

IN THIS ISSUE:



Whose Are You?
p.3



Crossword Puzzle
p.3



Find Your Identity
p.4

Leaving the Family Business to Build a New Legacy

by Jason Aten

Oscar Abrego was barely an adult the first time he was sent to prison.

When most elementary-aged kids were being taught the dangers of drugs, Oscar was being taught that drugs led to having cool stuff. His mom, who immigrated to the United States from Mexico as a teenager, sold drugs and bought him Nike Jordan shoes. His mother's boyfriend was also involved in crime; when Oscar was 10, the boyfriend was arrested in front of him.

When he got a little older, Oscar started selling drugs, too. But it wasn't his mother who got him into drugs. It was the gangs.

At first, he could buy whatever he wanted. Over time, however, drugs and gang life led to trouble with the law. Eventually, Oscar was



Photo by Chad Prince

Oscar had a family history of drugs and arrests. When his daughter visited him in prison, he decided it was time to make a change and break the cycle.

sentenced to three years in prison for aggravated robbery. Three years might seem like

a long time for such a young man, but unfortunately, it wasn't long enough to inspire

Oscar to do something different with his life. While in prison, he still

WHAT IS ANGEL TREE CAMPING?

Would your child like to experience the great outdoors and hear about God's love? Angel Tree Camping®, a program of Prison Fellowship®, helps children ages 5 to 18 who have an incarcerated parent or stepparent to attend a Christian summer camp* on a scholarship.

To find out if there is an Angel Tree Camp near your child, you or your child's caregiver can call 800.55.ANGEL (26435) to get connected to the Angel Tree Camping specialist in your region.

*Camps are not owned or operated by Prison Fellowship.

managed to get access to drugs. He kept the same unhealthy habits he had before his arrest. "I was in there gang-banging, and I was in there selling dope," says Oscar.

Continued on page 2

How to Find Your Passions Behind Bars

by S.L. Ray

You are so much more than just some prison ID number. You're a unique person with gifts and talents. Using these talents in the form of a regular hobby can keep your mind sharp and help lower stress. But how do you even pursue your hobbies with limited resources?

Inside Journal reviewed research articles, blogs, and personal stories to create a list of tips on how to find your passion while incarcerated.

1. Remember your childhood.

What activities brought you joy when you were younger? Even those of us

with unhealthy childhoods had hobbies and passions. Did you love to draw? Were you good at sports? Acting, writing, reading, playing an instrument? Think back to what gave you fulfillment as a very young child and find a way to recreate that as an adult. That might mean exercising in your cell, joining a prison music program, drawing every day, or starting a book club or theater group*.

2. Ask others to list your best qualities.

Find a few trusted friends and ask them what your strengths are. Then use those answers to find your passion. If most of your friends agree you're great at math, create



Photo by ugde/GettyImages

your own Sudoku book or offer to help tutor someone in math*. If most of your friends agree you're a funny storyteller, start a journal or write a screenplay or stand-up routine. The added bonus of getting feedback from friends is that you can use this information to improve

yourself. If you're told you have the gift of gab, ask yourself if you sometimes talk too much and could stand to work on your listening skills.

3. Find inspiration in others.

If you hear a song that touches your soul, ask

yourself what it was about that song you loved so much. Was it the lyrics? Try poetry. Was it the sound of the instruments? Try finding books in the prison library about writing composition or see if your facility offers music classes. Reading biographies and autobiographies is also helpful. There are some fascinating people in the world. If their talents impress you, try them out yourself. Look around at fellow prisoners who inspire you.

4. Think outside the box.

Just because you're in a prison cell doesn't mean you can't get creative. Find

Continued on page 2

Letters to the Editor

Jason, Florida

I have been on the streets and in and out of boys' homes, juvenile facilities, and prisons all my life. I have lost many people that I loved. I haven't heard from my children or girlfriend in years, I have no family, and I'm tired of all the old ways of drugs, robbing, stealing, and all the false love of bad relationships, and false belonging in the brotherhood (gang)! I don't know nothing but the streets! All I've ever wanted is someone to love and have a family! And reading Inside Journal today I saw this ad to have my own personal Bible and to learn God's Word and love. I want to change my life. I feel as if I'm blind. I want to belong and begin a new life!

