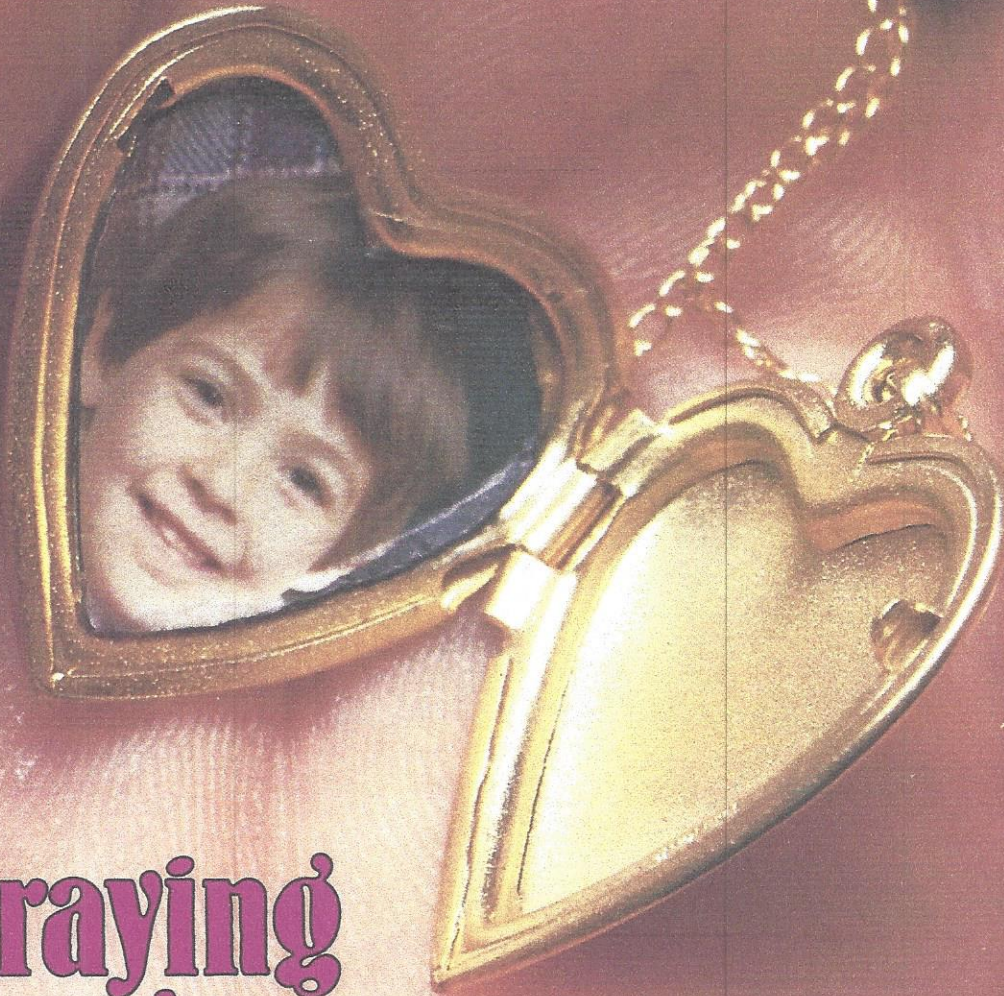


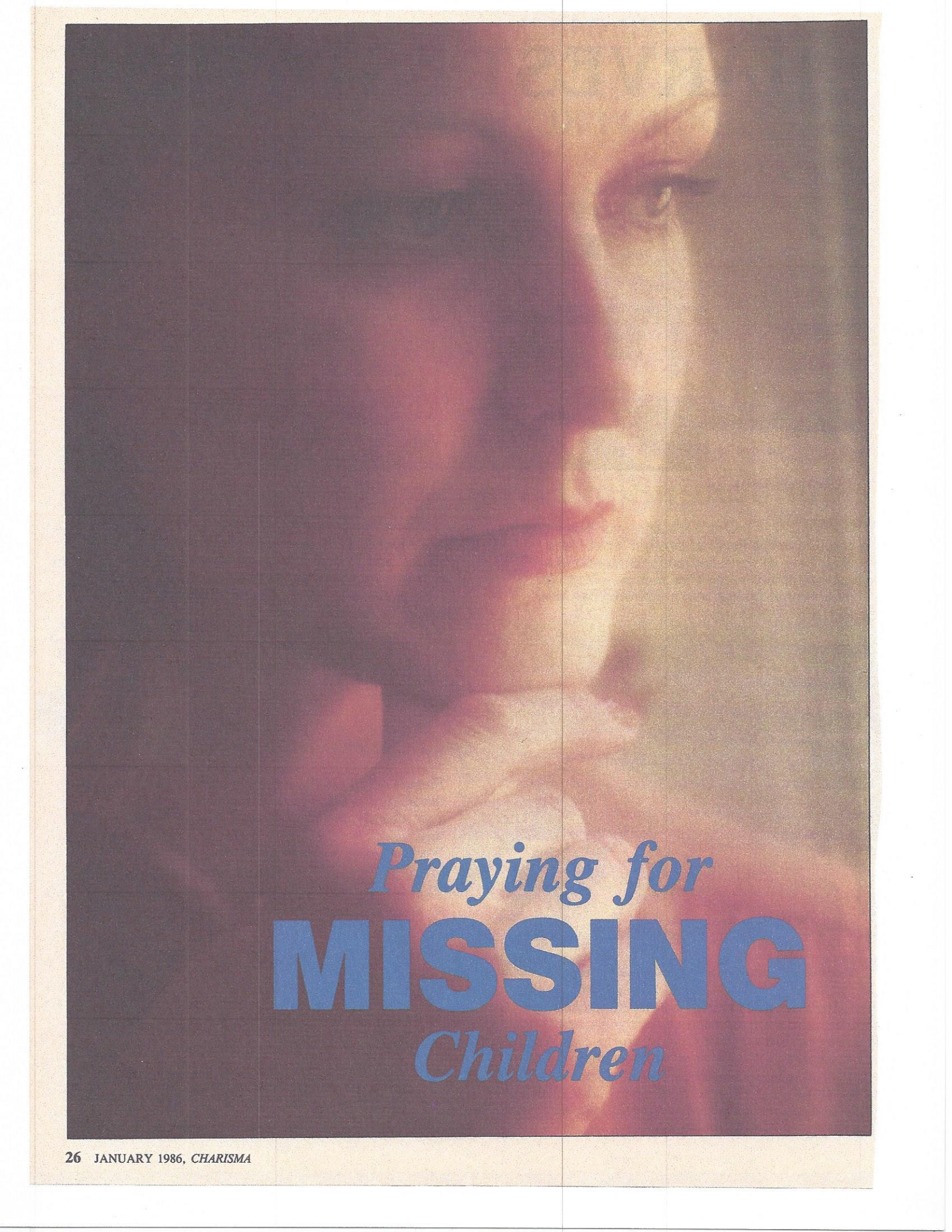
Special Bible Issue: Which Study Bible Is Right for You?

THE MAGAZINE ABOUT SPIRIT-LED LIVING / JANUARY 1986 / \$2.50

Charisma



**Praying
for
Missing Children**



Praying for
MISSING
Children

*Some Christians are showing concern for missing children,
with impressive results.*

By MICHELE BUCKINGHAM

On February 22, 1985, 9-year-old Cherrie Mahan of Cabot, Pennsylvania, stepped off the school bus about 100 feet from the lane leading to her home. A woman who was picking up her children at the same stop remembers watching Cherrie in her car's rear-view mirror to be sure the girl had cleared the bumper before driving away. The woman also remembers noticing that a large van with a ski scene painted on the side was just behind Cherrie. No one has seen Cherrie—or the van—since.

On August 31, 1982, 6-year-old Ricky Barnett from Grangeville, Idaho, was visiting his grandmother. Although the boy wore hip braces to correct a bow-legged condition, he managed to wander out of his grandmother's view. He is still missing today despite thorough searches by special teams and bloodhounds.

Kristopher Michael Sigel, a 9-year-old boy from LaGrande, Oregon, had been left in the care of a babysitter for two weeks. But when his mother returned, the babysitter was gone, and so was Kristopher. That was in August 1982. A warrant is out for the babysitter's arrest.

