











We are so excited for Kids Africa 2024, which will run alongside Sisters of Africa Conference 2, from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> of September! Kids Africa is always a special time for the kids, and this year we look forward to seeing each of them flourish and grow in their faith as they learn about NURTURE through age-appropriate and impactful ministry. They will enjoy loads of fun games, exciting arts and crafts, incredible worship, interaction with their favourite teachers and characters and much, much more! So, parents of kids aged 12 months to Grade 7 (age 13), make sure your kids don't miss out. Register them for Kids Africa. It won't be the same without them and we cannot wait to see them there!

\*Moms, remember, there will be no Kids Africa during Sisters of Africa Conference 1 running from the 10th to 12th of September.



## Hello to all God's gorgeous girls!

Welcome to Sisters of Africa 2024! Preparations are well underway to host our best conferences ever. These conferences exists to inspire, motivate and mobilise you to be a vessel in God's hand. If you have been before, welcome back later this year and thank you for joining the journey, which has existed for twenty-four years. If you are new, we have been waiting for you beautiful one, and we are already praying for you to have a life changing experience. We are convinced that if we open our hearts and lean in fully to all that God has to say to us and act in obedience to His Word, we will be transformed, renewed and see breakthroughs like never before.

Our theme this year is NURTURE and we are already learning so much from the Word of God in our monthly Sisters meetings. The beautiful thing about nurture is that God is our nurturer and He created women to nurture. We can only imagine what more God will reveal to us this year. We are offering two back-to-back conferences again and conference two is at full capacity. Girls, with only a few months to go, our prayer is that you will register soon and make your way to Rivers Church in Sandton, South Africa.

We are also praying that you will bring women in your world along with you to be part of what God will do. If you are planning to attend on your own, you will not feel alone as our hospitality team will be there to welcome you and connect you with new friends.

As per our custom, the children (boys and girls) will have their own Kids Africa Conference in a safe and secure children's venue on the same campus. Please note that we are only offering Kids Africa Conference during conference two. It will be wonderful that while you are ministered to, your little ones will enjoy their own conference with the same theme, NURTURE.

Our speakers this year are all new to Sisters of Africa. I am happy to introduce you to Lisa Young and her daughter, Landra Young Hughes, both from Fellowship Church in Dallas, Texas, and Stephanie Ike Okafor from ONE, A Potter's House Church in Los Angeles, California. They are all authors and doing amazing things for God, and their ministry is going to be rich and God-breathed.

All you have to do now, if you haven't already done so, is to register and plan to be here. We look forward to seeing and welcoming you! Enjoy the articles in the magazine, which were carefully chosen to inspire and bless. May the magazine be a tool in your hand to inspire other women in your world.

Kind regards, Wilma Olivier (Conference Host)











## GOD DESIGNED WOMEN TO NURTURE

#### BY WILMA OLIVIER

It is good to remind ourselves that we are created in the image of God. We have been beautifully fashioned for purpose.

Genesis 1:27 (NLT2) "So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

Women reflect the attributes of God in a way that men do not. Men are nurturers too, but women nurture differently and more intensely. To nurture is in the very nature of how God created and designed women. God gave us that side of His character and nature to represent Him on the earth.

In speaking to His people, God likened Himself to a nursing mother.

Isaiah 49:15 (NIV) "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!"

#### Nurture: (a verb)

- To give tender care and protection to a child, a young animal or a plant, helping it grow and develop.
- To encourage and train somebody or something to grow, develop, thrive and be successful.

Think of a plant that is showing signs of not thriving and is growing skew. One would need to find a stake to place in the soil, and tie the plant to the upright and sturdy stick to direct the shrub to grow upright and in the right direction. We do that with trees and we do that with our children. We direct and nurture them in the ways of God, to grow upright in Him. (Proverbs 22:6).

#### Nurture is in our nature

In most societies, women are the ones who care for the young, the sick and the elderly. We naturally lean towards acts of kindness and care. We have that touch and it is a beautiful thing. I have always said that the Sisters Women's Ministry exists to place value on women. We have done that for twenty-four years and it has been a joy.

Not only have we nurtured within our walls but also outside, through the Rivers Foundation and other foundations. We supply sanitary items to teenage girls, and for the boys, we supply toiletries. We provide children with food, shoes, clothing and more. We bless the Gogos (grannies) with blankets. We also bless the disabled with blankets. We do not only supply needs, but on our behalf, the team physically visits, hugs and loves on these precious people.

#### Nurturing is a labour of love

Many women in history were willing to give their lives while nurturing others, if necessary, because they cared. They displayed a nurturing spirit. A few women come to mind. They are an example and inspiration.

a) Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa and Sophia Williams-De Bruyn, South African women who led the 20,000 women's march under the banner of the Federation of South African Women.

This took place on the 9th of August 1956 in Pretoria, South Africa. The aim was to object to the introduction of the apartheid pass laws for black women in 1952, and the presentation of a petition was handed to the then Prime Minister, J.G. Strijdom. The petition addressed needs such as childcare provisions, education, marriage and



guardianship of children. At the core of the petition were their hearts of compassion for families and children. That law required non-whites in South Africa to carry certain documents, which gave them access to restricted areas. Pass laws were an instrument of apartheid until the government ended the requirement to carry documentation in 1986.

b) Mother Teresa, a nun who had no children of her own but was called to care for the poor in India.

"I am a little pencil in God's hands. He does the thinking. He does the writing. He does everything and sometimes it is really hard because it is a broken pencil and He has to sharpen it a little more."

That pencil wrote an incredible legacy and story. The question is, what will our pencil write?

c) Corrie and Betsie Ten Boom, two sisters who during World War Two saved many persecuted Jews and over two hundred Jewish babies from the Nazis in Holland.

Betsie died in the Ravensbrück concentration camp and paid the ultimate price for compassion and love. Corrie lived to the age of ninety-one, proclaiming the gospel and the message of forgiveness.

d) Everyday older women who teach the younger women.

We read in Titus 2 how the older women are called upon to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, taking care of their homes, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, so that the Word of God is not harmed. These everyday older women teach from their own journey, the mistakes they have made and the lessons they have learned. Experience is a great teacher.

Scripture tells us that the way we train and nurture one another as women holds value. A woman's nurturing should point others to the gospel and grow another's faith in Christ. It is equipping one another for every good work that God has put in front of us. In the church, it may be guiding the teenager volunteering in Children's Church, taking care of babies, the young woman at university helping the high school student, or the empty nester mentoring a new mom. Acting in a motherly way, training and developing lives, makes us more womanly.

Some of the main things taught by the older women are:

Love and respect your husband

I recently found a note I used as a bookmark in a book from years ago. On it, I wrote, 'God love me through André and love André through me.' I prayed that prayer long ago and started once again to pray that prayer now in our 51st year of marriage.

To love your husband is to nurture him and to remember your marriage vows. Husbands love it when we show them respect and submit to them as the head of the home. Show him kindness in various ways. When he returns home from a business trip or even a long day at work, let your kids witness how you fuss over him with treats and surprises so that he will feel the nurturing. Be intentional, have fun and provide him emotional support.

• Nurture and love your children

God created us to nurture our children. People in this new world have different views of what that means. They may no longer be willing or see the need to make the sacrifices mothers in the past made.

"A woman bleeds when she gives birth, but that is only the beginning of the bleeding." Stasi Eldrige

What about women who have not given birth to children of their own? They can still nurture the students and children of family and friends.

"I believe that whether or not a woman has children, she is called to embrace the discipline of nurturing [furthering the development of and training another]. This aspect of womanhood goes far beyond the physical bearing of children." Barbara Hughes

#### The rewards and results of nurture

"Mothering is at the essence of womanhood. To live out life as a nurturer in this self-centred, godless culture will cost you. But the rewards are rich indeed."

Barbara Hughes

The rewards are that nurture has built purpose into everything that is good on the earth and it will be evident in many ways. Nurture has a

knock-on effect. It blossoms. The hope is always that those we nurture will in turn become nurturers.

"I want women nurtured well, so that they can in turn enlarge the life of others." Lisa Bevere

We look at the life of Timothy and his great achievements in ministry. It was as a direct result of the faith of his mother Lois and grandmother Eunice. (2 Timothy 1:5) We can do the same for our kids and grandkids. Put in the effort, and remember that little tree needs pruning and quidance in the faith.

We were designed to nurture. It is in our nature. Let us be women who embrace this God-given design and shine for God like stars in the universe.

Wilma has a specific passion to build into women's lives. She heads up a successful women's ministry called Sisters, and hosts the annual Sisters of Africa Women's Conference through which she aims to mentor, motivate and mobilise women to be all they can be for the cause of Christ. She is also the author of three books; Small Beginnings, Life as a Chocolate Cake and Keep Hope Alive. She has been married to Ps André for fifty-one years and have three children and four grandchildren.





















### 2023 MEMORIES











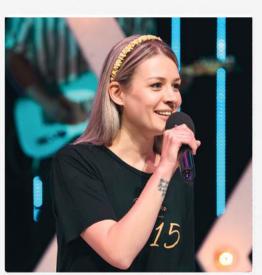








**2023 MEMORIES** 







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# CREATING AND NURTURING THE JOURNEY OF THE MAGAZINE

#### BY SIMI RANKIN

Back in 2009 I was getting ready to compile ideas for a conference brochure. I had aesthetics laid out, items designed and special print finishes in mind to share. We met a month before we were meant to launch (not go to print, but launch) and the idea was born to create a magazine instead of a brochure.

It was unknown territory and let me tell you, while on the aesthetic side it seems pretty straight forward, making a magazine from scratch is a lot of work no one even considers. It's one thing to have photoshoots and layouts, it's another to curate articles, edit pages and pages of text, get magazine quality images from your contributors, not to mention that the original budget went straight out the window. The only way to fund this project was to sell pages for adverts, which was also a daily dance of configuring what goes on which page as sponsors came and went. The design logistics were also foreign to me; I'd never designed anything using the software required before, there were technical aspects of magazine print that I had to learn from scratch and there was the pressure to make it look "real", as in have it resemble the magazines available on the shelves in stores. We went out and bought piles of glossy magazines like Elle, Vogue, Marie Claire, Cosmopolitan, even Heat and the You magazine to see what aesthetics could be replicated and what made these magazines jump off the shelves.

With only three weeks to make it happen, along with all other work having to somehow still get completed, there were days when I never saw

the sun, as I worked in an office with no windows and I would arrive before sunrise and leave after sunset. Once the magazine was done, I just had to celebrate the sheer audacity of completing a project like this, with a team of only four or so people (including one photographer and one editor/proofreader).

There was a vague sense of excitement at creating something so unprecedented, as no one knew what to expect from the project and there were a lot of other things that had to be put on hold in order to make this possible. So many wanted to see what the fuss was about and if we really were making something as big as we'd been saying.

I chuckle at the first magazine now, with its flimsy sixty-eight pages, cheesy one-page articles and journalistic terms we tried to adapt to our own context (such as editor in chief, production manager and sales consultant). No one will ever understand how much went into that project with no point of reference or anyone's help. I designed and planned fourteen of them, including a brochure one year that fell short of expectations, as we tried to move away from what we'd always done. The Sisters magazine was here to stay it seemed, but it needed to change and grow, as interest in making this project waned from contributors.

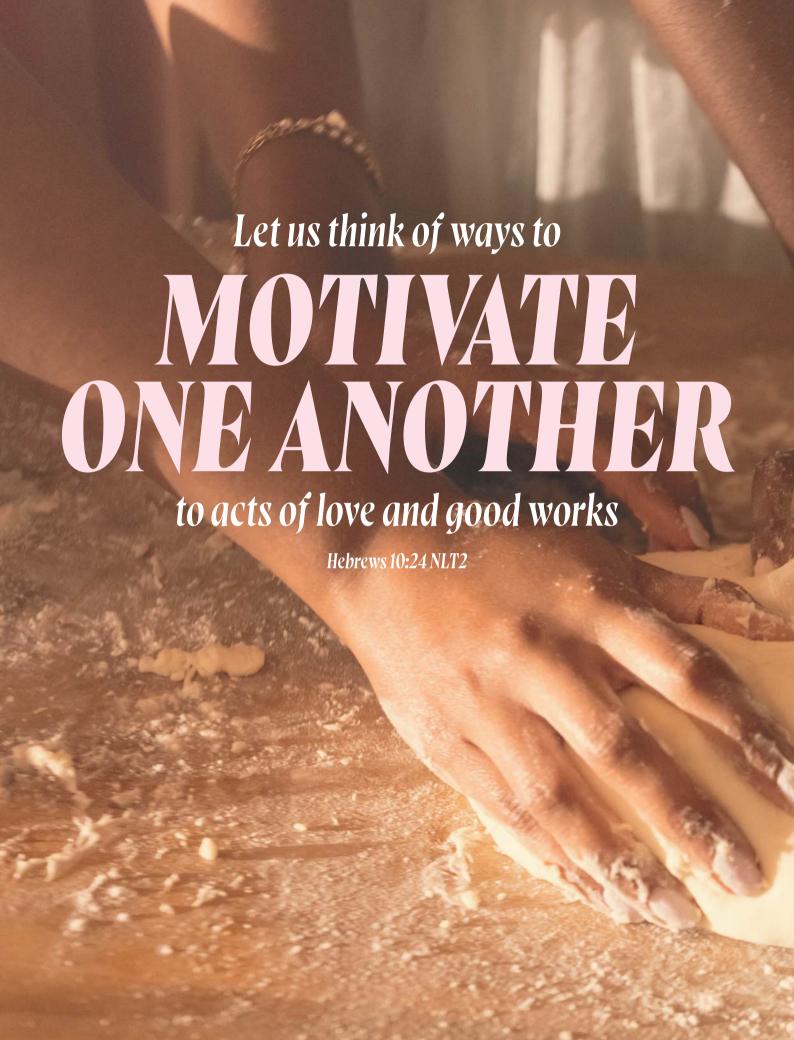
Don't get me wrong, the excitement for launch night was always there, but we had to build that from the ground up and convince everyone that Sisters Night in May needed to be a big party (you wouldn't want to put in all that work and then just quietly hand it out-it needed to point to conference and get ladies to register, which is the project's entire purpose). And so, every May (although there was one April), the Sisters of Africa magazine came out. The methods became more streamlined, we planned numerous shoots over several days each year, a theme for the written content was established for each publication and everyone knew to make room for this project in their departments and calendars. As the years passed, it became more and more like a glossy brochure and finally, in 2019 (a whole 10 years later), we no longer needed to fund it by selling adverts. It was finally its own thing, no longer based on big name magazines in stores but a standalone project that spoke for itself. It was amazing to see the creativity that came out every year from all the people I had roped in (many initially against their will, but like I've said in previous years, it takes a village) and how the print and video aspect was married every time. I've had many ambitious and eager people come ask me for "tips" and ask who "makes" it for us,

and I have to hold back laughter. It's one thing to find a printer to churn it out (which is akin to the commitment required to buy a car) but content does not create itself out of thin air and the design doesn't assemble itself. There have been many naysayers as we've done this thing year after year, but I've always pointed back to previous projects and how we somehow got through - if we could survive the advertisers who bailed on us in 2011, we can survive this; if we can survive the numerous, rainy reshoots of 2013, we can survive this; if we can survive having no more cover girl for many, unspecified years. we can survive this; if we can survive most of the magazine team getting COVID and the printer trying to make the deadline earlier, we can survive this.

I've always said that the best part is when it's all over, as in, everyone has a copy in their hands. There have been fun days at shoots, great times brainstorming and little adventures to locations and suppliers, but nothing is better than seeing the end result.