Dear Jason:

Thanks for reading! The old

hymn "Amazing Grace" says, "I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." Continue to seek God's guidance. And go find others who seek Him, too. It's not always easy to follow a new path, but with God, you're never alone.

Ronald, California

When I came to the hole, I can't tell you how I felt. Lost? Alone? Stupid? So many different feelings. I can tell you that I no longer fit in when it comes to prison. I'm a seasoned convict, and I cried even though eyes were on me. I felt like I betrayed myself. How did I let this happen? Day in, day out, my anxiety filled the room and threatened to overwhelm me. ... I asked the chaplain for a Daily Bread. Instead, he hands me an Inside

Journal. One of the articles really hit me hard. So here I sit, after 18 years in prison, sitting in segregation, with less than a year left, and all signs pointing to God going through incredible lengths to restore my relationship with Him. I've spent years preparing myself for release and am now ready to accept the last piece of my puzzle: God.

Dear Ronald:

God loves you, and there's nothing He wouldn't do to make you part of His family. As you get ready go home, we pray His love will keep you focused. We encourage you to find a Celebrate Recovery chapter—there are thousands nationwide—so that you'll have a welcoming community that understands life's hurts, habits, and hang-ups. Learn more at celebraterecovery.org. ■

Find Your Passions Continued from page 1

clever ways for using the items you're allowed. Check the commissary for items that might have unexpected purposes. Have you always loved to cook? Experiment with different items to create unique cuisine behind bars. (Inside Journal ran two recipes articles in Spring 2019 and Fall 2019; see if your library or chaplain keeps old copies.) Are you artistic? Draw pictures or create cards as low-cost gifts for loved ones. Are you poetic? Try spoken word, rap, or even acrostic poetry, where you write a word or name vertically down the left side of the paper and then use each letter to start a separate phrase going left to right.

5. Don't stop until you find your passion.

Like the old saying goes, you'll never know unless you

try. Figure out what classes you're allowed to take. Find out which programs involve the fine arts. Ask about volunteer opportunities for mentoring, pen-pal letter writing, tutoring, and other services. Try a variety of activities and make a note of your reaction to each. If you experiment long enough, you'll eventually find the talents and gifts that make you tick. And when you find them, stick to them. Make a schedule if necessary. Consistency will help strengthen your skills and reduce your stress.

People who are incarcerated with limited resources are some of the most creative, inventive people around. That includes you. Your passions and talents are unique and priceless, so go find them, and serve your time well.

*Be sure to ask permission before starting any group and follow all your facility's rules and regulations. ■

A New Legacy

Continued from page 1

A valuable influence

Once Oscar was released, the bad habits continued. More selling drugs, more gang-banging, more trouble, and eventually, more prison. This time, though, it wasn't just the sentence—six years—that was different. Oscar was about to enter prison while leaving behind something far more valuable than a pair of Jordans—his 3-year-old daughter.

"The biggest thing that cut me was my daughter saying, 'Daddy, are you coming home tomorrow?' every time she'd come [visit] ... [I thought], this baby doesn't deserve this," says Oscar.

He decided it was time to turn his life around, not for his own sake, but for hers. An older prisoner gave Oscar an easy-to-read Bible. The things he read began to make sense to him. "So," he said, "I decided to give my life to Christ."

Oscar became part of the Prison Fellowship Academy®, an intensive, biblically based program. Through

the Academy, God started working on Oscar's heart and changing him from the inside out.

"[The Academy] was definitely a blessing in my life because, as I started getting deeper into the things of God at the Academy, I started to let down a lot of guards, a lot of old beliefs," says Oscar. In addition to the impact the Academy was making, the Prison Fellowship Angel Tree® program was also making an impact on Oscar's relationship with his daughter. The program allowed him to provide Christmas gifts and a personalized message to her through volunteers on the outside.

Beyond grateful

Oscar has come a long way from the young boy with a new pair of Jordans and a future full of trouble. Today he volunteers at a summer camp for children of incarcerated parents through the Angel Tree Camping program. (See green box, page 1.) At camp, Oscar has an opportunity to

Subscription Info

At Inside Journal® (IJ), we receive many letters each week from prisoners asking for subscriptions to our newspaper. However, because of staff and budget limitations, IJ is only available in bulk shipments to your chaplain, programming coordinator, or a volunteer who visits your facility. Chaplains, to set up these shipments for free, please contact our editorial staff at P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790 or insidejournal@pfm.org.

help kids who face many of the same challenges he did growing up.