These children and as many as 1.5 million others who disappear from their homes each year in the United States are a special burden for Nancy Walsh, a petite, 39-year-old mother of five who began over a year ago to "pray the kids home."

A resident of Apopka, Florida, a suburb of Orlando, Mrs. Walsh is the founder of "Prayer Parents," a network of concerned mothers, fathers and young people committed to praying for the return of specific missing children—those who are brought to their attention through posters, news reports, even milk carton photographs.

While it is impossible to prove a direct correlation between the group's prayers and the recovery of missing children, the fact is that many of the children the group has prayed for in the last year have been returned to their families. Several who had been missing for a number of years were located within a short time after a Prayer Parent began pray-

ing for them. Coincidence? Nancy Walsh doesn't think so.

"God has said, 'If we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the request,'" says Mrs. Walsh. "Anyone who knows God knows that answered prayer is not just coincidence."

Besides, the Lord has a special place in His heart for children, she notes. When the disciples tried to stop children from coming to Jesus, the Lord rebuked them saying, "The kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

"God cares about missing children, and it is out of His compassion that He brings them home. Our part is to ask and pray," Mrs. Walsh says.

There is an urgent need for more people who will "ask and pray." According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Washington, D.C., the number of children reported missing from their homes has been increasing steadily over the last two years. Experts disagree on exact figures, but most estimate that 4,000 to 7,000 children are abducted by strangers or acquaintances each year. Approximately 100,000 are stolen by a non-custodial parent. Perhaps 10 times that number run away from home.

How these figures break down is important to understanding and ultimately to stemming the rising tide of missing children in this country. To date, the most publicity has been given to the smallest number of missing children cases—the so-called "stranger abductions," a misnomer since the child frequently has some acquaintance with his abductor. Stranger abductions like the one portrayed in the widely viewed 1983 TV movie, "Adam," the story of 6-year-old Adam Walsh (no relation to Nancy Walsh) who was kidnapped and murdered, are the most terrifying missing children cases, and the ones most likely to end tragically. Fortunately, they make up as little as 1 percent of all instances of missing children, according to some estimates.

Abductions are more likely to be carried out by estranged parents frustrated by a custody arrangement after a separation or divorce. Under the best

circumstances, the parent-abductor loves the child and will try to make a decent life for him, albeit on the run. Too often, however, a parent who kidnaps a child illegally is emotionally unstable and has acted out of revenge rather than love. The child may suffer sexual abuse or violence at the abductor-parent's hands.

The vast majority of missing children—some experts estimate over 90 percent—are runaways. Many of these children and young teenagers run to escape alcoholism or physical or sexual abuse in their homes; others have become involved with drugs or are in some other kind of trouble they feel they cannot discuss with their parents. Most runaways return home voluntarily or are found by local police within a few weeks of their disappearance. Those who don't come home, however, are the frequent victims of drug dealers, pornographers and pimps.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children handled 5,291 cases of missing children from its opening in June 1984 through September 1985. While this was only a small proportion of all of the missing children cases nationwide, the center's statistics on recovered children are nevertheless telling. Of the 5,291 total, 2,676 children—about half—were found: 2,053 had run away; 427 had been kidnapped by a non-custodial parent; 60 were victims of stranger abductions. Another 136 cases fit none of these categories. Twenty-eight of the missing children were found dead.

To Nancy Walsh, every missing child, whether a runaway or a victim of a parental or stranger abduction, has a unique story and special needs that sometimes

only God knows. And every missing child needs a "Prayer Parent."

The idea for Prayer Parents came to Mrs. Walsh about a year ago, a direct extension of her own prayer life. She had begun praying for specific missing children in the fall of 1984. A part-time clerk in a shoe store, she had been asked to clear off all of the signs and posters that had been collecting for weeks on the store's window. One of these was a poster with photographs of missing children.

The idea for Prayer Parents came to Mrs. Walsh about a year ago, a direct extension of her own prayer life.

"I went to throw the poster away, but then I looked at the faces and thought, 'No. I'll take it home and pray for them,' " she says.