While the bare soil doesn't have to be ploughed anymore and the trees have grown quite tall over the years, the garden still needs care, attention and continuous watering. There are weeds (and even plants) that need to be pruned on a regular basis, and more land to tend to as this expands. Whatever the future holds, you've got this!

Simi Rankin is on staff at Rivers Sandton and is part of the Pastoral team. She has been on staff for seventeen years and formerly worked in design, making fourteen of the Sisters magazines. She is an avid reader and painter. She has been married to Phil for three years and the proud mother of a thriving orchid!







## CAN MY MARRIAGE SURVIVE THE ROUGH SEAS OF PAIN?

#### BY LISA YOUNG

Pain is a part of everyone's life and whether we are sailing through marriage on calm and steady seas or whether we are a bit seasick from the common problems that many marriages face, how do we respond when a big wave hits?

These tsunami type waves can come in many forms. It could be a critical health issue, the loss of a job, depression, anxiety, the death of a loved one and so much more. We don't like to think about these things or consider that they may become a part of our lives. But, the hard reality is that at some point we will experience a difficult season with pain at the forefront.

There are one of three categories in which you might find yourself: either you have just come through a season of pain, you are in a season of pain right now, or your painful season is up ahead. Wherever you find yourself along this path, how can you deal with the pain and keep your marriage afloat? And not only keep your marriage afloat, but keep it moving in the direction God wants it to move!

Studies show that pain or hardship of any kind can have adverse effects on even the strongest marriages. This pain presents itself in many ways and can wreak havoc if not dealt with wisely.

Marriage is a union of two individuals, often, two very different individuals. These differences can be highlighted in negative ways when a painful situation is experienced. My husband Ed and I have been married for over 42 years, which is no small task! Throughout these decades of marriage, we have experienced times of smooth sailing when life seemed to be hitting on all cylinders.

But, the defining moments of our marriage have been experienced in the most difficult of times. One such occurrence was in January of 2021 when our eldest daughter, LeeBeth, lost her battle with addiction. Our beautiful daughter, who loved Jesus, entered Heaven long before we thought she would. Our family and our marriage were shaken to the core!

How does a marriage survive seasons of severe pain? Sadly, divorce rates increase among marriages that face these monumental waves of pain and hardship. Is there any way for us to navigate through this without it taking its toll on the unity, love and devotion that have been the components of our marriage thus far?

Ed and I are a testimony to this possibility. Marriage isn't the easiest thing, but it can become the greatest thing, if we are willing to work! Work is what we do to have a great marriage in the best of times but, in the throes of pain and hurt, we must take our work quotient to a new level.

I'd like to share a few tools that we used to succeed in our marriage, despite the surmounting pain we experienced.

#### Pain and suffering are a reality of life

When pain hit us hard we knew that it wasn't anyone's fault or responsibility. We live in a fallen world that has been this way since Adam and Eve messed up in the Garden. From that point on, we have faced adversity and hardship in life. But, we still want to blame someone for what we are experiencing. Often, we choose to blame God for the mess we are in. If He is a good God. He wouldn't allow this horrible thing to happen. God is good all of the time. His character never changes and He is intrinsically good. He gave us free will just as He did Adam and Eve. We are responsible for our fallenness, not God. Also, we blame or show anger towards the person closest to us, our spouse. We have to be aware of our anger and the origin of it. Anger is a secondary emotion and is likely the result of disappointment. fear and uncertainty. If we recognize that pain is a part of life, we can assimilate it without seeking a scapegoat.

#### Anchors are necessary in rough seas

An anchor is a critical component of a boat. It must be strong and secure to hold the boat in place during the windiest of times. Too often in life we depend on faulty anchors to hold us steadily during a painful storm. We think a relationship, money, climbing the ladder of success, being married or even having a family will hold us steady when the winds blow, but none of these things can keep us secure. Jesus is our only anchor. Hebrews 6:19 says, "We have this hope, an anchor for our soul." This hope is Jesus, who through His strength and His power can keep us steady in the most difficult circumstances. We must trust Him and hold on to the truth of His word so that we remain steady. Your spouse isn't an adequate anchor.

## Only Jesus can hold you and only Jesus can hold your spouse!

#### Isolation is never our friend

There is a tendency to draw away when going through pain. There is a time to be alone and process pain prayerfully, but too often we feel like no one will understand, and we draw away and isolate. Community is crucial in healing. A car crash victim who has sustained injuries doesn't go home with all of the bruises and lacerations. They go to the hospital for care and treatment. Whether it is a trusted friend, a community group or a wise therapist, lean in, not out. This is why the church is so crucial. When LeeBeth died, we were surrounded by those who were part of our church. They were an army of prayer warriors who brought food, texted prayers and stood with us, holding us up when we couldn't stand on our own. The temptation is to draw away to find comfort in your isolation but you as a couple need support that is found among others.

#### Communicate your pain quotient

Couples are individuals who are joined together by the covenant of marriage. Although God considers us "one flesh", we are still two people with different personalities and coping mechanisms. Our spouse doesn't have telepathy and doesn't necessarily know what we are feeling at any given time. In pain and grief, it is important to share how you are feeling. Be honest and vulnerable with each other so that you can offer the best support. It is ok not to be ok, especially with your spouse!

#### Recommit your life and your marriage to your anchor, Jesus!

We often ask "why" when going through pain and suffering. "Why God? Why is this happening to me, to us?" This is normal and we even see examples of this in the Bible. The most prevalent being King David as he cried out to God in the Psalms. God can take our questions. He loves us so much that He makes Himself available to us to call on Him at any time. How beautiful is our Heavenly Father to love us like this? At some point, we trust Him with the "what now?" of our pain.

We must pray for wisdom as God shows us how this pain can draw us closer to Him and help our story bring glory to His name. He is our anchor and He holds us steady in the storm!

Lisa Young, together with her husband, Ed, is the founding pastor of Fellowship Church in Dallas, Texas. She is a gifted speaker and teacher, and is a New York Times bestselling author. Lisa also has a degree in Early Childhood Education. She is passionate about leading women to grow in their understanding of who God is and how much he loves them. Lisa and Ed have been married for over forty years and have four children, one of who is in heaven, and six grandchildren. She enjoys cooking, nutrition, fitness and spending time with her family.



## PREPARATION IS A HIDDEN PROCESS

#### BY STEPHANIE IKE OKAFOR

Isaiah 49:2 (AMP) says, "in the shadow of His hand has He hid me and made me a polished arrow."

To be effective is to become a polished arrow. An arrow begins as a branch, which is then carved and formed with other elements added to make it functional, so the finished arrow is heavier than the branch used to make it. Although a branch is needed to make the arrow, the branch alone cannot function as the arrow. Likewise, in order to realize our full potential, God needs to prepare us by adding the necessary elements to us, in order to accomplish the task He gives us. Some people, however, would much rather be seen than be prepared, and therefore launch into ventures while they're still unrefined branches and fail because no impact was made.

When Jesus began His ministry, those from His hometown rejected Him because He had always lived among them and they just couldn't comprehend His true identity. They said amongst themselves in Mark 6:3 (NIV), "Isn't this the carpenter?" They didn't know God had been preparing Jesus for the assignment on His life, that His true identity had to be concealed until the appointed time. So His years growing up, working as a carpenter, living a seemingly normal life, weren't a waste. He wasn't just passing time waiting for His ministry to begin, or waiting for His true identity to be revealed. His years as an ordinary child were His training for His ministry.

One of the most pivotal moments in Jesus' life was when He prayed in Matthew 26:39 (NIV) when He was at Gethsemane, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." He struggled with accepting that God's will was for Him to be sacrificed. In the end, however, He was obedient to God's will and followed through. Obedience wasn't just something Jesus picked up at the start of His ministry. He learned to obey His earthly parents early on. When He was twelve years old, He and His parents went to a festival. When His parents headed home, Jesus chose

to stay behind without their knowledge. When they realized He was missing, they returned to the location of the festival to search for Him. Luke 2:46 (NIV) says, "After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." Even though Jesus felt He had done nothing wrong because He was in the house of God (the temple), His mother worried that she might have lost her child. So in her opinion, what Jesus did was wrong.

After this incident, however, Luke 2:51 (NIV) states, "Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them." The fact that obedience is noted here suggests His staying behind might have been an act of disobedience. Be that as it may, Jesus experienced what it meant to submit His will to His earthly parents before He experienced it with His heavenly Father. So a seemingly ordinary childhood experience actually prepared Jesus for an extraordinary purpose.

People we think are living ordinary lives are actually living lives that are far from ordinary. An individual working 3 jobs just to get by might think he or she is living just to pay the bills, when in truth God might be preparing such a person for a time-consuming ministry and is teaching him or her time management through those jobs. Although what God is preparing you for may be concealed to those around you, it isn't concealed to you, for 1 Corinthians 2:10 (NIT) says, "God revealed these things by His Spirit." So as God's children. He has affirmed within us what He has prepared for us. Sometimes we're unable to embrace this truth, however, if we're expecting our present circumstances to reflect that revelation because the preparation process doesn't outwardly reflect the task God is preparing us for. Preparation starts from within. This is where trust comes in because we have to trust that despite how we perceive our circumstances, God's plan for our lives will manifest and all of our experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant, serve a purpose concerning our



true identity in Christ, no matter how mundane they may seem, because He didn't create us to live mediocre lives. Zechariah 4:10 (NLT) states, "Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin." He makes it known that indeed our beginnings will be small but it's not about the magnitude in which we start; it's just about starting, and although we're not responsible for the growth, we're responsible for beginning.

The Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:7 (NIV), "neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." In order for God to make a thing grow, however, something must be planted. Paul used an excellent analogy because when a seed is buried in the ground, it's hidden, and God is responsible for its growth, a process that reveals the nature of the seed. It's not until the seed takes root and begins to grow that its identity is revealed. We wouldn't know, for example, where an orange tree is planted just by looking at the ground. When that tree begins to grow, however, and starts to bear fruit, we recognize its identity. Even though Jesus didn't announce Himself as the Son of God, while John the Baptist was baptizing Him prior to the start of His ministry, Luke 3:22 (NIV) says, "the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Jesus didn't unveil Himself before it was time; instead. He waited for God to reveal Him.

With the widespread effect of social media on our generation, however, many are taking extreme unethical routes to market themselves in order to be seen. Rather than focusing on their crafts, doing the tasks assigned to them, and being patient for God to reveal them when they're fully prepared and able to sustain all that comes with the revealing, they're more focused on being known than being an instrument of change. Even periods of David's life that seemed insignificant served to reveal his true identity. As a shepherd, he was faithful and committed to the care and safety of his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear attacked the sheep, he put his own life at risk by killing the lion and the bear (1 Samuel 17:34-36). David committed himself to a task that even his brother viewed as insignificant (1 Samuel 17:28). His level of commitment may not have made sense from a human viewpoint, but giving his all to something that might seem trivial prepared him for the task God had in mind for him to do.

When Goliath, the Philistine giant who had been taunting the people of Israel, requested a

challenge, he said in 1 Samuel 17:8 (NLT), "Choose one man to come down here and fight me!" David presented himself to the king to contend against Goliath, and when the king questioned David's ability, he referenced his experience with the lion and the bear while protecting his father's sheep. David was confident that God would use him to conquer Goliath the same way he used him to conquer the lion and the bear. So Saul approved of him, and when it was time for them to battle. Goliath "looked around and saw David, he scorned and despised him" (1 Samuel 17:42, AMP). Perhaps he thought it was a joke that David came to challenge him, and perhaps if God hadn't prepared David to realize his potential, the confidence to stand strong after being ridiculed wouldn't have been there, but despite the mockery, 1 Samuel 17:48 (AMP) says, "David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine." If David had been unsure of himself. he wouldn't have run toward him. That was an act of certainty, which resulted in him defeating Goliath (1 Samuel 17:51) and becoming a person of significance to the people (1 Samuel 18:7).

## The next stage of your life is determined by the preparation that preceded it.

So the preparation process is more important than the opportunity, because the magnitude of the opportunity is determined by what you've been prepared to conquer. Never despise any chapter of your life because it prepares you for what comes next. Your name might not be known, your talent might not be recognized, but that's your training ground; that's where God prepares you. So nothing in your life is a waste; everything serves a purpose. What seems like so little leads to so much.

Excerpt from Moving Forward by Ps Stephanie Ike Okafor's. Used with author's permission.

Stephanie Ike Okafor serves as the Executive Pastor of ONE LA. She is a dynamic leader, visionary, notable author, pastor, businesswoman, and podcast host, known for her ability to communicate with diverse audiences in a conversational and relaxed manner. Her profound teachings are impactful and transformative, changing the lives of many on a global scale. Stephanie's desire to spread the gospel was ignited at the early age of nine and she has dedicated her life to making disciples for God's Kingdom. Based in Los Angeles, California, Stephanie resides with her husband and daughter.





## EMBRACING OUR IDENTITY IN GOD

### BY LANDRA YOUNG HUGHES

Life is indeed a rollercoaster ride, isn't it? Full of exhilarating highs and heart-wrenching lows, unexpected twists, and challenging turns. As a young wife and mother, I've experienced the countless emotions that come with these seasons – from moments of sheer joy and fulfillment to times of deep sorrow and overwhelming responsibilities. In these challenging times, when the weight of the world seems heavy on our shoulders, it can be easy to feel like God's presence is a distant echo. But let me assure you, even in those moments, He is right there beside you, holding you up with His unfailing love and strength. Through my journey and experiences, I've realized two fundamental truths that anchor us during life's darkest days: trusting in God and recognizing His constant presence.

There have been countless moments in my life as a mom, a wife, and a follower of Christ, when I've looked up to the heavens and guestioned. "God, where are You in all of this?" I share my story in my first book, a narrative intertwined with a fierce battle against a severe eating disorder that consumed four and a half years of my life. From the grips of anorexia to the depths of binge-purge bulimia, it was undeniably one of the darkest times I've ever faced. Coupled with that were waves of depression and anxiety, leaving me questioning why I had to walk through such a difficult path and where God stood amidst it all. Then, a few years ago, I received that dreaded phone call. My brother's voice trembled as he told me to pray because our oldest sister, LeeBeth, was unresponsive. We were already aware of LeeBeth's declining health earlier that day and were actively taking steps to help her. My dad rushed to her house to bring her back, and plans were in motion to take her to her therapist's office for further assistance. However, tragedy struck that night as LeeBeth had a sudden seizure and passed away in my dad's arms. The world felt like it had crumbled beneath my feet. My sister, just 34 years old,

was gone in an instant. Once again, I questioned God's whereabouts in the face of such heartwrenching loss.

But here's what I discovered – God never left me. Not for a single moment. He was there through every struggle, every tear, every question mark hanging in the air. He was there with me in my pain, my joy, my good days, and my bad. And for that, I am endlessly grateful. You see, God doesn't abandon us in our struggles; He walks alongside us, holding our hand, and whispering words of comfort and strength.

Through all my struggles and wrestling, I knew about God, but I also had moments of uncertainty or confusion. In fact, according to a survey by the American Psychological Association, over 70% of individuals experience moments of identity crisis at some point in their lives. This crisis often contributes significantly to anxiety disorders among young adults, as revealed by a study conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health, with a prevalence rate of approximately 25%.

What if, just what if, God is using our pain, our struggles, to magnify His glory and draw us closer to Him? What if every tear we shed becomes a testament to His unwavering love and faithfulness? The Bible tells us in Ephesians 2:10 (NIV), "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." This verse reminds us that we are uniquely crafted by God, designed for a purpose He ordained for us long before we even existed. What if God wants to use our tears?

