more than once...during the days I was there.

I am eager to spend time with any young adult...but one who has exposure both to the American experience and another culture is especially captivating to me. Then when you add the factor of an especially keen intellect and communication ability...it is a GREAT pleasure. James described in great detail his impressions of American young adults, their values, their strengths and weaknesses, and the general challenge of adjustment to our culture since he arrived here in the United States. Some of his insights were so well conceived and expressed I thought was talking with a 35 year old man.

I have to always remind myself of just how young James is. At our meeting that January, he was not yet 20 years old and yet he was thoughtfully expressing himself with the sophistication of someone twice his age.

As part of my visit, James gave me a tour of his campus which was very interesting...but even more intriguing was the obvious appreciation his fellow students had for him. He has mentioned how well-accepted he has been in various groups he has worked with on campus and several people we met as we walked along warmly greeted him, showing how much they value him.

Many times we are given the impression that the emerging young adult population today is a gaggle of inarticulate, self-absorbed,

no-minds who lack perspective on what life is all about. When you run into someone like James, it gives some hope. There are those who, even in challenging situations, rise to the occasion and pursue higher thinking and expression at an early age. It is wonderful to see how James proves that good things can and do come out of the young adult demographic.

He stands as a prime example of someone who conscientiously applies himself in developing his strengths in his early years. He has *seized the day (carpe diem)* even in his youth to achieve great things. With the head start he already has experienced, his future is bright indeed. James inspires me and everyone observing him to build on our strengths and strive for excellence...and not waste any time doing it!

## **CLOSING THOUGHTS...**

And so, my trip to Florida in January 2019 provided me some fresh examples of admirable character in my friends. In fact, if we keep our eyes open, we will see character worth emulating in people all over. When we see it...we should celebrate it and encourage people for the positive influence they are having on us and others looking on.

Let's be encouraged and challenged by these truths:

1. Character still makes a difference in the quality of our relationships and community.
2. Character is still evident even in younger people today.
3. Character can and should be developed by the molding of our thinking and behavior through positive examples in our relationships, in reading good books, and in thinking and meditating.
4. Character should be celebrated when we see it positively displayed in our friends and family.

Remember Scottish author, Samuel Smiles' famous adage: *Sow a thought, reap an act; Sow an act, reap a habit; Sow a habit, reap a character; Sow a character, reap a destiny.*

May God help us in all such sowing and reaping in intentional ways for as long as we live.

## **Character Counts**

### ***Seeing the Positive In the People Around Us***

In this period of the 21<sup>st</sup> century many people think that the quality of your character is not so important as your professional success. Timothy Johnson questions that premise as he identifies qualities in eight of his close friends and suggests that the content of our character indeed is still very important as we build relationships with others each day. *Character Counts* will help you do an inventory of your own life and friendships to see how the strengths you see in others influence and enrich you in powerful ways.

Timothy A. Johnson holds the B.A. in History/Secondary Ed. from Trinity International University, the ThB and ThM from American Bible College, the D.D. from St. Thomas a Becket University, and ordination in the Evangelical Free Church. He has served as Minister of Congregational Development at Central Free Church in Minneapolis (1980-84) and since 1984 as Exec. Director of the Minnesota Church Ministries Association, based in Eden Prairie, MN. He is author of *Celebrate What Is: Discovering God's Three Dimensions of Ministry Happening in Your Church*; *The Gospel Nudge: How a Mentoring Mindset Accomplishes the Mission of the Church*; *50 Topics to Engage Men in Conversation*; and several others. He contributes to the *Spiritually Speaking* column in the Eden Prairie News. He is known as Bishop Timothy in Africa where he ministers in a growing network of pastors and churches. He lives in Eden Prairie with his wife Mary. They enjoy their son Jeffrey and daughter Andrea, who live nearby with their spouses and growing families.



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