Mrs. Walsh knew little more than the names and ages of those first eight children for whom she began to pray diligently. She wasn't even sure how she would know when her prayers had been answered. But several weeks later, while watching the news on TV, she was shocked to see a picture of one of her "prayer children"—15-month-old Jen-

nifer Lamm—appear on the screen. The girl, who had apparently been stolen from her mother's custody by her estranged father, had been returned home.

"I was so excited, I just began thanking and praising the Lord right then and there," Mrs. Walsh says. "Then I thought to myself, 'I wonder if any of the other children I've been praying for have been found?'"

To find out, she visited the Missing Children's Center in Winter Springs, Florida, last January.

"I expected the woman who helped me at the center to look at me strangely when I told her I had been praying for missing children. But she didn't. Instead, she said, 'That's wonderful!,' and told me that four of the children I had been praying for had been recovered," Mrs. Walsh says. (To date, six of the eight children have been located, although, tragically, one child was found murdered.)

Mrs. Walsh could hardly contain her excitement on the drive home. Then the Lord impressed a thought upon her: more missing children could be helped if more people would pray. So she immediately began contacting friends and relatives in and out of Florida to enlist their prayers. Within a few weeks, over 100 missing children had been "adopted" by Prayer Parents living in Florida, Massachusetts, California and elsewhere around the country.

She asks only that a Prayer Parent commit to praying at least once a week for a missing child. Most find themselves praying much more than that, however. One Prayer Parent, for example, attaches two photographs of missing children to

How to Keep Your Child From Becoming a Statistic

Most missing children are runaways. The majority of the rest are victims of parental kidnapping. At the root of both is the breakdown of the family, which, like missing children, has reached epidemic proportions in this country.

A strong Christ-centered home is the best prevention against the tragedy of a missing child. Parents who show love to one another and to their children, who encourage open communication and who lift up their children daily to the Lord in prayer are much less likely to discover one day that a child has disappeared.

Fortunately, "stranger abductions" are more rare than many people have been led to believe. Nevertheless, several thousand children are likely to be kidnapped by a stranger or acquaintance this year. Christian parents need to ask God's

protection over their children as they go about their daily routines.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children also offers these suggestions to protect your children against abduction or exploitation:

- Know where your children are at all times. Be familiar with their friends and daily activities.

- Be sensitive to changes in your children's behavior; they are a signal that you should sit down and talk with your children about what caused the changes.

- Be alert to a teenager or adult who is paying an unusual amount of attention to your children or giving them inappropriate or expensive gifts.

- Teach your children to trust their own feelings and assure them they have the right to say NO to what they sense

is wrong.

- Listen carefully to your children's fears and be supportive in all your discussions with them.

- Teach your children that no one should approach them or touch them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable. If someone does, they should tell their parents immediately.

- Be careful about babysitters and any other individuals who have custody of your children.

- Warn your children about certain situations or actions, rather than about certain individuals. While "stay away from strangers" is popular advice, it is misleading. Many children are abducted or exploited by people who have some type of familiarity with them but who may or may not be known to the parents. ■

a big, red construction paper heart hanging over her bed, a reminder to pray for the two each night. Another tapes her photographs to the refrigerator door, where she knows her family will see them and pray for them often.

The missing children and their Prayer Parents are listed in a special "prayer notebook" that Mrs. Walsh keeps, along with clips of newspaper articles on missing children cases and photographs of the children she prays for specifically. When she learns that a child has been recovered, she puts a star by the name in the notebook, a testimony to herself and others that God is faithful.

Many of these children are now back home.

One of Mrs. Walsh's original eight "prayer children," 4-year-old Troy Erick Anderson, had been stolen from his bed in his mother's home in Alberton, Georgia, on October 3, 1982, by his estranged father. He had been missing for two years when Mrs. Walsh began praying for him. Nine months later, an anonymous call to the Missing Children's Center identified the boy as a student in a Fort Lauderdale elementary school. Local police followed up on the lead and found Troy on July 10, 1985.