Here's the thing about God – He's good. Always. Even when life throws its worst at us, He remains steadfastly good. We may question Him in the storm, but He's right there with us, guiding us through the raging waters. It's not about understanding every twist and turn of life; it's

about trusting in God's character, His timing, and His divine plan. Romans 8:16-17 (NIV) reaffirms this, stating, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

God isn't sitting up in the heavens waiting for us to figure everything out. He's more concerned about us placing our trust in Him than trying to dissect every situation. We don't need to have it all figured out; that's not what His Word says. Instead, we're called to lean on Him, to trust Him wholeheartedly, knowing that His plan is perfect, even when we can't see the whole picture.

Our identity isn't found in our struggles or successes; it's found in our relationship with God. When we anchor ourselves in Him, we discover our true worth and purpose. We become confident in who we are because we know Whose we are — children of the Most High God, loved unconditionally, and valued beyond measure.

So, if you find yourself weathering a storm right now, remember this—God is right there beside you. He's not distant or detached; He's intimately close, holding you in His loving embrace. Place your trust in Him, lean on Him for strength, and witness how He transforms your pain into a powerful testimony of His goodness and grace.

Your circumstances may be challenging, but they do not define your identity. Your true identity is rooted in the unshakeable love of your Heavenly Father. Galatians 2:20 (NIV) beautifully encapsulates this truth, "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Remember, God loves you immensely and has created you for a significant purpose, so live your life with joy, cry, laugh, and love, giving it your all!

Landra Young Hughes is the daughter of Pastors Ed and Lisa Young of Fellowship Church in Dallas, TX. Because of her upbringing and dealing with her own struggles in the spotlight, Landra has developed a passion for seeing people maximize their God-given potential and embrace their God-defined self-worth. She and her husband, Brad, also live in Dallas, TX, where they serve on staff at Fellowship Church and raise their three children: Sterling, Jackson and Bear. Landra is the author of two books, A Different Kind of Love Story and Where Is God In This?









# 52 SUNDAYS - SOWING TOMORROW'S SEED TODAY

BY PS BRIDGETTE GOGWE-SIBANDA

It's a bright and sunny Sunday morning at Kidszone, our children's church. You can almost feel the energy bouncing off the walls and hear the screams of delight and hurried shuffling of little feet heading to the playground, as kids walk past the almost life-size statue of Jesus walking through the blue wall in the foyer. Echoes of worship fill the building, sounds of laughter can be heard, and glimpses of smiles can be seen as kids settle in for their lesson of the day. This is just one of fifty-two Sundays. Year in and year out, we have the privilege and pleasure of rolling out church for future generations.

Every Sunday is another opportunity to pour love into our little kids and to connect with them while listening to their "Big Thing" from the week gone by. Many different things happen in the lives of our kids across the age groups as they navigate bumpy friendships, the disappointment of not getting picked for a school team or the excitement of passing the test that they had asked us to pray about the previous Sunday. Our team leans in to hear all about the "Big Thing" that matters to them. For a toddler, it could be a story of colouring in their new book or playing

with a ball, while pre-schoolers love to share stories from crèche or home, detailing how they played in the garden with their dog, Bingo. You can't influence someone you don't take the time to know, so these conversations are a very special part of nurturing our kids.

All that we see on a Sunday starts many days. weeks and often months in advance. Being entrusted with nurturing kids is not something that our team of faithful and loving volunteers takes lightly. To be ready to sow seeds into our kids, our team must first cultivate the soil of their own lives and hearts. This team is a beautiful. passionate and integral part of God's heart for nurturing and growing our kids. They are more than volunteers to us; they have each chosen to put their hands to the plough, partnering with us and the families in our church to sow seeds of love, laughter, connection, worship and the Word of God to help our kids flourish and grow. But, a farmer's role does not start at the point of sowing the seed. It starts much earlier.

In every season, a farmer knows what to focus on in order to get the most out of their future harvest. Before the sowing season, they make sure that they select the right seeds to sow, and they prepare the land. A farmer is committed to sowing the healthiest seed in the right season to get the biggest and healthiest harvest. This means that for our team of volunteers to be the best farmers that they can be for our kids, they first need to take care of themselves by staying connected to the vine - God. This is the only way that each of us can sow good, healthy and long-lasting seeds into our kids' lives because, in the words of Jesus, "No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit..." John 15:4-5 NIV.

Over the years, I have watched as our Kidszone team has navigated some heart-breaking seasons in their own lives, including retrenchments, loss of businesses, disability, barrenness, death and divorce. They have dug deep and stayed the course through these challenging seasons because of their passion for nurturing future generations.

It was not their willpower or might that got them through, but their decision to stay connected to the vine. We have seen God use these different seasons for His good as He continued to use them to sow seed into the lives of our kids. Staying connected to the vine is not always easy but, it is essential.

I am reminded of a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson:

"The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honourable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well."

Over time, each volunteer comes to fully understand and appreciate that nurturing kids comes with sacrifice and consistent commitment as they start to see the fruit of the seeds that they have sown in different seasons. The commitment to sow seeds in this season is useful, honourable, and compassionate, and it makes a difference. The fruit of their commitment may be seen within each child as they grow physically, emotionally and spiritually. Watching the children progress from one class to another over the years and then starting to serve in different areas of church life where they, in turn, nurture the younger and older generations, must be the most rewarding part of what we do! This is indeed seed sown in good soil and our harvest is rich and the fruits eternal.

Ps Bridgette Gogwe-Sibanda is the Children's Church Pastor at Rivers Church. She volunteered in Kidszone for eleven years before coming on staff in 2013. She loves serving our youngest congregants and their families. She is the second eldest of eight kids and an aunty to many nieces and nephews.

## EMBRACING THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF NURTURING MY DAUGHTER

BY PS ROBYN MOSS



When I was little, all I wanted to be when I grew up was a mom. I knew it was one of my purposes. I have been married for almost fifteen years now and I have been blessed with three beautiful children – Leanne, Jack and Emma – and it's a purpose fulfilled. Psalm 127:3 says, "Children are a gift from the Lord, a reward..." and my three are definitely a reward.

The arrival of my first born, Leanne, twelve years ago, brought an overwhelming sense of joy and responsibility. From her first cries to her first steps, every moment was filled with a sense of wonder and joy. Becoming a mom, I knew that my role extended beyond merely providing for her physical needs. It encompassed guiding her emotional, mental and spiritual growth and instilling in her the values and teachings of Christianity. This journey has been filled with challenges, triumphs and a profound sense of love and faith.

As a mom, I understood that my actions and words would shape our daughter's understanding of faith, values and morals. We are their first role models in life and one of the most impactful ways we nurture our children is through leading by example. We made sure to live out our faith authentically, demonstrating love, compassion, forgiveness, and humility in our interactions with each other at home and with others, knowing that our every word has the power to destroy or build a child's life.

Leanne had a very special bond with her very first friend, Chloé Rose, that encapsulated the first five years of her life. Leanne and Chloé were born six weeks apart and their journey of becoming little friends started when they were about four months old. As they grew, the two would roam the Rivers Sandton campus, dummies in their mouths, with their helpers in tow like they owned the place. They got up to all sorts of mischief, as little girls do, and had so much fun learning things together and teaching each other what they knew.



The girls started in Kidszone as soon as they were old enough and were inseparable. They would comfort each other and look out for the other when the need arose. LeeLee and Chloé started at a little nursery school and spent almost every day together until Chloé and her family moved to Ballito, where Pastors Adi and Claire started up the Rivers Ballito campus.

The two besties missed each other greatly and looked forward to seeing each other over holidays or conferences, or any moment they could get to be with each other. As they have gotten older, their relationship and communication has changed to a more technology based one but they formed a bond that I am sure will never be broken. Even though they don't see each other often, I know that Chloé always has a special place in LeeLee's heart.

My greatest joy in raising Leanne has been witnessing her blossoming into her own person. From a shy but confident toddler to an independent pre-teen, she has navigated the world with resilience and determination. She has found her passion in drawing and art, and what she has learnt and taught herself amazes us! Her unwavering enthusiasm reminds me of the limitless potential inherent in every child.

As Leanne transitioned to pre-teen, our relationship underwent its own evolution. The delicate balance between nurturing and guiding her, while allowing her the freedom to make her own choices, became increasingly complex and so did the challenges of parenthood.

"When you put faith, hope and love together, you can raise positive children in a negative world." Zig Ziglar

One of the most daunting challenges of raising a daughter in today's world is shielding her from the pervasive influence of social media and societal expectations. The pressure to conform to unrealistic standards of beauty, success and peer pressure can take a toll on a young girl's self-esteem and confidence. We faced new challenges in nurturing her faith in an increasingly secular world. We recognised the importance of Leanne staying true to her Christian beliefs and values while still forging her own path and authentic self.

"It's hard to fight the current societal values but at least teaching a child about spiritual values is a good place to start." Dr James Dobson





At the beginning of this year, Leanne asked me if she could start volunteering in Kidszone. This was such a breakthrough moment for us as we finally realised the importance of persevering with her and consistently bringing her to Kidszone, even when she resisted. The impact that Kidszone has had on her life from twelve months old was a firm foundation being built into her and she finally grasped the concept of sacrifice and giving back to help others. Being an All Stars helper in Kidszone has opened up her eves to what it means to put her own issues aside and, in a way, start to nurture those younger than her, and she loves it! It has even created in her a need to be a better big sister to her little brother Jack and little sister Emma.

Raising Leanne has been a journey defined by both joy and challenges. From the highs of witnessing her growth and development to the daunting lows of navigating the complexities of pre-adolescence, every moment has been a testament to the transformative power of parenthood. Through it all, our bond has remained steadfast, anchored by love and understanding.

In nurturing Leanne in a Christian way, we have learned that it is not merely about teaching her a set of beliefs but about cultivating a deep and personal relationship with God. It is about instilling in her a love for others, a passion for justice, and a desire to live a life of purpose and meaning. As we continue on this journey together, I am filled with gratitude for the privilege of being able to keep nurturing her, as her mom, and to trust in God's grace to guide her and sustain her every step of the way.

Ps Robyn is part of the Pastoral team at Rivers Church, Sandton and has been part of the staff team for fifteen years. She is married to Greg Moss and has three children, Leanne, Jack and Emma.



### **NURTURING CHLOÉ ROSE**

BY PS CLAIRE OLIVIER



22 February 2012 – the day of my caesarean had arrived. Finally, we were going to meet our miracle girl. Chloé Rose Nicia Olivier would enter the world after years of prayer and waiting, as well as the heartache of an ectopic pregnancy and a few miscarriages. Along with joy and anticipation. I had an overwhelming sense of just how weighty the responsibility of this answered prayer really was. Insecurity, fear, and a million 'what-ifs' flooded my mind that day. The fact that Adi and I had been raising our thriving son, Aiden, for seven years brought little relief. In spite of myself. Chloé was born that afternoon. She seemed tiny and fragile, but as the days passed she reminded me that dynamite indeed comes in small packages.

Chloé began to grow and flourish and I realised I'd been nurturing her since the day of her conception – together with my Father, God. The One who'd answered our prayers was not about to abandon His daughter, Claire, nor His new daughter, Chloé. Pure joy and awe began to replace fear and anxiety. It made all the difference that she was well loved by her daddy, big bro, grandparents, nanny, and half of Rivers Church! Nurturing a child needn't be done alone. It's incredible how many kind people are just waiting to lend support.

I was part of the Worship team at the time – an extended family I'm eternally grateful for. Chloé joined me at Wednesday rehearsals for the first three years of her life and was showered with love that undoubtedly left an indelible mark on her life! I was also allowed to bring her to work, at the church, each day. Ps Wilma, aka Granny, loved having staff babies on campus! She made sure that our bubbas were well accommodated and welcomed with open arms. This meant the moms could work in peace, knowing our babies were nearby.

Nanna (formally Stephina) cared for Chloé during the day. She'd helped raise Aiden since he was born, so Chloé was in safe hands. LeeLee, Ps Robyn's baby girl, was Chloé's weekday companion. These two soon became inseparable! Together, they explored the Sandton campus, at first looking out at the world from their prams; then on their knees; and finally on foot. The girls challenged and championed each other as they met their respective milestones. They looked out for one another and were quick

to offer a loving embrace when one took a tumble or was having a bad day. I discovered that the nurturing instinct is part of our DNA from birth, and having been made in the image of our Father, the ultimate nurturer, it makes sense! In 2016, our family embarked on an adventure with a big move to KwaZulu Natal to pioneer the Rivers Ballito campus. It was a huge adjustment for all of us. Chloé, however, took to coastal life naturally.

Synonymous with coastal life is being outdoors. Chloé loved this! She enjoyed riding her bike, skateboarding and swimming, but was particularly fond of hanging upside down and inside out on the jungle gym we'd inherited with our new house. So when I heard about a new dance studio opening that also offered tumbling, I quickly signed her up. Her new teachers recognised she had a gift for dance and she began to excel. Her teachers have always nurtured her talent, but most importantly, Chloé nurtures it. Her work ethic is inspiring.

In Ballito, our son left mainstream schooling and entered the world of alternative education. He flourished in a more relaxed, individually tailored environment. Chloé saw Aiden go to school in civvies each day, return with hardly any homework and naturally became curious. She went to 'check out' his tutor centre for two days and never returned to regular school. Adi and I chose to nurture this diverse schooling approach because it seemed to work for our kids. It was a daunting change at first, but I'm forever grateful that we were open-minded. We discovered a







different approach to education that continues to meet our needs. It's also given Chloé flexibility to pursue competitive dance. In 2021, someone from church asked her to model for a clothing brand. She got signed to an agency and loved her first shoot. Modelling exposed her to a highly professional industry; she's met wonderful people; and she earns an income. She's learning early that it takes hard work to make money; part of your income belongs to God (and SARS); and how to budget for luxuries so that she doesn't have to wait for her next birthday to come around.