He had been out for less than a year when his pastor challenged him to make his faith real by sharing it with kids at camp by leading worship. Even though Oscar doesn't play an instrument or sing, he takes popular songs the kids know, changes the

words to glorify God, and then leads the kids in worship.

"They love it, and I love them," Oscar says about his experience with the kids over the last three years. "Man, I'm extremely grateful for the opportunity to come here and volunteer."

Oscar uses the word grateful to describe a lot of his life today. One thing

he's especially thankful for? Getting to spend more time with his daughter, who is now in junior high. Oscar loves getting to be there for her. "I'm proud of him," she says of her dad.

Oscar is also grateful for the chance to help other young men chase after something bigger and better than a pair of Jordans. ■



Photo by Chad Prince

GET EQUIPPED IN GOD'S WORD!

Free Bible Correspondence Courses—Enroll Today!

ALL YOU NEED IS A BIBLE, A PENCIL, AND A WILLING HEART.

In the last 18 years, more than 35,000 students have taken our courses.

- Receive lessons in the mail
- Earn certificates of completion for each course
- Build spiritual strength, character, and endurance
- Receive personalized comments and encouragement (trained volunteers review and respond to each lesson)



Upon completing the 35 self-paced lessons, you may earn 6 credit hours at Berean Bible Institute, Slinger, WI.

Bereanbibleinstitute.org



Prison Mission Association
PO Box 2300
Port Orchard, WA 98366

Please enroll by writing us at the address above and be sure to include:

- Your name and ID#
- Institution Name
- Institution Address
- City, State, ZIP

Our lessons are also available for download at www.prisonmission.org

Who Are You? Whose Are You?

by S.L. Ray

Throughout your life, you've been described by other people.

You've been given different titles and identities, whether you liked them or not. When you're in prison, you get called Inmate. Before prison, you might have been called Store Manager. Or maybe Gang Leader, or Parolee, or Dad. Some people get titles based on rank. Others get titles based on reputation. But words like "addict" or "thief" describe how someone behaves, not who someone is.

So the big question becomes: Who even are you? Is your identity found in someone else's opinion of you? Or in how much money you make or your latest achievement? If that were true, your identity would change depending on the circumstances of the moment.

An unshakable identity

Thankfully, your most important identity isn't based on mood or circumstance. That identity is firm: you are God's creation.

Does God measure people based on how "good" they've been lately? Does He like



Photo by baona/Getty Images

you more if you've been reading the Bible or going to chapel?

The answer is "no." He loves us with no strings attached. He says if we accept Him into our lives, then we are His children. Your identity as a child of God can't be stolen from you. It isn't earned by your actions or stripped away by your mistakes. It isn't based on what other people think of you. God doesn't value you based on how well-behaved you were as a kid, or what crimes you've committed, or how hard you pray. You can be secure in your identity as a child of God in an unsecure world.

Imagine the most loving parent. Would that parent stop loving their child if that child misbehaved? No. Sure, the parent would guide the child, teach the child, or discipline the child. But no matter how badly the kid messed up, the parent would still love that child

unconditionally. And God's love for us is even more perfect than the most loving parent we can imagine.

Sometimes, God's children focus too much on being "good," as if God will love them more if they try harder. But your identity doesn't come from how well you "perform" as a Christian. If you aren't yet good at talking to God through prayer or hearing from God through reading the Bible, you don't suddenly lose your identity as a child of God.

That being said, if you pray and read the Bible regularly, it will strengthen your relationship with the Lord. And it will bring you a better sense of spiritual discipline to lean into God's peace more easily. Just like a child grows up and matures, so does a child of God.

Not easier, but better

Let's get something straight. When you finally

ARE YOU GOOD ENOUGH?

How do you know if you're "good enough"?