Chris and David Fuqua, also victims of a parental kidnapping, had been missing for five years when Nancy Raborn began to pray for them in May 1985. Mrs. Raborn, herself the mother of twin 4-year-olds, began to pray for them in May 1985. Three months later, on August 9, 1985, the boys were found.

Mrs. Raborn is excited about the opportunity for ministry that praying for missing children provides. "This is something that anybody can do, even a mother who is working at home or in an office and who doesn't have time to get involved in another kind of ministry," she says.

"When you see on the news that a child has been abducted or is missing, you want to do something, yet you feel so helpless," adds Evelyn Blitchington, a Prayer Parent, mother of two, and author of *The Family Devotions Idea Book* (Bethany House). "But one thing we can do—perhaps the best thing—is to pray."

Mrs. Blitchington's son has "adopted" a 12-year-old boy, Michael Louis Griska, who has been missing for seven years. Her daughter has "adopted" Regina Mae Armstrong, a 6-year-old girl abducted from the Orlando area last summer while playing with friends.

For many Prayer Parents, prayer for

a specific missing child often extends to the child's family as well.

Trudy Burke, a Prayer Parent and mother of two from Lemon Grove, California, has been praying for Beth Ann Miller, a 16-year-old girl who disappeared from her home in Idaho Springs, Colorado, on August 16, 1983, after telling her sister she was going jogging. Beth Ann is about the same age as one of Mrs. Burke's daughters.

"When we pray for Beth Ann, we pray for her parents also, that they will not give up hope," she says.

The Prayer Parents are not a formal organization, Mrs. Walsh stresses. Anyone can be a Prayer Parent, right where they are. All it takes is a "heart for kids" and enough awareness to identify a missing child to pray for—an easy task since photographs of missing children appear on milk cartons, grocery bags, billboards and posters hung in store windows, on television and in newspapers, even in preview slides at movie theaters.

"When the child one woman had been praying for was found, she immediately began praying for another child whose picture had been on a piece of mail she received," Mrs. Walsh notes. "This is what I hope to encourage. I want people to take the initiative to start praying for the missing children who come to their attention."

How can you become an effective Prayer Parent?

1. Identify a missing child in need of prayer. You may want to begin with one of the children pictured in this magazine.

2. Commit yourself to pray at least once a week for the missing child. Consider making the prayer part of your regular devotions or daily routine; pray for the child over coffee every morning, as you drive to work or before you go to bed each night.

3. Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you in prayer, since you may know very little about the child, the circumstances of his abduction or his current whereabouts. The Holy Spirit knows far more about the child and his particular situation than you do. By putting Romans 8:26 into operation, even though you don't know exactly what to pray for, you can be confident that the Spirit is interceding from the vantage point of His omniscience.

Mrs. Walsh says that many Prayer Parents, under the Spirit's leading, find themselves burdened to pray for specific needs that the child may have at the time, such as warm clothes or medical care. Others feel burdened at times to pray for

the child's family, or even for the abductor.

4. Claim the promises of Scripture as you pray. Mrs. Walsh's favorite verse to apply when praying for missing children is Luke 12:2: "But there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known." Other verses she uses are Ezekiel 34:16: "I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment"; Psalm 10:18: "To judge the fatherless and the oppressed, that the man of the earth may no more oppress"; and 1 John 5:14,15: "And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask any thing according to His will, He heareth us: And if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him."

5. Be alert for information on the child's recovery. Mrs. Walsh has learned of the return of many children by simply noting that the word "recovered" has been stamped on a photograph on a missing children poster. She has also found out about recoveries through news stories on television and in the papers.

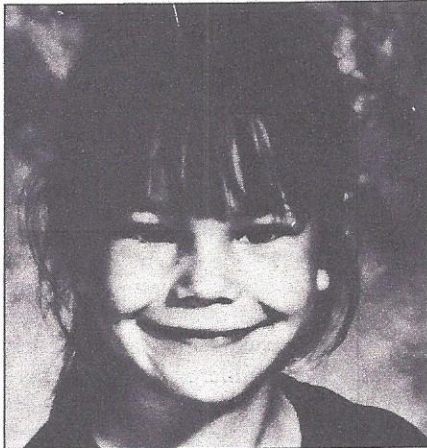
Of course, the law enforcement agency or other public or private organization involved in the search for a missing child (usually listed with a photograph) can tell you if the child has been located. Some may be more willing than others to provide information to non-family members, however, and most don't want to be inundated with frequent calls from large numbers of "interested" people. You may want to consider designating one Prayer Parent in your area to call once a month for information on several children at a time.