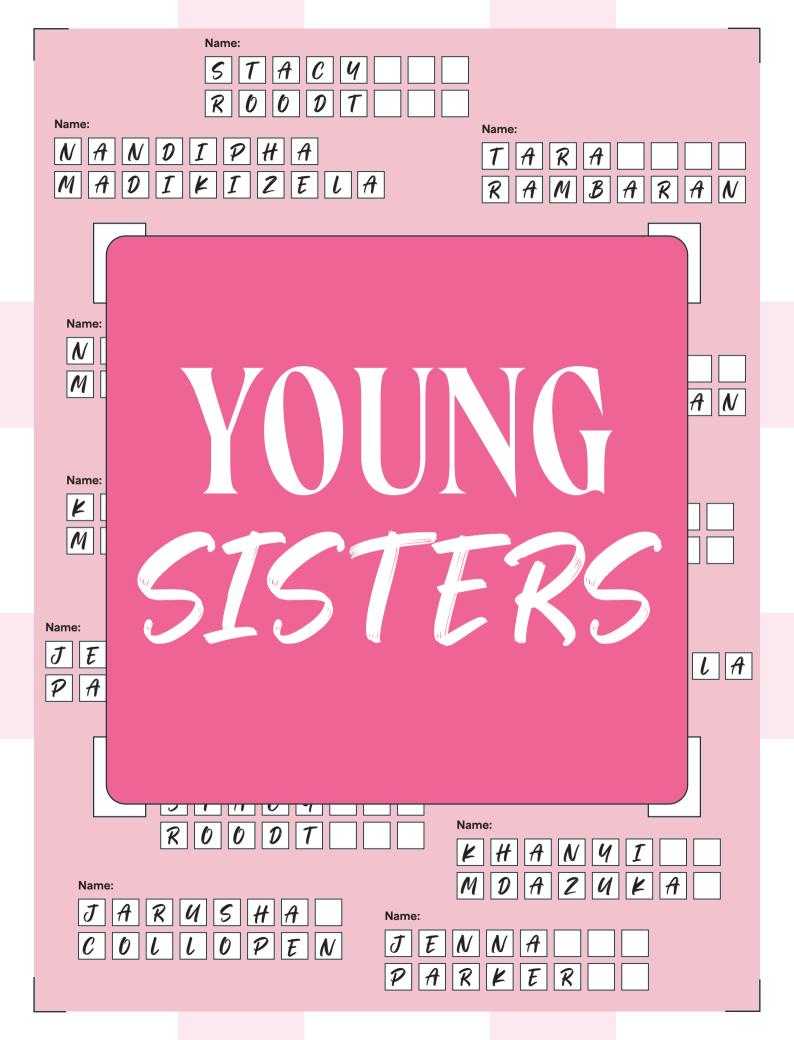
After five years in Ballito we returned to pastor the Kyalami campus. We had to help the kids navigate transition again. It was hard for Chloé to leave amazing friends, the beach and the church she knew so well. However, I've no doubt that key to her successful adjustment was the major role that church plays in our life. Our kids were born into church life and it's been a consistent. integral part of their lives since. In every season they know that their family, their church and their God remain constant. From her early years at Kidszone with LeeLee, until now, her last vear before graduating to Junior Youth, Chloé's been nurtured and taught the things of God. Because of this, she has a passion for God's house. When Adi and I take a staycation, Chloé arranges lifts to church, for all three Sunday services! Last year she petitioned Teacher Mich, who heads up Kyalami Kidszone, until she agreed to let Chloé start serving at age eleven. Every Sunday she serves two services and attends the third. She loves nurturing the little people each week.

Children don't always do as they're told, but they do what they see. As the Word says, 'Train up a child in the way she/he should go...' and let God handle the rest. We've chosen nurture over nature and have seen beautiful fruit from our labour of love.

Ps Claire is the Lead Pastor of Rivers Kyalami, alongside her husband Ps Adi. She's been on team since 2004. She has two children, Aiden who serves in the Worship team and Chloé who serves in Kidszone. Ps Claire is passionate about women and God's house.











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It's 07:43am and the service countdown starts. I put my in-ear monitors on and walk on to the platform. I check my guitar strings and adjust the volume on my monitor pack. I look to my sides and see the anticipation of my team members. In front of me, Ps Paulette, our worship pastor, lifts her hands, praying. I look around the auditorium and see a room full of believers preparing their hearts for an encounter with God. "Holy Spirit, use me as a vessel to serve your people today. Amen."

I remember attending main service in Auditorium Two with my mom and seeing our worship team, a group of passionate individuals using their incredible musical gifts at church. They weren't in the mainstream media or selling out concerts. Instead, they were humbly serving God on a weekly basis. It inspired me so much that it became the spark that ignited my passion for worship, a passion I could use in God's house. I had no idea how I would get there but God brought people alongside me to help me cultivate and nurture this passion and gift.

I started attending Creative Workshops on Fridays, held by our Youth ministry, for young people who had a passion for music. It was exactly the right conditions: the season was perfect and the environment was ripe for me to be planted in the house. I remember the very first workshop I attended. Ps Paulette spoke to us about the heart and posture of worship. She reminded me that everything I do with my gift should ultimately be worship to God. Ps Paulette and the team were very intentional about cultivating and nurturing a sense of commitment in us. This created the right kind of soil in my life that would produce a harvest I was yet to see.

By the time I was in Matric, I was an established volunteer at church and I was consistently attending the sessions. At the time, Rowan, our music director, had begun taking care of the workshops and he suggested that I audition for the worship team. I was in shock as I felt unprepared, unworthy, and unqualified but I remember the words Rowan shared with me that day. He said, "All you have to offer is your willingness and commitment to God's house, and that's all He needs."

I took Rowan's advice to heart and followed through on the audition. I was so nervous going in but once I had finished the audition, I got the feedback that I had made the team! Rowan continued to support me through this time, checking on my progress weekly and giving me notes on what to work on so that I could grow my skill.

I had to go through a season of waiting and preparation before I could step into my promise. This season started out as a seedling, but as time progressed, it was clear that I was being nurtured and pruned and shaped into what would ultimately be a healthy, fruit-bearing plant. It took about nine months before I served for the first time, on a Friday night at a Youth service.

This journey has culminated in so much more than I could have imagined. Now, I get to serve our congregation every Sunday, where people are continuously encountering Jesus and experiencing life change. I am walking in purpose and seeing the '& More' that comes with putting God first. I believe that as I continue to pour out as I have been poured into, God will continue this harvest and sow into people I have yet to encounter.





There is an ongoing debate as to whether one's genetic makeup (nature) or upbringing (nurture) determines who they become. I believe the latter. To nurture simply means to care for and protect something while it grows, and I have had so many people in my life do that for me, which has shaped the person I am today.

My grandmother played an integral role in who I have become and where my priorities lie. I can vividly remember sitting on her bed and listening to another one of her stories, when one day she turned to me and said, "There are three people you must respect in life, in this order: God, your parents and your teachers." My grandmother had never known Jesus until her final moments, but she still knew the importance of putting God first and honouring your parents, and she encouraged me to do the same.

My grandmother modelled what it means to be a woman. Her life certainly wasn't easy, but she handled adversity, such as her health challenges, with such grace that you would have never even known she was sick. She was warm, kindhearted and welcoming, to the point where it seemed as though everyone who met her left just a little bit changed. Every moment I spent with her, I hoped to become just like her. I hoped to be kind without a reason, to be generous for the sake of being generous, to love endlessly, and to show respect to everyone, no matter what. She was the epitome of the word 'nurture'.

They say it takes a village to raise a child and that has certainly proven true in my life. Besides my grandmother, many other people from various spheres of my life have become nurturers to me. From some of my teachers at school to my church family, I have been moulded by those who saw potential in me and made it their mission to get me to recognise what they saw for me and my future.

I remember the day one of my teachers asked me, "Why do you doubt myself?" I wasn't sure what spurred the question but when he elaborated, I began to understand. He spoke about how much my math teacher would rave about me, how much he believed in me, and the fact that he was proud of me! In that moment, my math teacher became a nurturer in my life. He may have never voiced his desire for my success to me, but he always showed it.

To nurture means to care for and protect something while it grows, but nothing about it is simple. It takes sacrifice and a level of compassion far beyond the natural. I have seen the ways that being nurtured has changed my life, and I aspire to one day be able to nurture others the way that I have been nurtured.









I remember, as a younger girl, my mom saying to me that I was really bad at picking friends. "The friends you pick for yourself will get you into heaps of trouble!" she would say. "They never cherish you as much as you cherish them." After a string of friendships that just weren't the best for me, I realised that my mom was probably right, that I needed good people around me, and even more, I needed to know how to be a good friend, too.

Enter stage left, Khanyi, a new church friend who essentially forced her way into my life. She showed me how nourishing friendships are meant to be and how they are supposed to grow you and lead you away from trouble. As I said before, Khanyi forced herself into my life. She may tell you differently, but don't take her word for it! At this point, we were around eighteen years old and we had recently become more familiar, seeing each other often around church and serving in the Worship team and Youth ministry together. We would often sit next to each other, save each other seats and hang out between services, but at this point, there wasn't much emotional vulnerability.

One day, after a particularly impactful message in church, I was a little bit teary. I cried a lot and it was embarrassing. Khanyi had been sitting next to me and had a front-row seat to all the tears. She tried comforting and consoling me, and finally said, "I'm coming to your house tomorrow at 10 am. You are going to tell me what is going on, and you had better be ready!" Like any normal person, I was gobsmacked! This was a first for me, that someone I hadn't known long and had shared very little of myself with, recognised that something wasn't right with me and invited herself over to talk about it! From that moment in our friendship, a couple of things became clear to me: God does answer prayer, good friends will get in the mess with you, and really good friends will nourish and build into you.

I had been asking God to surround me with good friends who wouldn't take me down the wrong path and that He would also show me how to be a good friend. Man, did He answer! This nurturing friend brought herself to where I was and held me up during a couple of tough seasons. Her friendship has brought to life this image of Jesus lowering Himself down to our level and enduring the frailties of the human condition, so that He can stand shoulder to shoulder with us, teaching us to be more like Him. As I've gotten older, this image has stuck with me and impacted how I approach friendships. I now think about how I can care for others, how I can nurture them and show them love, like I was nurtured and shown love.









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I'm quite sure everyone has that one teacher they remember or respect for their sheer kindness and dedication. For me, there is one teacher in particular who has shown me what it truly means to nurture. She is my matric year History teacher, Ms Maneli, and she is one of the most inspiring women I know. She is a strong Christian woman and a single mother to an adorable four-year-old son. Ms Maneli is an incredibly busy woman, yet she doesn't let that stop her from giving her all to us as her students. She takes a genuine interest in our personal lives, even going as far as watching as many of our sports fixtures as she can.

History may not be the most exciting subject, but Ms Maneli sure knows how to make all the dates and historical events fun and engaging! Whenever we would need to learn dates and events that could be considered particularly boring, we would make an event out of it, in cahoots with each other to motivate ourselves to memorise them properly.

Ms Maneli encourages us to strive for perfection and to achieve the best we possibly can, which she actively encourages by giving up her time outside of school hours to give extra lessons to all the students who want them. Somehow, she also knows just when we need to take a break. Most of all, she is incredibly kind. When I need to talk to someone or simply cry, she always welcomes me into her classroom and makes me feel safe.

There is one day that I will always remember her for, when she showed me incredible kindness. I was having a very tough week with personal challenges that were causing me immense stress, as well as a pileup of tests and projects. I was sitting in History class, knowing that I had an English test in the next lesson, and I wasn't sure I was in the right state of mind to pass that test – never mind excel. Ms Maneli noticed this as I was walking out of her class. She told me to go to reception and call my mom to take me home and that she would excuse me from my English test that day.

The reason I will always remember her and this day is because instead of just giving me simple words of encouragement or not saying anything at all, she took notice of me as an individual and helped me in the very way I needed at the time, rather than pushing me to simply go on with things. It was not a chore for her to help me when I was struggling, but rather a given.

In some ways, she reminds me of my mom. My mom is a kind, elegant and warm person. She is always there for me when I need her and is also an exceptionally nurturing woman, which are the exact kind of characteristics that I can see in Ms Maneli.

When asked to think of a woman in their life who has nurtured them, most people's minds would probably jump to a mother, a grandmother, or maybe an aunt, but I believe special mention needs to be given to our teachers. If Ms Maneli isn't a nurturing woman, then I don't know who is!







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The first thing that comes to mind when I hear the word "nurture", is the role that moms play in their kids' lives. Moms are there to protect, love, take care of, and teach their children. So naturally, I think of my mom and how she nurtured me. My mom is my biggest supporter and the first person to be there for me, give me advice, correct me, and guide me in every aspect of my life.

From the moment I was born, I was attached to her hip. I was a "mommy's girl" through and through. We used to do "Mommy Mondays" where we would spend the whole day together while my brother and sister were at school, and this was my absolute favourite thing in the world. We go on shopping trips, nail appointments, coffee, and lunch dates. I'll never forget our road trip to the bush where we spent six hours just talking and listening to music.

Whenever I was upset, shy, excited, sick, happy, or tired, I always wanted my mom. In my eyes, there was nothing she couldn't do, and nothing she wouldn't do for me and my siblings. She was there for me when a friend of mine passed away due to suicide. She sat and cried with me, prayed with me, checked up on me constantly, and held my hand through his funeral.

My mom worked in children's ministry for a long time and therefore did a lot of research on understanding kids and all the different areas of their personalities and behaviours. She made an extreme effort to understand them. These efforts were then obviously put into me and my siblings. I was always very different from my brother and sister. I was very quiet, shy, and introverted, and this was new for my parents. She never tried to change me or force me to be someone I wasn't. For example, when I look back at some of the outfit choices I made as a kid, I am absolutely appalled. When I asked her, "Why did you let me wear that?" her answer was simply, "You really liked choosing your own outfits, and you thought they were incredibly stylish."

I know it sounds cliché, but my mom nurtured me into the young lady that I am today. She was the one who encouraged me to serve at church, to read my Bible, and to understand it. She was and still is the one who supports me in all my aspirations, from major production roles and singing competitions to my dream university and career path. She's a shoulder I can cry on and the first person to celebrate with me. I will always be grateful that God blessed me with my beautiful, unique, funny, crazy, protective, and amazing mom. I just absolutely adore her!







Growing up in a close-knit family of nine, I am constantly surrounded by unwavering love and support. I have been blessed beyond measure with an abundance of mentors, whom I call my family. My family is my anchor, my safe haven, and they are my biggest cheerleaders. What I love most is our strong sense of unity, which has shaped me into the young individual I am today.

When I was one, my granddad prayed and God led him to attend Rivers Church in Sandton, which we have called home since 2009. I recall having the best teachers at Kidszone. Through their enthusiasm, nurturing spirit, and dedication, I was encouraged to attend church every Sunday. Through my parents' consistent commitment to bringing me to church, my belief in God grew, and as my faith grew, so did the belief I had in myself.

I will forever cherish a memory dating back to February 2022. My mother touched my shoulder and whispered, "You're doing it!" after a promo for Worship & Creative Team auditions in River News. As a shy little girl, I convinced myself it would never happen, but my father said it was worth a shot, so we sent the email. Then came the day of the audition. I was nervous because I didn't like singing in front of anyone besides my family, but my grandparents came with me and cheered me on, telling me that God had blessed me with a talent that would glorify Him. After the audition, I remember waiting anxiously for that email to tell me if I had gotten in or not. Finally, the day came when Ps Paulette's name appeared in my inbox. After reading that I would be joining the Youth worship team, I thanked God, rushed down the stairs and shared the news with my family!

Reflecting on the young woman I am, I will be eternally grateful to my family and Senior Pastors who have nurtured and cared for me. By being part of a committed family and by consistently serving in the Youth worship team, I have found joy in developing my understanding of what it means to be a child of God. As young people, we may often forget to appreciate the ones who mould and shape us, but as children of God, we are taught to honour our mothers and fathers. I believe that one way to do this is by simply acknowledging their roles in our lives and being grateful for them. Even though I still have my entire life ahead of me, with many more blessings to come, I will always cherish my nurturers, as they are my greatest blessing.



### PLANTING SEEDS AND WATCHING THEM GROW

BY LEISHKA LALJITH



The day had finally arrived, a day we had been waiting for with crazy amounts of joy and equal trepidation. Our sweet Emmy girl left the womb to join us in our life on the 14th of August, 2023. I remember the feelings so clearly, but the day felt like a blur, a bit like fragments of my memory pieced together. One moment that stood out so clearly, so much so I still feel like I can visit it in my mind, was the first night we spent in the hospital as a new family unit. I recall being in pain but also on really good medication, lying in the hospital bed, watching my husband and baby sleep in front of me. My little family was there, right before my eyes. It was real, it was happening. I felt a surge of love fill my whole heart and body, and at the same time, I felt my mind fill up with doubt. I loved this perfect little girl more than I knew how to comprehend, but I was worried about whether I could be enough for her. Would I know how to be a mum? "I'm so happy she's here, but, like, what happens now?" I thought.