In 2 Corinthians 12:9, God says, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." In Him, you are good enough! No need to earn God's love or to seek approval from others. Rest in the peace that God's grace is a free gift, and if you have accepted Jesus into your life as your savior, your identity as a child of God is solid. If you're not sure how to receive God's grace, start with this simple prayer:

"Dear God, please show me that Your grace is all I need. Help me stop trying to find my identity in others' opinions, or in how 'good' I'm being. Let me be content in who I am as Your child. Amen."

To discover how to follow Jesus, sign up for a free correspondence Bible study through one of our trusted partner organizations. Just write to "My Identity," c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790. To learn more about free correspondence Bible courses, see offer on page 2.

identify yourself as a child of God, that does not mean you will now have an easy, trouble-free life.

Nowhere in the Bible does it say we'll have fewer problems or be more well-liked if we follow Jesus. In fact, Matthew 10:22 even says, "And all nations will hate you because you are my followers." And 1 Peter 4:12 says, "Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you."

But hold on—there's more to those verses! Matthew 10:22 continues, "But everyone who endures to the end will be saved." And 1 Peter 4:14 goes on to say, "If [people insult you] because you bear the name of Christ, you will be blessed, for the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you."

The next time the world is trying to insult you or define you, just remember that you are a child of God. And that is all the identity you will ever need. ■

RECIPE CORNER

Prison Lasagna Supreme

(submitted by James Grindle, South Carolina)

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 cans of ravioli
- 1 can of mushrooms, drained and dried
- 1 spicy beef sausage, diced
- 1 small onion, diced
- 1 small green pepper, diced
- 8 slices of cheese
- 4 single-serving bags of Cheez-It crackers (or similar), crushed
- 2 packages of Captain's Wafers (or any saltine/soda crackers), optional

*Mix mushrooms, sausage, onion, and green pepper in bowl. Microwave on high for five minutes. Put a layer of ravioli in the bottom of a second bowl. Add several spoonfuls of mushroom mixture over ravioli. Next, sprinkle a bag of Cheez-Its and a half package of Captain's Waters. Then layer with sliced cheese. Continue the layering process until all ingredients are used. Finish with a final layer of sliced cheese and crushed Cheez-Its. Heat in microwave for 5-6 minutes or until cheese is melted. Let sit for a few minutes and enjoy.

*Be sure to comply with your facility's rules and regulations whenever cooking.

IDENTITY CHALLENGE:

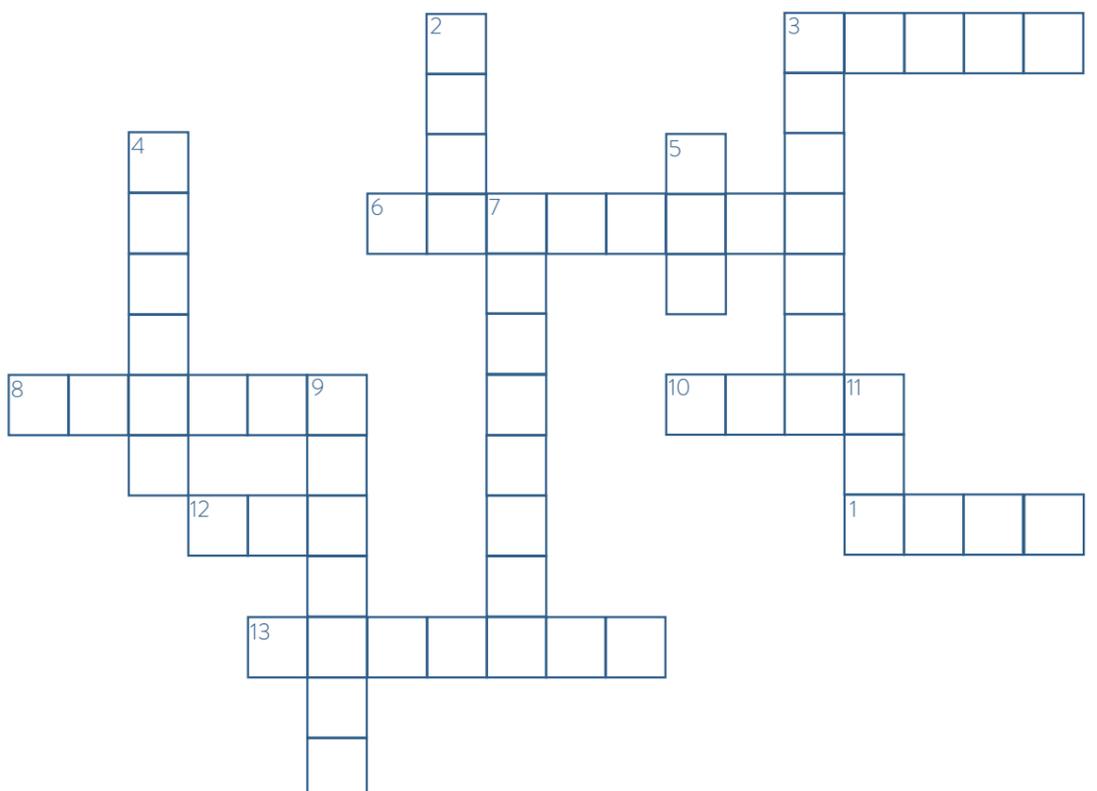
How quickly can you solve this crossword? Answers on p.4.