Naturally, being so pumped with love and doubt, the next days were filled with bouts of

overwhelm. We left the hospital and headed home, and a new kind of anxiety filled me. She's with us forever, there are no take-backs and no amazing nurses to help us through the night. There was a part of me that felt unqualified. I had delivered through C-section and much of my hospital stay was about recovery and healing. I tried to get some time in learning how to look after Emmy from the nurses, but my husband was the one who left with the baby caring qualification. I was sent home with a participation medal and the lovely experience of being engorged.

As the days passed, I felt things change within me. While I truly had no idea what I was doing, somehow, I was doing things, I was taking care of my baby. I find it hard to describe but it felt like something that was dormant in me had come alive. I don't think calling it an instinct accurately describes this experience. There was a sense of this "thing" being known to me, being so familiar. As I continued to wonder what this "thing" was, I would hear my dad say to me, "Your mum did the



very same thing with you and your brother." I would hear my mum say, "I can't even get mad at you for wanting to do everything for Emmy because I was that exact same way." It then clicked that the "thing" I was experiencing was a gift my mum had given me when I was a baby all those years ago — my mum had given me the gift of being nurtured. Unbeknownst to the both of us, she had planted a little seed in me, a seed that would grow over all the years of being so wonderfully nurtured and cared for by my mum that when the time came for me to be a mum, I had a beautiful harvest to rely on, and in turn, nurture my own baby girl.

I do a mental zoom out and realise that my mum's mum gave this to her, and I do wonder and believe that she was gifted it, too, a living legacy of women within whom God had placed the gift of nurturance – which I now realise is unique to each woman and their design. This speaks to the part of me that wondered if I would be a "good" mother. I see now that God made me a mother for my daughter and my family and that the seed that grew in me was mine, a gift that only I could steward and grow. I love that there isn't only one way of doing this and that God uses our unique design, where the nature of our nurturance is our own.

As the journey continues, there's more I'm uncovering. I've become acquainted with the mum part of me and have a good grasp of who I am as Leishka. These two parts, however. are still strangers to each other. As I navigate piecing together these parts of my identity and adjusting to this new life, I find myself still in need of nurture. The women around me have been pivotal in bringing me back to who I am and are loving me and supporting me into this new version of me. I'm reminded again of the gift we offer each other on this voyage of womanhood. I don't think nurture is just a cute, catchy word. I think it encompasses depth, duty and most importantly, a divine purpose. I guess that's the part that links us, our responsibility as women to do the work of growing that seed and making sure the soil is tilled for the seed to grow. This is a seed that I pray I will plant in my daughter so that she can continue to plant and grow these seeds that will keep growing so she, in turn, can nurture and care for the people in her life, the women she'll call friends and the family she'll one day create.

Leishka is married to Rowan and they are the proud parents of Emily. She has her Masters in Clinical Psychology. She has been at Rivers for over ten years where she has served in the Rivers Coffee Shop, among other ministries.







# THE BLESSING OF HOME AND SISTERHOOD

### BY MAPHIMITHI KOELE

Acres of Love was established in 1998, with the mission to serve, rescue and care for orphaned and abandoned children in South Africa. Acres of Love provides the kids with family, unconditional love, and world-class healthcare and education, empowering them to thrive as they launch into adulthood. Through the Rivers Foundation, Rivers Church supports nine Acres of Love homes every month.

I grew up at Acres of Love from the age of four and look back with many fond memories. My home was filled with sisters as we lived next door to two other Acres of Love families. When I was little, there was no fence between them and I felt the support of a big, extended family. I'm grateful for dinners as a family around the table, playing hide and seek in the garden, and sharing a bunk bed with my sister. I remember loving my home - it always smelled like a home-cooked meal and was a place of warmth for me. Mom Sylvia, Mom Winny, and Mom Wendy, gave the best hugs, making me feel safe, seen, and cared for. At the dinner table. Mom Berlina would ask me about my day. At the time, I thought she was strict but now, looking back, I know that she helped make me the person I am today.

As teenagers, we would visit friends' homes, but I was always ready to return to my home and the routine and structure it provided me. Acres of Love gave me a nurturing, biblical foundation. We went to church and learned about the Bible. It was a special treat on Sundays to eat at McDonalds on the way home after church – something we all looked forward to!

I loved being a part of the Rivers Foundation SHINE program in my teen years. One of the highlights was when they brought us beautiful dresses to wear and walk down a red carpet – we were queens for the day! That, along with monthly workshops held at Acres to empower us, gave me a foundation that I still think about as a young adult. I am rooted in this foundation,

and I don't take it for granted. I think about Proverbs 22:6 (NIV), "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it." That biblical foundation in my home was important for me, even as I started to rebel a little in my teens. Even in the moments I might have been difficult, my Acres of Love family still loved me and never gave up on me. This was a picture of God's grace over me.

In 2020. I was sitting in my room and experienced God calling me back to Him. I rededicated my life to Him and He has transformed my life. I look back on my childhood and know that even when I wasn't following Him, He was merciful with me. God's love brings us to repentance, and He is at work in my life! In the past, I struggled to let people in, but God has opened my heart to love people. I am so grateful for where I am now, and I still have the love and support of my Acres family. They message me and check in on me, and I know that I am loved. My childhood at Acres of Love was protected – I had above and beyond what I needed, and I was given the tools to be an adult. I learned how to be independent, how to cook, and how to look after myself.



God has been so faithful in my life and I see His mercy and goodness. He chose the best for me – He brought me to Acres of Love, where I had everything I needed.

I was well cared for – whether it was doing my hair, having clothes for the different seasons, having everything I needed for school, or feeling confident about inviting friends over. I grew up blessed with my big Acres of Love family. The sisterhood I was a part of continues even now that I am away at university. The sisters I had while growing up are my sisters for life, and those relationships have given me the foundation to create a sisterhood here with my roommate and friends at varsity.

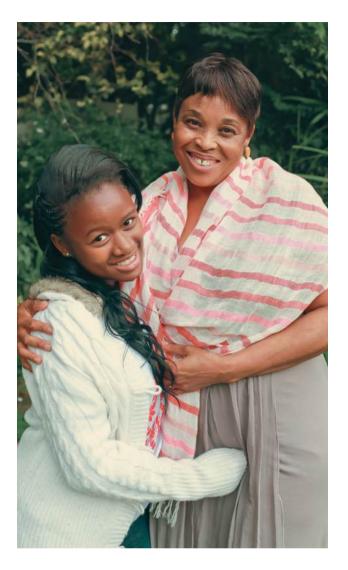
The family foundation I received at Acres of Love has impacted how I see myself and the world. If I do something, I am going to do it well and with excellence, because I am doing it for God. I am now in my second year at university, and in His goodness, I was first in my first-year class for Economics and second in my class for Business.





In addition to my studies. I am active in my local church. I was a youth leader and now I have so much compassion for my Rivers Youth leader who was so patient with us even when we found it hard to listen! And today, I enjoy mentoring young teens. I now serve on the Salvation team, and I just returned from an amazing missions trip with my church, and God opened my eyes and heart to ministry. Our team went door-to-door and prayed over the sick, the oppressed and the broken. We saw God heal and restore people's lives, and I was so humbled by His goodness and the HOPE He brings. I met people struggling to raise their children with no support, and I was reminded of how much I have been given in my life and how I want to be a blessing to others. This trip made me realise that I want to minister the gospel and work with youth, to help them walk in the fullness of what God has for them. He is the one who transforms lives!

When I think about my life, I see that God has restored and delivered me from so much. I am blessed and am now living to bless others and share the Gospel – the hope of Jesus!









### CYCLES CALL FOR CONNECTIONS

### BY KABELO MAAKA

The 2020-2022 pandemic life was uncertain and scary, but it was also repetitive, which was its own type of frustration. As far as end-of-the-world post-apocalyptic films go, the pandemic was unsettling, yet mundane. Don't mind me and my film references! Let me give you some context. My name is Kabelo and I run my own animation company. I run the business with my mother, Dr Tshepo P. Maaka. We call her "Dr T" at work. Since 2017, we've been creating award-winning educational animated short films and children's books. That's my long-winded way of saying I think in moving pictures.

My daily routine during the pandemic went something like this: Wake up. Pray. Get ready to work (from home). Make breakfast for my ailing granny, hoping she'll eat so that she can take her medication. Rush to meet my team online for our weekly staff meeting. Squeeze in a breakfast meeting with my mom. Try and get through the

workday. Witness my mom and gran disagree over my grandmother's healthcare again. Work late into the evening and then crash on my bed. The next day: repeat, like clockwork. I could relate to those movies where the character lives through the same day over and over again, doomed to repeat it unless they make a change.

During the hard lockdown my grandmother came to stay with us to remain shielded from the deadly virus. My mom is a medical doctor, and my gran had been suffering from diabetes complications for a few years. Her health was in a fragile place, and our home in Joburg was the best option to keep her safe. Our lives were like a medical drama with two strong-willed women living under one roof! My mom loves her mother, otherwise she wouldn't have chosen to bring her to stay with us. My grandmother loves her daughter, otherwise she wouldn't have agreed to come. And, I love them both and am close

to both, which is why I thought I would be okay with the occasional tension that comes from a mother and daughter who have differing opinions on how to live life. But I was certain of one thing though, that I needed more variety in my week.

Some days proved lighter than others. We would all laugh together while enjoying a silly TV show or YouTube video. By then, my gran had partially lost her sight, so she would just listen. Every now and then, my mom and gran would bond over some old pop culture references that I was too young to understand. I remember thinking, "I need young people in my life." Those moments were a respite – like a heartwarming family sitcom.

When our Youth and Young Adults ministry started hosting Zoom Connects on Sunday evenings, they were a saving grace. We would play games, chat about young adult issues in Christ and pray together. Those sessions eventually came to an end as lockdowns eased. With no other option, I decided to do something I had been avoiding – I actually joined one of those Connect Groups that they always talked about during the services.

Before joining a connect group, I was a nameless extra in a sea of people starring in a made-up film called "The Perpetual Visitor". Even as an introvert, it had always bothered me that all these people I saw at church were my family in Christ and yet I didn't know anyone's name or face. So, I decided to take the big jump out of my comfort zone and join a Connect Group, as awkward as it would be. I remember my Connect Group leader, Simphiwe Nxumalo, really making us feel welcome from the beginning. He asked me a simple question, "How was your day?" Wow, someone actually asked me how my day went! Suddenly, I was no longer a nameless extra in a crowd. I was now the protagonist in my own coming-of-age drama film. I also met my good friend, Phaello Tshabalala, who is like the fabulous big sister everyone needs!

The group has an array of young and older members attending every other week. We meet on Saturdays, talking through the latest message preached at church. We've gone on hikes, watched movies, eaten way too much pizza and Woolies finger foods, and we always laugh together.

My gran and I share a birthday, and every year at midnight, she would beat me at being the first to call and wish me happy birthday. During the pandemic her health started to deteriorate. She eventually returned home to Limpopo and had a caregiver to take care of her until she went to be with the Lord. I will never forget how my Connect Group went all the way to Limpopo to attend he funeral in August 2022. I know that death comes to all of us, but when my birthday came up in September that year, it was harder than all the others. It was on a Saturday, and I went to connect as usual, although feeling down. All of a sudden, in walks Phaello with a giant set of balloons, a cake and a pot plant! They remembered it was my first birthday without my grandmother and made the saddest birthday a warm memory that I will always remember.

Now, when I walk into church, it's not a sea of extras but rather a home full of familiar faces. Connect Groups really allow you to be more relational instead of just being internal and thinking about your own self. It's not a tired cliché, Connect Groups really do "make big church small". You find your people who will do life with you. Now, the mundane, repetitive cycle is broken, and I find myself participating more in church. I've joined the worship team, and I actually say hi to people during the connection time.

So, what are you waiting for before you start connecting?

Kabelo is a businesswoman and owns an awardwinning animation company. She has a podcast and is passionate about inspiring other animators to create sustainable businesses and careers. She is plugged in at Rivers Church and serves on the Worship team.



### FOOD IS A LOVE LANGUAGE

### BY SOLVEJG FUGARD-GOUS

I have enjoyed being firmly on both sides of the "nurture" equation all my life, often receiving, and sometimes being called on, to give it.

My parents raised me and my four sisters in a wholesome, nurturing environment. Despite, or probably because of, lots of typical strict Dutch discipline which included corporal punishment, we felt safe and loved. We knew our parents' marriage, while not always peaceful, was going to last. They took us to excellent schools and we lacked nothing, but we were also taught frugality, a priceless value, in my view. We went to the Anglican church only at Easter and Christmas, but strangely, even that firm tradition gave us a sense of regularity and assurance. We were regaled with stories of my mom having experienced World War II when she grew up in The Hague, a community that cared for each other and survived by making soup out of tulip bulbs. During the 1945 Hongerwinter (which needs no translation!) they were overjoyed when Allied planes dropped bales of fresh bread from the sky, called the Manna Project. Storytelling and nostalgia are huge in our family and our boys have always pressed us for information about those who have gone before.

Being at the receiving end of wonderful nurturing continued into my marriage with Julian. He took care of so much of the typical husband stuff and also took his spiritual role in the home seriously. I place the credit for our sons being the solid, devoted ministry men they are, firmly on their dad. We have fond memories of prayer times and Bible reading at their bedsides led by Jules, who was truly "a priest in the home", and being in church on Sundays was never negotiable.

Our lives were turned upside down when Jules suffered a massive stroke in 2017. Seven years on, I have taken on much of what he did: financially, heading up our family, and taking care of tasks that don't come naturally to me. Because we were quite old school and each took care of typical gender specific roles, any type of role reversal was initially unappealing and more than a little terrifying to me. Even now, any outing has to be finely organised and executed by me and I long for the days when my nurturing husband would take care of things like dinner dates and holiday planning.

A while back I heard a rather unkind term referring to the carer/spouse as "a nurse with a purse". It really stung as I realised it kind of summed us up, even though it was meant negatively. I decided to turn it into a positive, because with God's grace, He has given this nurse endless strength to keep doing this nurturing work, and He faithfully ensures that the purse is amply supplied! We live in great comfort and with margin. Jehovah Jireh does His best work when there is a crisis, I have learnt.

I was struck by how the sisters in my world rallied when they heard of this calamity. Reshma created a file full of healing verses for Julian which he cherishes. Ps Kogi Nareen quickly provided her legendary Rocky Road treats, known for its restorative powers. Mona Pillay, on hearing that there was a shortage of hospital beds when he had to transfer from Casualty, somehow found one and literally sat in it, telling one and all, "This one's taken." Others, like Ginny Marsden, took care of tasks for me to release me to stay with Jules. Ps Roeitha Weyers still organises socials at our house with his old coffee shop volunteers. for him. My team of chefs is very OTT and jubilant every time Jules arrives at the Rivers kitchen. Ps Wilma has prayed for us without ceasing, all these years. This is who these sisters are and what they do.

I love the fact that the word *nurture* finds its roots in the Latin word for nourish. This opens up a whole world of opportunity to care for people – by feeding them. Surely it should be a love language all on its own! We were that family who would discuss lunch and dinner while eating breakfast, and each one of us, my four sisters and I, has had a career in food. Cooking for groups or individuals is one of my greatest joys and I'm blessed that my work and calling mean that I get to do what I love, professionally.

### Home is the place where nurturing should naturally and ideally be encountered.

While parents don't always get it right, most try to create an atmosphere of peace, fun and acceptance. A wise friend advised me years ago. "Make yours the house where all the children's friends want to go." Clever girl, she was! Now that we have the unspeakable privilege of grandparenting, the little ones know that at our house, they will find cosiness, warmth, affection and treats. We relate differently to our grandchildren and it isn't easy to say why this is so. When raising our own children we thought we couldn't possibly love them more, but when the littlies come along there is a whole new richness and depth. We get to teach, relate and laugh all over again. It surely is the greatest blessing and nothing else comes close, neither lifestyle nor wealth.