ACROSS:

- 1 *The Bourne Identity* actor: ___ Damon.
- 3 A ___ certificate is issued when you are born.
- 6 A booklet used to travel internationally.
- 8 Me, ___, and I.
- 10 Opposite of "FOUND."
- 12 The male version of "DAUGHTER."
- 13 The identity card required to drive a car.

DOWN:

- 2 Popular credit card (not MasterCard).
- 3 Musicians John, Paul, George, and Ringo: The ___.
- 4 "Christian" literally means "of ___."
- 5 Opposite of "ME."
- 7 Clark Kent is the secret identity of ___.
- 9 2003 Disney Movie: ___ *Nemo*.
- 11 Nickname for Thomas.



Finding Your Identity from the Inside Out

IJ: What else is helpful for finding your identity on the outside?

TL: A good faith community. People are much less at risk of relapse or returning to any kind of criminal activity if they find friendships in a church home, and especially a church that's welcoming to former prisoners. In prison, people often place their faith in Jesus and find their identity in Him. And that relationship with Jesus involves other people, to help anchor and deepen their values. Well, that's even more critical when you leave prison. In prison or jail, there aren't as many temptations, you have more time on your hands, and you can study a lot. But when you're released, you have a wider range of decisions to make, and you don't have the level of people keeping you in check. Without a network of support, it's a lot harder to stay on the right path. People who find community on the outside tend to do well. People who don't find community tend to struggle.

IJ: How long does the reentry process take?

TL: Figuring out who you are in Christ, or who you are as a person, takes time. Several former prisoners I worked with told me it took them a year after getting out to find out who they are. In fact, research says it



Photo by malerapas/Getty Images

Many of our readers will be released at some point. But who will you be on the outside? Inside Journal spoke with Prison Fellowship Academy Reentry Manager Tom Lundquist about finding your identity after release: both your literal identity (ID cards and bank accounts) and your figurative identity (value and purpose).

Inside Journal: After being released, how can someone get a driver's license or other identifying documents?

Tom Lundquist: There's such a spectrum of how things work, depending on your conditions of release. Reentry services vary from county to county. Some counties have "wraparound" reentry services. Many prisons have transitional services. In Minnesota prisons, the DOC has transition coordinators that assist in obtaining IDs, birth certificates, and driver's licenses, even paying some fees for you. Before you do anything, first find out what your permissions are from your parole agents. Then, based on your situation, you

can start finding the right resources to help you.

IJ: What about opening a bank account and managing money after release?

TL: When someone is released from prison, the money that they earned in prison is put into an account. They'll have money on their books and be given a debit card. That card can be used right after release.

If you walk into a bank, you may get coaching there as far as how to open a bank account. For a credit card, you might have to start off with a bank credit card. That's OK in the beginning. It keeps your money all in one spot.

IJ: How can someone learn the latest technology on a smartphone and find the right apps, especially someone who has been incarcerated a long time?

TL: I've noticed that if newly released citizens don't have restrictions against a smartphone, they'll often get one the day after release. A smartphone opens up all sorts of options.

You may need coaching on how to use a smartphone. If your prison has a mentor,

that's a good way to get help. Otherwise, some cities have community organizations that will also walk you through things like how to get access to bus cards, which banks are best to open an account in. Once you get a smartphone, you'll have a lot more options, with banking apps, organizing apps, all kinds of helpful apps—even ride-share apps to help get to a job interview.