Our Heavenly Father is the source of all the nurturing we experience as His children and He is also the enabler of the nurturing we give. Even as adults, we can imagine clambering onto His lap when in need of extreme comfort. I am so grateful for His kind and loving heart, His forgiving nature and endless grace.

Solvejg Fugard-Gous heads up the Catering Department at Rivers Church. She has been on staff for twelve years and is passionate about all things food. She is a wife, mom, grandmother and a self-confessed feeder.

## A CHANCE MEETING OR A GOD CONNECTION?

BY NEROSHNI ELLAPA AND LUA BLIGNAUT



"In Her Shoes" became popular after Charlotte Gambill, our guest speaker in 2010, preached a message on walking in our sister's shoes. This sentiment was to be our sister's keeper and place ourselves in her position by praying for her and being available to her for a year.

Who would have thought that a chance meeting, or rather in hindsight, a divine intervention, would spark a connection over passion, travel and residency 11,156.5km away from beautiful South Africa? God did!

Divine intervention:

### Neroshni:

Lua and I met at a Sisters of Africa Conference in September 2010, both nudged by a loving friend to come and see what God had in store for us. Excited and hopeful for the future, I received my prayer card and penned down my deep desires for God's intervention. The likelihood of Lua and I receiving each other's prayer cards, sitting a row away from each other was a 20% probability. However, our Father knew we would meet and share a common denominator, our passion for the Gospel. Inquisitively, we spotted our cards and immediately began to talk and pray over our circumstances.

### Lua:

What are the chances that in a crowd of over 1000 ladies, two of them would draw each other's 'In Her Shoes' prayer card? That is exactly what happened at the Sisters of Africa Conference in 2010. I distinctly remember wondering if I would ever get the opportunity to meet the person who's card I had drawn out of the box. I was walking to my seat for the last session of the conference and as I sat down, I opened the envelope. As I started reading the card, I heard a voice behind me saying, "That's my card!" I turned around and saw Neroshni sitting behind me waving. We had a chat and then realised that she had drawn my card too! God truly comes through in small little waves as I remembered clearly that I prayed for God to give me confirmation that He was listening.

### Throughout the years:

Throughout the years we have nurtured our friendship and kept in contact via social media, wishing each other Happy Birthday – our birthdays are two days apart – sending words of encouragement, and sharing ideas about teaching as we are both teachers who really have a passion for education. We would often ask each other if there was anything we could pray for one another.

### Connection on foreign ground:

### Lua:

In 2015 I moved to Abu Dhabi to start my international teaching career. A chance meeting with Rasheen at a rooftop braai in Al Ain revealed that Nersohni was a mutual friend, and that she was looking to move to the UAE. I had met Rasheen that night. I shared some advice on making the move to Abu Dhabi, excited that our paths might cross again. Neroshni made it to the UAE and eventually asked me about a church. I invited her to join me for a Life Group evening, and we reconnected.

### Neroshni:

With both of us having numerous challenges and the desire for travel and education, we flew to the 'sandbox' to start a new adventure. The UAE would bring us together again. We met in a Life Group and later, with the counsel of our new friends, began to worship at Cornerstone in Abu Dhabi.

### Brought together by Faith:

### Neroshni:

Cornerstone is a multi-cultural community of Christ-followers and seekers from fifty-eight nations. We have become a part of this body and serve our community passionately. I help host a life group and actively serve as a group leader in Alpha Courses yearly. Being able to serve our community through the Gospel has equipped us with life skills and genuine friends who are now our family.

Life in the UAE hasn't been a breeze but we have continued to nurture each other through our friendship and our mutual passion for the Gospel; we are victorious women of God.

### Lua.

We now both attend and serve at Cornerstone Church in Abu Dhabi, a community of Jesus followers who are called to the city, the nation, and the world! I am one of the worship leaders in church and help co-lead a life group. We regularly catch up on life and work, and continue to encourage one another.

It is amazing how God can use something that might seem small, like a prayer card, to make such a big difference. It was a small seed that was sown and now, fourteen years later, it has grown into a flourishing friendship many miles away. We can look back and see God's goodness, His grace, and most of all, His love for us. He would go to the ends of the earth, and beyond, to make sure we know how much He loves us. Just like the woman at the well, we can be certain that God sees us, acknowledges us, knows us, and empowers us as women to be His heart in this world.

Lua and Neroshni are two friends whose friendship spans across continents. They are passionate about education and travel and continue to serve God in the UAE.







## MY NEST IS NEVER REALLY EMPTY

BY PS KOGI NAREEN

My husband, Derek, and I have three grown up kids, and they are all pretty incredible. When our kids entered their teenage years, for the first time I heard the phrase "empty nest". It didn't sound appealing! The empty nest is often associated with feelings of grief and loneliness that parents feel when their children leave home. Because we know the value of a strong marriage and family, the power of nurture and the importance of empowering our kids for life, we were determined from the outset to prepare our kids and ourselves for the empty nest, and to do that part of life as best we could.

When our firstborn, Chris, left home, we were already in a season of transition. After a nasty break-in where we were held up in our home, we decided to move to a secure complex, which happened on the same day that Chris moved

into his newly purchased apartment. With so much change all at once, and the fact that we work together, and the excitement of Chris's wedding to Candice, somehow the change was easier than anticipated.

Our second born, Matt, moved out in 2021 when he married Jenavee. He popped in regularly and took forever to move all his belongings out. Even though it is now (finally) empty, his old room is still affectionately known as "Matt's Room". Both boys and their gorgeous wives live in close proximity (Matt and Jen's apartment is across the road!), which means we see them often. It goes a long way in closing what could have been a gaping hole.

Our last born is our daughter, Adi. She went to London for a gap year in 2022, and just like that

all the kids were out the house and we had an empty nest. Routines were adjusted and priorities re-evaluated as we spent a little more time with friends in the same stage of life as us - strong friendships we have formed over years that we are so grateful for. We took over every inch of the now-free cupboard space, dinners became uncomplicated and the house became quiet. Sometimes too quiet. Fortunately, we could count on the kids to gatecrash regularly, friends in tow. because we've always seen our kids' friends as adopted children. Family would drop by often too, so the nest never really felt that empty. Then about the time that we were getting used to this new way of living, Adi became our boomerang kid and moved back home!

We have done the best we can and while, admittedly, it may not have been perfect in execution, it is so rewarding to see our kids pursue their own paths. Our goal as parents is to raise godly children who become self-sufficient and resilient to navigate the challenges and opportunities they will encounter as adults. They should thrive in society, pursue their dreams and make meaningful contributions to the world by living out their God-given purpose. That includes learning, taking responsibility and knowing that their decisions are no longer based on submitting to parents but rather in response to the wisdom, skills and values we have tried to instill in them.

We are so proud of all our children as we watch their lives unfold. Chris and Matt have each chosen strong and faithful women to be their wives, and both Candice and Jenavee play a significant part in strengthening family relationships and contributing to our family dynamic in meaningful ways. We watch in amazement and with great admiration as they build their own beautiful nests for the next generation of Nareen babies. Adi, while still in the nest, is an absolute pleasure to have back home. She is independent, hardworking and helpful, a pure joy to have around while preparing for her next in the future.

The empty nest season is worth taking time to prepare for. Many don't, and then find themselves looking at a stranger and going through an identity crisis, when their kids leave home. Parents selflessly and inevitably lose a sense of who they are once a child is in the picture. For many parents their kids become the centre of their universe, love, sacrifices and dedication. Their wellbeing, growth and protection become the top priorities. When that's no longer your primary role as the kids move out, empty nest syndrome can catch you by surprise. As a single parent, in particular, you may often feel a sense of

significant loss, as you and your kids relied on each other for emotional support, love and companionship. The empty nest can lead to increased feelings of grief, depression and isolation. Can I offer some advice? Give yourself time to adjust to the change. It's never going to be easy, and even preparing for it can leave room to be surprised by feelings you didn't expect. One day might bring sadness that your kids are not there, and the next might bring relief that they're gone! Allow vourself some room. You may even find that the physical separation deepens the family bonds as it offers opportunities to support and encourage each other from a distance, nurturing spiritual growth and emotional resilience.

This period can be both daunting and liberating, allowing parents to confront their own identities and redefine one's sense of self outside the role of mom or dad. Parents have the opportunity to focus on their own needs and desires, rediscovering their passions and pursuing long-dormant hobbies and dreams. This season creates opportunity for couples to strengthen and nurture their relationship without the constant demands of the kids. For some couples it may mean rediscovering things lost during the parenting life stage, falling in love again, dating each other again and exploring new adventures together.

Whatever your unique family dynamic looks like, embrace this season and figure out what works best for you. The discomfort of the change will pass, and you will discover many new dynamics to love as your family faces a new path.

My job as a mother will never be over. Just because my kids have moved out, it doesn't mean that they won't need my guidance. This brings its own difficulties that require adapting to a new phase of parenting, knowing that we can't tell our grown, married kids what to do, but we can advise, support and encourage from a distance. By embracing change, nurturing relationships, and exploring new opportunities, parents can navigate this transition with grace and optimism, embracing the next chapter of their lives with open hearts and minds, knowing that if we do this well, our nests will never really be empty.

Ps Kogi Nareen is the Executive Pastor across Rivers Church and oversees all five campuses. She has been on team for over nineteen years. She is a wife, mom, foodie and loves gathering friends and family around the table.

## A TEACHER'S SACRED MISSION

### BY MELISSA CHRISTIE

My twenty-three years at school have been filled with school bells, sport fixtures, Shakespeare, parents' evenings, report cards, giggly teens and a whole lot of hormones. Twelve of these years I sat at a school desk and the other eleven years I have been sitting behind the teacher's desk!

My fondest memory of my teaching career thus far is journeying with my class of '23, from the day they started high school to the day I handed them their matric certificates and sent them out into the world. These impactful years included Valentine's balls, sporting leagues, team building events, moments of heartache, academic extra lessons, leadership coaching, rip-roaring laughter sessions, not so pleasant detention afternoons, picking matric dance dress colours, getting learner and driver licences and finally, completing and submitting university applications. I actively watched each member of my class develop and grow, and in turn they developed and grew me. They have left a stamp on my heart and I am certain we will reunite for 21st birthday parties, graduations and weddings.

### Nurturing the next generation

Teaching is not just a profession; it's a calling and a mission – to nurture and shape the next generation. I consider it a profound honour and privilege to be entrusted with the task of nurturing the future generations. This calling goes beyond imparting knowledge; it involves shaping hearts, fostering growth and instilling values that will guide students throughout their lives.

### Straight As start with gentleness

As a teacher, nurturing begins with empathy, understanding that each student who walks through my classroom door carries a unique story, dreams, fears and aspirations. A nurturing spirit is not centred around self, but is always



centred around others and meeting the needs of my students before my own.

I do my best to celebrate my students' successes, comfort them in moments of struggle, and guide them with compassion and wisdom, just as Christ guides us through our many challenges. Through meaningful conversations, and encouragement, I strive to nurture not just their academic growth, but also their spiritual growth, to help them develop emotional resilience and character.

One of the most rewarding aspects of nurturing is witnessing the transformation that occurs in students' lives when they feel seen and supported.

### A delicate balance

Nurturing is a delicate balance between lovingly encouraging my students, and also holding them accountable through discipline and correction. This involves setting clear expectations, providing constructive feedback, and helping them learn from their mistakes. This instills in them a sense of responsibility, helps them take ownership of their actions, and teaches them to make positive choices and learn from their successes and failures. I believe in holding students accountable, not out of a desire for control, but out of commitment to their growth. Christ is the highest standard, so we should point our students toward the higher standard set by Jesus, using His example as the guide to reach their full potential.

### Filling in the gap

As a high school teacher, I encounter students who are in a crucial phase of their development. I engage daily with teenagers who are navigating issues of identity, relationships and the challenges of transitioning into adulthood. Our role as nurturers involves guiding these students through these formative years with empathy, understanding and wisdom.

One of the greatest challenges of nurturing is the uncertainty of what burdens each student carries. As teachers, we don't know the struggles, fears, or challenges that students may be facing outside the classroom. Some students may not even understand the concept of nurturing, and we may have to fulfill the role of 'mother' in their lives as they may have no example of it at home. In addition, in today's fast-paced world, students are bombarded with information, distractions and societal pressures. They have instant access to vast amounts of knowledge and are constantly surrounded by technology. Nurturing in such an environment requires us to navigate through the

the noise and distractions, focusing on building meaningful connections with the students, earning their trust and building a foundation of mutual respect.

God's nurturing love is beautifully depicted in how He even takes care of the lilies of the field. This serves as a powerful reminder of God's provision and care for His creation, and this includes each precious student under our care. As teachers, we must recognise and celebrate the inherent value and potential within each student. They are each unique individuals whom God formed and knitted together intentionally. Each student is fearfully and wonderfully made by God.

### The sacred commission

As a Christian educator, I believe that nurturing is not only a professional responsibility but also a spiritual calling, one that requires us to allow God to lead us in every step we take. In order to be effective in nurturing our students, we must also prioritise self-care and personal growth, trusting in God's guidance as we navigate the challenges and joys of teaching.

Beyond academic instruction, teachers play a vital role in modelling nurturing, God-centred relationships. We can provide hope and encouragement to students in a world often marked by brokenness and uncertainty. We can inspire students to cultivate nurturing relationships and to positively impact those around them. My goal as a teacher will therefore always remain rooted in supporting, teaching, cherishing, cultivating, upholding and training the future generations. Through God's guidance and grace, I am committed to nurturing not just minds but also hearts and spirits, fostering a legacy of love, wisdom and faith.

May we as educators continue to embrace our role as nurturers with humility, compassion and unwavering dedication, knowing that we are shaping the leaders and influencers of tomorrow.

Married to Timmy Christie, Melissa is a school mom, known as "Mrs Christie" to hundreds of teens, and a cat mom to Kalamata. Melissa serves in the Coffee Shop team at Rivers Sandton.

## FROM DOOM TO BLOOM

### BY JOLANDA BOTHA

I never imagined that at the age of thirty I would find myself heartbroken, my self-esteem at an all-time low, and my faith wobbling. I was battling depression and felt lost in so many ways. I pushed loved ones away and completely shut God out. I didn't realise that even in that darkest place of my life, God, the Creator, was working on my inner garden.

You see, I had gotten married as a young, hopeful twenty-something-year-old to an atheist. God was not at the centre of our relationship and as a result, was not our foundation. I imagined a life for us – of friendship, growth and travel, but as time passed, we grew apart and struggled to patch the holes in a foundation that was weak to begin with. I watched helplessly as our marriage crumbled. After years of hardship, we parted ways. I found myself having to rebuild my life at the age of thirty and this, of course, was not easy. Unfortunately, life only got harder before it got better. Two years after the divorce, I was in a car accident and sustained a serious injury to my wrist that required two surgeries and a significant amount of healing time. However, the accident was a turning point for me. It could have pushed me further into a dark hole, but the opposite happened. My focus shifted and my support system was God's hand pulling me out of the ashes.

My mom has always been my rock. She raised my sister and I as a single parent after we lost my dad when I was ten. During such a heart-breaking time, her strength was immeasurable and is still something that I lean on every day. One thing that has always stood out to me is my mom's faith. She didn't force faith on us but rather led us into a life of faith by example. I don't think I will ever truly know how many battles my mom fought on her knees, but I am grateful for every prayer. So, I grew up knowing that Jesus was a great foundation, but that at some point I would have to carve out my own journey with the Lord. For many years, my faith journey was like a oncein-a-while catch up with a distant friend. I went to church and I knew Who I believed in, but I wasn't actively seeking a meaningful relationship with God. Although I wasn't putting in the work,



God was sowing into my life the people who would later help me weather storms I never imagined would come.

One of the special individuals God planted in my life back in 2008, many years before the divorce and the car accident, was Paula Mitchell. Paula was my boss at the time – definitely not my favourite person in that season! But our relationship flourished from being just colleagues, to Paula becoming a confidente at work, then a running buddy, and later one of my closest friends. Many would say we are an odd pair, her and I, and because of our age difference she has been mistaken for my mother more times than I can count! Paula and I have always openly shared our faith. During the darkest days of my divorce, she prayed with me and allowed me the space to shed my tears. She was always ready to pick up the phone and whenever I confided in her, there was no judgement. I always knew I would get honest and godly advice. Her enduring love, support and prayers carried me through some of the most difficult times.

At the time, I relocated to Sunninghill and Paula often invited me to join her at Rivers Kyalami, but I was not ready. Then COVID happened, which got me off the hook for a while, but as soon as in-person services began, she was back on my case about joining her at church. For the first few months of attending, I was known as Paula's friend, the one who always made it just in time for the service countdown. Yet, Paula's perseverance got me plugged into the house. I finally partnered in 2021, ironically kick-starting my serving journey on the first anniversary of my car accident.

A year later I met my now husband, Lincoln, at the Rivers coffee shop where I used to grab a coffee for Paula and I pre-service. I'd make small talk with him, catching up on the week. He was always so kind and interested - a real gentleman. Only later did I learn that the coffee shop team worked their magic to make sure Lincoln was the one serving me because they knew he fancied me. Later, this became having long chats after service and hours on the phone building a friendship. One evening, Lincoln suggested that we pray before saying goodnight on the phone. Aside from stealing my heart with his charm, romantic picnics and effort, Lincs won my heart with his love for God and how he nurtured our friendship into a blooming relationship.

God has continued to shine His face upon me and blessed me with a husband who is also planted in His house. Lincoln's faith journey actually began after receiving spiritual watering at a Rivers Men's conference. Every day he ensures our marriage remains built on God's Word, consciously nurturing our foundation and committing to walking through life as my partner to serve in God's Kingdom.

How dark and empty would our world be if God had not created us to be relational creatures? I can't even bring myself to imagine it! Our relationships matter; they influence our path and shape who we become. My faith foundation was laid by my mom and later restored by Paula (not without some nagging!). These two strong women nurtured me into the woman I am today, and I am flourishing in God's house.

God continues to amaze me with His faithfulness and I am a testimony to the power of relationships and how they nurture the soul. It's these relationships – the ones God purposefully sows into our lives – that save us. They surely saved me. So choose wisely who you allow to water your garden and don't be shy to water someone else's garden!

Jolanda is wife to Lincoln, daughter, sister, dogmom, friend and Marketing expert. She is an easy and outgoing person, who loves spending time with family and friends. Rooted in church, Jolanda also serves as a photographer at Rivers Kyalami.







# MYTIMELINE VERSUS GOD'S TIMELINE

### BY PS ROEITHA WEYERS

When I was thirty-three years old I spent a beautiful summer afternoon with some of my girlfriends watching a funny, and I must confess, not a very Christian movie! This movie sparked some interesting conversation about life, love and purpose. When I got home that evening, I prayed and diarised two very specific prayers. Firstly, I asked God to help me to always remain in His will and to live a life of purpose. Secondly, I prayed that I would not be a virgin by the time I turned forty. Guess the movie! I knew that God knew I obviously meant I wanted to get married before I turned forty.

It was a very serious prayer and at the time it never dawned on me that being unmarried at forty would mean I was exactly in the centre of God's will. Over the next few years, my role on the staff team at Rivers led me to walk alongside many women from diverse backgrounds through the various difficulties they were facing in life.

For the most part, many of these women were navigating being single and waiting for the right partner in their lives. These were girls who had never been married before; girls who had been in terrible past relationships; or who had been divorced and were trusting to do things differently the next time around. I sat through countless conversations which included questions that I myself had asked over the years: "Why not me? When is my time? Will I ever get married? Why is life so unfair? How do I deal with family and societal pressures?" and many others.

Despite having my own questions, I knew that God was bringing these women my way for a reason and that I had a duty to Him and to them. So I encouraged, cried with and prayed with many – sometimes even laughed with many at some of the "ludacracies" of singleness, not knowing whether I would get my own

breakthrough or not. Our God is one who nurtures, nourishes and protects us through His Word and through relationship with Him. I knew that He often nurtures people through us if we make ourselves available and allow Him to work through us. So although I did not have all the answers, I stepped into that big sister role and asked God to use me. I was not always the older sister in the room, age-wise. Sometimes I felt really inadequate and I was not sure whether I was the right person for the task. But then I remembered 2 Corinthians 12:9 where God reminds us that His power is made perfect in our weaknesses. So best I get on with it!

What helped is that I am the eldest of five siblings. Our dad passed on when I was ten and I became a second parent in our home. I had to grow up quickly as I took on the role of helping my mum to take care of my four younger siblings. This meant learning to cook, doing household chores, helping with homework and everything else in between! I loved taking care of my siblings and embraced the role, even though sometimes it was difficult. I discovered that nurturing often meant speaking the truth in love which also meant I was not always their favourite person. At nineteen, I moved to Johannesburg to find a better job so that I could help my mum financially to take care of my siblings.

When I joined Rivers, I met a sister who would eventually become my best friend. Vineshree was older than I was and had been married for many years. Vineshree and her husband had waited a long time for a child of their own but unfortunately, that dream had not come to fruition in the way they expected. Despite the fact that Vin and I were waiting for two different things, we realised that the sentiments and questions in our seasons were exactly the same. I discovered that God had placed her in my life as an older sister who helped to nurture me and help me through my own weak moments when I wondered if my prayer would ever get answered. She stood by my side through tough times and allowed God to use her to speak into my life, sometimes even words that I did not want to hear. Titus 2:4-5 says: "These older women must train the younger women to love their husbands and their children, to live wisely and be pure, to work in their homes, to do good, and to be submissive to their husbands. Then they will not bring shame on the word of God." Vineshree taught me that the nurturing nature of women is a gift from God and goes way beyond just motherhood. She modelled a Titus 2 woman. Neither of us knew it at the time, but she was helping to prepare me for so much more to come.

Well, three years later, still single and truly content with where I was in life, I met Hein. Our dating journey was an interesting one which included a three year break up and navigating a relationship through COVID. We finally got married a whole ten years after journaling that prayer. I was forty-three. Part of God's nurturing nature is not giving us what we want, but rather giving us what we need, when we need it. It did not quite meet my timeline, but I am definitely glad that it was in line with His!

Marriage is a beautiful thing and two are definitely better than one! I catapulted into a whole new world. It felt like someone had hit the fast forward button. The circle has gotten wider and there are even more women coming my way now who need the nurturing arm of a sister. I face a new waiting season with some questions and inadequacies passing through my mind every now and again like old friends. But, I am reminded that those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed. And my prayer remains the same,

"Lord, help me to always be in the centre of your will and to live a life of purpose."

Ps Roeitha Weyers heads up the Pastoral Care team at Rivers Church. She has been on team for sixteen years. She is married to Hein and is passionate about God, family and helping people to develop a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ.



## NURTURING A GROWING FAMILY

### BY JUSTINE GABRIEL

Chris and I married shortly after we graduated. We were resolute on honouring God in our relationship and knew that He would take care of all the details. The decision to get married was made prior to us having jobs. It was an act of faith, trusting that our Heavenly Father would protect and provide for us if we would honour Him. Being plugged into church, volunteering and surrounding ourselves with God-fearing friends helped fertilise our lives and marriage for what was to come.

Even before we met, based on our relationship with God and understanding His love for us as His children, Chris and I both desired to one day grow our family through adoption. When we met and realised that we were aligned in this, we knew God was behind it and we knew He would lead us when the time was right. This desire was strong and was nurtured for many years before it came to fruition. After having our first child, Zoe, we were quite comfortable with our family of three. However, our dream of growing our

family through adoption was revived when Zoe started insisting on getting a baby brother. She would pray for a baby brother every night at bed time and even went to the extent of naming him. I was quite surprised when her teacher congratulated me on the new addition to our family because Zoe had told everyone about her baby brother even before we started the adoption process! It was Zoe's persistence that prompted us to commence the process of adoption. We enquired extensively and when we met with our social worker, we knew God was taking care of all the details.

Like we did with Zoe, we prayed for our baby boy. We prayed that God would work through our social worker to match us with our perfect baby boy. We did not identify a baby we wanted to adopt, so we relied solely on the discernment of our social worker to match us. Many times during the process I dreamt about our baby boy. I could feel his touch. I could smell him and hear him. Throughout the thirteen months, God was preparing us to receive our bundle of joy and when he arrived, he was the fulfillment of every dream I had about him prior to his arrival.

We experienced many frustrating delays in the adoption process but looking back, it was a time to nurture our patience. We would later come to find out that our baby boy would only be born eight months after we started our adoption process. There was purpose behind the delays.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2019, we got the much anticipated call from our social worker. We had been matched! My husband, Chris, called me at work and I remember having to explain the stream of tears to my colleagues. A week later, we brought our baby boy home. The embrace I got when he was placed in my arms will be forever etched in my memory. This was the baby boy I saw in my dream and my heart had a place reserved for him.

Joshua is now five years old, and each and every day he continues to fill our lives with loud laughter, mischief and profound wisdom that can only come from the innocence of an ill-constructed sentence relayed through a little person.

Our family was created by God and the pieces came together through faith, marriage, biological birth and adoption.

During each season – being single, getting married, building a career, starting our family, growing our family and now leading our kids to serve Christ, we seek to deepen our understanding of the different aspects of God's love for us. In doing this, we are able to replicate His love in our friendships, marriage, family and careers.

One of my favourite verses is Psalm 138:8, "The LORD will perfect that which concerns me; Your mercy, O LORD, endures forever," and this verse has been my story. As we grow in Him and nurture our God-given desires according to His will, we see God work in wonderful ways.

Justine is passionate about fulfilling her purpose as a child of God, wife, mother and career woman. She has served on the Rivers Worship team for fifteen years through various seasons of life.







## NURTURING IN DIFFERENT SEASONS

### BY RACHEL DZENGA

### 2024

I sit quietly in the assessment room. My young client is playing with wooden blocks, hands busy and frantic as he throws pieces across the room and shouts loudly. Taking in a deep breath, my eyes settle on my favourite picture pasted on the wall of the therapy room. A quote from CS Lewis reads, "Children are not a distraction from more important work." My client is a similar age to what I was when the seed was first planted in me.

### 2005

I am six or seven years old, swimming, playing hide and seek, skipping stones on the river, and enjoying summer holidays barefoot on a farm in Mooi River. I vividly recall that the day after Christmas each year, my grandmother packed small plastic bags of sweets, toys and crayons, and we'd walk down the dusty roads to hand them out to children living in a village nearby. With my baby dolls in hand, each year, this small tradition became a seed of charity and open heartedness that I have carried with me.

### 2017

It is my first year of university, and at the age of nineteen I met Stephen whilst we served in Junior Youth together as youth leaders. We became good friends. Shortly afterwards, he stepped into full-time ministry and he proposed a year after we started dating.

### 2020

In January of 2020, we stand at the altar, not knowing that six weeks after our honeymoon, a hard lockdown would be announced and the world as we knew it would shut down. In the months that followed, as a twenty-one-year-old newlywed, I faced the daily decision to tend to our marriage and build a strong foundation

whilst navigating the precarious nature of the days ahead. This meant filling my days with online connect group meetings, daily walks together, board games, and family Zoom calls. Whilst lockdown was a harsh and devastating time for many, it was a blessing in many ways as Stephen and I spent an entire year together, learning, growing, and nurturing our new life together as husband and wife.

It was in the long months of lockdown that I completed my studies online. I volunteered at a non-profit organisation called Project Brave that focussed on uplifting and empowering marginalised women and children. The organisation provides a fresh start for vulnerable women with children, who find themselves living or working on the street. It was through this volunteering opportunity that I decided to pursue a Masters degree in Counselling Psychology and further my passion for helping women and children.

### 2021

Stephen and I set off on another early morning adventure, ready to explore a new coffee shop and spend time together. In the months after hard lockdown, as restrictions eased, we enjoyed going on dates to quiet coffee shops and loved to explore new parts of the city each weekend. With the goal of nurturing small businesses that were reopening, as well as my own creativity, I began a coffee blog documenting our adventures. One Instagram account soon blossomed into three pages featuring date spots, brunch spots, and coffee spots to explore in Joburg. My three Instagram accounts have grown quickly and organically, and the art of capturing my experiences through photos and videos has become a fun way to nurture my creativity and find unique and interesting date ideas to enjoy as a couple and with friends.

### 2022

I sit quietly staring out at the open fields through the train window. It is the second week of living on the Phelophepa Healthcare Train, a travelling train that provides basic healthcare services to communities across South Africa. I am a student psychologist, seeing clients for the first time and finding my feet with counselling skills and play therapy. My mind wanders to the beginning of this journey, when I first applied and was accepted to be one of twelve students in the Masters of Community-Based Counselling Psychology degree. Little did I know that a two-year whirlwind of learning and growing would challenge me deeply and have me dig deep into

the roots I had established in God's love and strength. Practically, this meant establishing non-negotiables during the busiest year of my life, which included attending every monthly Sisters meeting and serving on a Sunday in the coffee shop. Facing the reality of other people's pain meant I needed to keep returning to the source of my strength, nourishing my soul as I kept my feet steadily planted in purpose.

### 2023

I sit in my office on the medical campus of my university, celebrating the achievement of becoming an intern counselling psychologist. My days are filled with seeing medical students for therapy, counselling children at a primary school, and assessing children at a nonprofit organisation. Whilst I have experienced moments of deep heartache at the lack of resources and the child abuse that happens every day in our country, I am deeply moved by the many healthcare professionals I work with who choose to advocate and care for children who do not have a voice. It was in these places that my passion and commitment for my work blossomed, rooted in the cases I saw as a new intern. My eyes open to the reality of life for so many children and young adults in South Africa.

### 2024

I have settled into this year with a quiet determination to finish my research report, the final step to qualify as a counselling psychologist. In the months that follow, I know I will have my hands full with board exam preparation and au pairing with a very outgoing nine-year-old. My love for children and non-profit work continues to grow, enriched each day as I sit with the little one in my care and learn to navigate temper tantrums, difficult days, and snack choices. I am deeply thankful for the journey that has brought me to this very place, and I cannot wait to see what God has in store as I keep surrendering my passion and plans to Him. My prayer is that as He continues to nurture me, I will be able to richly nurture those around me.

Rachel has a passion for exploring Joburg and blogging about her adventures. She is completing her Masters in Community Based Counselling Psychology, with an interest in working with children. She is married to her husband of four years, Stephen, and volunteers alongside him in the Rivers Coffee Shop.

# THE NURTURING EFFECTS OF A CHAOS-FILLED THUNDERSTORM

BY RIVONINGO KHOSA



Picture the gloom and absolutely chilling sounds of a Johannesburg thunderstorm on a warm summer afternoon. The loud roar and exclamation-commanding lightning with the possibility of a chaos-filled hail storm. The infamous Joburg traffic starts to build up, inconvenience brewing.