IJ: What tips can you share for the post-release job search?

TL: When it comes to finding work, if you have conditions that prevent you from accessing the internet, you'll need to find a workforce center. Those are places where you can go in and people will coach you on the internet. And it's all filtered, so you can't access things that are too personal or improper, but you can access email. Also, some states have good resources for finding felon-friendly jobs. In some states, the workforce centers have trained staff to assist formerly incarcerated men and women to find jobs that are not as impacted by their past felony convictions.

takes three years on average to get established. Sifting through the temptations, the freedoms, the stresses, and the faith piece can be a slow process of transformation. You might even flourish for a while but then start to drift. One man after his release started off attending a huge church but didn't find any friendships there. He wondered if simply attending church but not getting to know other people is what Christianity on the outside was supposed to look like. But then he found a smaller church with real friendships. This church was also very intentional in welcoming those who were incarcerated.

It says in 2 Chronicles 15:7, "But as for you, be strong and courageous, for your work will be rewarded." Be patient with yourself and include others in your reentry process. Pursue your identity, find your community, and build your support. ■

For help finding employment after your release, start with job search websites like [indeed.com](https://www.indeed.com) and [70millionjobs.com](https://www.70millionjobs.com). Also visit [prisonfellowship.org/resources](https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources) and scroll down to the section called "Preparing for Reentry." There, you will find a lot of resources, including tools for job searching and writing a resume, tips for family, books to check out, a national directory for reentry, and more. Be sure to follow all your release conditions and parole rules.

News + Notes

Former Prisoners Go Behind Bars—for Good

In fall 2019 in Tyler, Texas, some former prisoners went back behind bars. But this time, it was for a good cause. They joined Prison Fellowship and CityFest, an outreach of the Luis Palau Association, to bring a life-changing message—that in Christ, even the loneliest prison cell can be a place of freedom.

Prison Fellowship puts on Hope Events™ with inspiring speakers, musical guests, and other attractions at prisons all over the country. At this Hope Event, StuntDudes, a team of professional athletes who put on live action sports shows, demonstrated their skills with ramps and BMX bikes. Incarcerated men came out on the yard, and incarcerated women stood nearby, behind a fence. Their voices joined together to cheer on the

speakers and to enjoy the music of Richard Andrew, a formerly incarcerated singer/songwriter.

Andrew Palau of CityFest delivered the Gospel message to the many prisoners who had gathered in the yard to listen. A "sea" of people came forward for prayer, Richard recalls. Jennifer Lowrey, Prison Fellowship's national director of Hope Events, added, "It was really powerful. You could just feel the Spirit there on the yard."

Michigan Finally Raises the Age

Come October 2021, 17-year-olds in Michigan will no longer automatically be treated as adults. Governor Gretchen Whitmer signed the bill in late October 2019. Once the law is in effect, Michigan will join most other states in treating 17-year-olds as juveniles.

In an opinion piece written before the bill was signed, Prison Fellowship's senior vice president of advocacy and public policy Craig DeRoche wrote, "Locking up 17-year-olds with adults is counterproductive and makes our neighborhoods less safe. Further, it disregards our young people's tremendous potential for change and redemption."

State Senator Sylvia Santana, D-Detroit, sponsored the bill. According to a report by Michigan Radio, she said, "What we need to do is educate individuals, not lock them up and throw away the key." The change could affect thousands of young people. The Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency found that within a span of

10 years, more than 19,000 17-year-olds who committed crimes had been treated as adults in the state's criminal justice system. ■

Crossword: ANSWER KEY



© 2020 by Prison Fellowship
INSIDE JOURNAL®
 is published four times a year by
 Prison Fellowship,
 P.O. Box 1790,
 Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.
[prisonfellowship.org](https://www.prisonfellowship.org)
 703.478.0100

Editorial Manager:
M.M. White

Managing Editor:
S.L. Ray

Writers:
Jason Aten, S.L. Ray

Graphic Designer:
N. Schmidgall

A member of the Evangelical
 Council for Financial
 Accountability and the American
 Correctional Association.

Inside Journal® is a
 registered trademark of
 Prison Fellowship®.