On the other side of all this chaos lies a small, perhaps wild, plant that has found its way through a small, cracked paved surface in a quiet and quaint suburban area. Reliant on the running waters from this thunderstorm, this small plant

has defied the odds and found its way through. Maybe one day this little plant will grow into a plant that will continue to flourish for years to come, perhaps encountering some challenges along the way. These are the nurturing effects of a chaos-filled thunderstorm. This is the story of a Christian girl who happens to be a geologist.

In my family, education has and will probably always be a big deal. It continues to be encouraged and promoted with every new generation. So, studying was always going to be something that would play a big role in my life.

I did not always know that I wanted to become an earth scientist. A scientist perhaps, but definitely not one in a field that would become a challenge to my faith. After high school, I registered at an institution of higher learning for a BSc qualification in Geology. Having not studied anything earth-related in high school (i.e. Geography), I thought that it would be an interesting way to learn about how the earth works and I would probably end up in a mining-related career. So, why not?

I have since become a fluvial geochronologist, one that spends her days using the rocks of Southern Africa to understand the development of the landscape that forms the background of the land we live in.

As a qualified geologist, I have, on many occasions, been asked how I reconcile my Christian faith with a science that bases its foundations on earth processes that span over 4.5 billion years, when the Bible clearly teaches otherwise.

See, I have been a Christian my whole life and ending up in a career where my faith and work don't line up was not really part of the plan. I recognise now that while this may have not been part of the plan for me, it was always part of God's plan. I don't doubt this. Being in this space has both challenged and strengthened my faith. What has previously felt like a source of possible deterrent and confusion, has turned into a space that nurtures my faith.

Although I have gone this far in my academic career, I recognise that I am still relatively new in the field and my opinion is not considered to have much influence. Well, at least not yet. I am a firm believer that nothing on God's earth happens by chance, like how much God has allowed us to know through science, or my being in the profession. We may not understand everything and that's okay, and science will also not answer everything either. I rest on Deuteronomy 29:29 which says that, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever."

Now, what does the headspace of a Christian geologist look like? What does the heart space of a Christian girl who happens to be a geologist look like? It is the head and heart of a young woman who has been nurtured by God's grace, goodness, faithfulness and favour, that have led me into spaces that He will continue to guide me through.

Science is a field that develops all the time with new evidence and approaches, but the Bible cannot and will never change. I have settled in my heart and mind that this has been and will continue to be the foundation of my faith and what carries me.

What has felt like potential for a chaos-filled thunderstorm has and is evidence of God's nurturing hand on my life from the beginning, and the plan He has always had for my life. That's the beauty of experiencing God for yourself.

I have seen God in my life and my conviction is what continues to ground me. Like the nurturing effects of a chaos-filled thunderstorm, God continues to nurture my spirit, my conviction keeps me grounded and my commitment to finding the cracks in the pavement for the glory of God keeps me motivated.

Rivoningo, AKA Beebo, is a Jesus lover and servant of God. She has been serving in the Rivers Visuals team for close to eight years. She is a lover of all things food, especially a good brunch and a good audiobook.











### **NURTURING IN BUSINESS**

### BY KERSHINEE NICODEMUS

McKayler was barely six months old when I had to get back into the working world, starting a new job, with a new team that also happened to be much older than I was. It was quite daunting at the time, finding my feet with being a new mom and trying to juggle work, marriage and motherhood. I strived to give my best at work and to make a good impression as I was trusting God for a permanent contract. My boss was a sincere and hardworking man who took the time to care for his employees, and he gave me the opportunity to grow my knowledge and skills in the workplace. God was faithful and He answered my prayer. As soon as I was made a permanent employee, my husband and I were able to purchase our first home. Four years later, along came baby number two, my daughter Teve. Some of the older women I worked with took it upon themselves to pamper me with treats, get

me lunch, and even drive me home when my feet were too swollen. They took the time to care for me and I in turn extended acts of kindness to them. This fostered such good relationships among us, that my then manager and I have never missed a birthday phone call to each other in these last twenty-four years! God knows our story from beginning to end, and little did I know that the years spent at this company were all in preparation for what God had in store for my future.

In 2004, from my small home office, I started a logistics and industrial supplies business with the support of my husband. Not too long after that, we decided to pursue Leon's dream of owning our own electrical supplies company, and we decided to partner with God in business. Jesus had been the centre of our lives and this meant

He would be the centre of our business. We prayed together every morning before the doors opened for trading and this has become a unified habit for our staff. As business owners we have seen growth, not just through prayer, but also through hard work. We have strived to build our business on the solid foundation of honesty and trust in God.

Running an electrical supplies company, I was known as the "rose amongst the thorns". This was a new challenge for me but I found myself being a source of encouragement to the men I worked with. As we have seen substantial growth in our business over the years, many women have since joined our team.

The great amount of nurturing that was shown to me when I was an employee, inspired me to cultivate the same approach in my own business. I learnt very early in business to take care of people. Being an approachable person has allowed me to help people grow, to respond to their needs and to offer support wherever I can. Finding the middle ground between being approachable and maintaining authority, is key. As an employer, you can be a nurturer and still set clear boundaries.

As we serve others through our businesses, we not only contribute to their growth and success but we also experience fulfilment and purpose in our own lives.

I have seen over and over in my Bible how God nurtures His people, how He cares and provides and encourages and delights in His people. When my heart and hands were open to extend this gift of nurturing, I began to see God work through me. Being planted at Rivers Church and receiving the word of God weekly, attending our monthly Sisters ministry for women, as well as our annual Sisters of Africa conferences, has grown and shaped me as a person, and stirred a passion in me to pay it forward. So each year I register the women on my staff for Sisters Of Africa Conference. I also extended the invite to other women in my world by blessing them with a conference ticket. Countless testimonies from my staff and the women who have been impacted over the years have encouraged

me to keep going, as they give glory to God: "This (Sisters of Africa Conference) was such a blessing... I'm going to pay this forward and I'm going to also book for next year for myself and two other people." Another said: "Before I started here at Electrical Warehouse my family and I did not have a relationship with God and the church... and you encouraging me about going to church was the best thing that has happened to me and my family. We all go to church now and our family life has been so blessed and loving."

The Lord has been good to me and I want to leave people better than I found them. We should pay attention to the area of influence where God has placed us, including family, friends and neighbours. We may never receive a thank you note or even hear about how our kindness or care has helped someone, but we are to do good anyway, expecting nothing in return.

As women, we are created uniquely in the image of God. We are nurturers, and this is the very nature of how God designed us. I have learned to embrace my God-given design as a woman, even within business, because our entrepreneurial journey is not just about our own success, but also about using our gifts and talents to impact others positively and bring glory to God.

Kershinee is a kingdom-minded businesswoman and has been plugged in at Rivers Church since 2003. She has been married to Leon for twenty-six years and has two daughters. She is passionate about spreading God's love and encouragement to those around her.



# EVERY WOMAN SHOULD FEEL SPECIAL

### BY CINDY LEWIS

This year marks the 8th anniversary of Lesarmario Hair and Nail Bar. Having come from a completely different background, that of corporate law, I had a lot to learn when stepping into business in a whole new industry. As head of legal for fourteen companies, I used to attend meeting, after meeting, and as a young girl in the corporate world, I was often brushed aside. So it was important to me that I always looked presentable, making sure my hair and nails were always done. But I found that I was spending so much money on hair and nails every month, and I wondered how on earth other girls, especially those who don't earn well but still want to look and feel good, could afford it.

As I looked deeper into this, I came across the concept of the "Lipstick Effect". This is where, across the world, lipstick sales increase midmonth or in times of economic recession.

The reason is that when consumers are cash strapped but still want a small indulgence to look and feel good, they forgo the big ticket items and rather go for more affordable makeup, namely lipstick. I took this concept and turned it around. I wanted every woman to afford looking and feeling good throughout the month, whether they are a CEO or a stay-at-home mum. So, three weeks later, after much training, I opened Lesarmario Hair and Nail Bar. The principle behind this was simple, that every woman should be made to feel special with a pamper and I wanted it to be affordable for everyone.

Eight years on, we continue to create a nurturing environment for every client who walks into our salon. It is an environment where women not only come in to get pampered, but also to find a safe space where they can let their hair down, relax and have someone to connect with. We've found

that so many women feel lonely and just need a safe space where they can talk. A busy mom can come in and for an hour just unwind while getting her hair or nails done. A woman working at one of the offices in the area can pop in during her lunch break and get her hair done before a big meeting. Our staff are known by name and we've seen clients walk into the salon feeling down, but walk out feeling positive, like they've had a catchup with an old friend!

I later realised that most people don't have time on their hands and end up forgetting to make appointments for their hair and nails. So we opened up a Whatsapp line where ladies can get in touch with us when it's convenient for them. It's all about convenience and serving women. The Sisters of Africa theme of 'nurture' is so apt.

When planting a seed, you have to ensure that the soil is perfect, that you water it correctly and avoid too much sun, in order for the flower to bloom. The same principles apply in life, as they do in business. The attention to detail and care taken is what makes everything beautiful.

My business is something that I am truly proud of and I constantly do my utmost to nurture it, particularly when it comes to my staff. My staff are my family. Seeing them grow in their work and personal capacity has been one of my absolute highlights over the years. One of my staff members came in as a cleaner and she has grown to become one of my top stylists today. "If you believe in yourself, I believe in you," I once told her. She has since been able to send her daughter to Germany as an au pair. I have also been proud to have retained my staff team, even during Covid, considering we are in an industry with an incredibly high turnover of staff. I've always had a business mindset and this was nurtured by my father. He is a retailer and when I was a child, he used to talk to me a lot about business. Business has been in my bloodline, from my grandfather to my father and now to me. When I was young, I remember opening a little

restaurant at home, and charging my parents for milkshakes so that I could get 'tuck' money for school! My father taught me about crocodiles and lizards, that I should be like a crocodile that goes for things, rather than a lizard that is happy to work under the crocodile. I pursued fulltime business because I wanted to make my own money and do what I love, which is meeting people.

This led me to attend a Rivers Church service one day. For the first time in my life I understood the Word, even though I come from a religious background. As embarrassing as this is, back then I didn't even know there was a book of Ruth in the Bible back then! Being in that service, I remember feeling a warmth, and feeling emotional. I thought to myself, "I belong here!" One Friday I attended my first Sisters Night and I remember thinking, "I am supposed to do something here!" We've since been privileged to bless the Sisters ministry with vouchers and goodies over the years.

There are so many exciting changes and additions coming to *Lesarmario* and we are so looking forward to what our next will look like as we continue to bless women and make them feel as special as they really are!

Cindy is a businesswoman at heart and is using her business in the beauty industry to invest in women's lives. She is married to Ryan and is mom to sixteen-year-old Aleksandar, and they live in Sandton.



## WHEN OUR DREAMS DON'T TAKE FLIGHT

### BY PHILILE MDLETSHE

"I am sorry Philile, but I cannot pass you," were the words that shattered my dream as I was told that I had failed my final airline practical flight test. I had worked incredibly hard and sacrificed so much to reach this point. Passing that assessment would have meant that I had finally achieved my childhood dream of flying as a commercial pilot for a South African airline. Failing the test, however, marked the end of the road with the company, embarrassment, shame, disappointment, fear and uncertainty. Thoughts flooded my mind as tears streamed down my face. "How do I explain this to my family who has been praying for me? What will I tell my peers and colleagues who had gone before me? God, where are you and how could you let this happen?" Unbeknown to me, this was a pivotal moment in my walk with God as He would begin to show me how He would nurture the dreams.

in my life. 'Nurture' is usually associated with warm, fuzzy feelings of kindness and tenderness, which paint a picture of a soft and gentle process. However, nurture can involve harsh measures including cutting off what is dead, diseased and damaged, with the vision of ensuring more growth of excellent quality. Whilst the latter may be unpopular, it is certainly how God nurtures us. God cuts branches off the vine that do not produce fruit and cuts branches that do bear fruit to ensure they bear even more fruit. This ultimately means that if you are not bearing fruit, you will be cut; more astounding is that if you are bearing fruit, you will be cut too! Pardon me but last I checked, being cut is extremely PAINFUL!

When I failed my flight test, my season of pruning had started. However, my path up to that point

had been anything but smooth or straight. Despite wanting to become a commercial pilot since the age of fifteen, I only started my flight training twelve years later at the age of twenty-seven as I had pursued the safer corporate path instead. Embarking on a new career at that age was daunting as it meant leaving my full-time, well-paying, comfortable job, moving back home with my parents and humbling myself to start over with peers ten years my junior.

My pruning continued when I sat on the ground for two years before receiving a flying opportunity for a humanitarian aid client which required me to be based in Kabul, Afghanistan. Whilst my dream was finally taking flight and I was doing what I loved, it was in a war-torn and poverty-stricken country that was unkind to Christians and women. During this season, pruning came in the form of isolation due to spending months at a time far from home, and extreme discomfort as I lived in a confined space for safety and imminent danger as my life was threatened on various occasions. I can recall the sound and feeling of bombs exploding close by, followed by sirens that warned me to run to the nearest bunker or safe room until the "all clear". Some of the events that took place during this season of pruning remain difficult to talk about and were unbearable.

Not only was life in Afghanistan incredibly difficult physically, emotionally, and mentally but also spiritually as there was nowhere to worship or fellowship with other Christians. The expats I befriended in order to form connection, used worldly ways to numb themselves from the harsh realities around them. Spending time with them to avoid being alone only led me further into the dark. I was desperate for the season of pruning to come to an end. I had never anticipated that my dream of flying would pan out the way it had. There were nights when I cried out to God, unable to even speak, and could only muster oneline sentences between sobs, "God, help me!" "God, where are you?" "God, I need you!" "God, WHY?!"

Pruning is a necessary process in farming. It essentially means sacrificing what is good for what is best. Pruning starts with a vision of what the farmer wants his crop to yield, even before he starts cutting. In the same way, God has a vision for our lives, to give us a hope and a future.

## God prunes us to ensure that we as His children produce the best possible fruit and fulfill the vision He has for our lives.

I have learnt that pruning is a continuous process. As a black female in a male-dominated industry, I have been harassed, mocked, spoken down to and discouraged to the point where I almost gave up. But I was reminded that God is love (1 John 4:16) and that He always wants the best for us. He is not cruel. God, in His faithfulness, has developed me by cutting off character traits such as ego, self-reliance and self-sufficiency and replaced them with humility, resilience, grace, empathy, patience and kindness.

I have also learnt that pruning is normally followed by increase and growth. In addition to the incredible operational exposure and exciting international travels I have had, God has promoted me to Chief Pilot for the organisation I work for. This means that I am responsible for all the pilots within the organisation - a position most pilots work their entire careers to attain. It is a position I never thought I would be considered for and had shied away from, given my past failures. But through the process of pruning, God has shown me that I do not need to rely on my own strength or wisdom. He truly works all things together for good and uses the seemingly weak and hopeless situations of our lives to shame the strong and the wise. In pursuing our dreams, may we remember that Jesus is the true vine and that we will bear the best fruit if we seek Him with all our heart and remain connected to Him.

Philile is an effervescent, friendly and warm natured person who is obsessed with anything that flies! You can often find her looking into the sky watching aircraft flying by as she anticipates her next adventure. She is spontaneous and loves to travel, meet new people, and embrace life through experiences. When she isn't travelling the world, you will find her hosting close family and friends, cooking up a storm. She has been attending Rivers for sixteen years and serves in the Hospitality team.