There is no shortage of missing children, Mrs. Walsh notes, only of Prayer Parents willing to reach out beyond their own families to pray for another child in need. She hopes that more and more Christians will quickly move in to fill that void. ■

Note to readers: If you would like more information on praying for missing children, write to Nancy Walsh, 3185 Barbados Court, Apopka, FL 32703.

Michele Buckingham is a free-lance writer who recently moved to Melbourne, Florida. She has served as a congressional legislative assistant in Washington, D.C.

Watch and Pray



Ilene Rebecca Scott Born 12/19/74
Brown hair, blue eyes
Last seen Dec. 20, 1980, Carson, CA

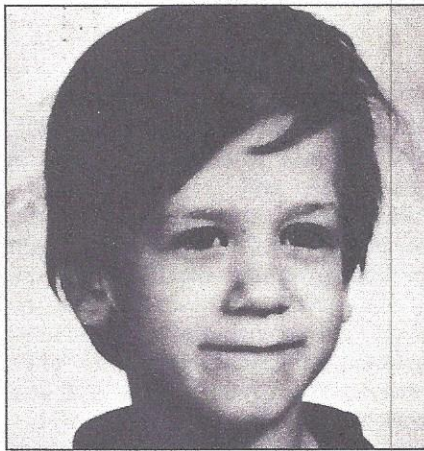
You've read Michele's story about missing children. We hope it has inspired and challenged you to pray for these children and their parents. Why don't you share the suggestions for prayer with your friends, Bible study, fellowship group and church?



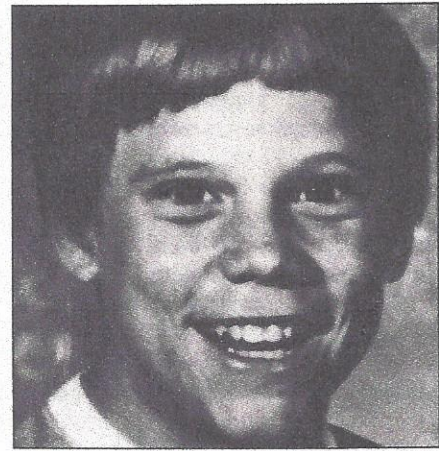
Jon Dabkowski Born 11/9/70
Dark brown hair, hazel eyes
Last seen Jan. 14, 1982, Tarentum, PA



Tyler Tridico Born 12/19/68
Brown hair, hazel eyes
Last seen Oct. 5, 1984, Huntsville, TX



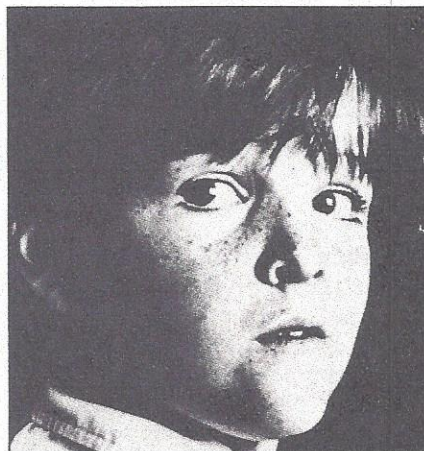
Louis Mackerley Born 2/15/77
Blond hair, blue eyes
Last seen June 7, 1984, Allentown, PA



Brian Bleyl Born 12/2/68
Brown hair, brown eyes
Last seen 2/28/81, Phoenix, AZ



Jennifer Martelz Born 6/8/75
Dark brown hair, brown eyes
Last seen Nov. 15, 1982, Tampa, FL



Kevin Collins Born 1/24/74
Brown hair, grey/green eyes
Last seen Feb. 10, 1984



Nicole Lynn Bryner Born 2/20/79
Brown hair, brown eyes
Last seen March 11, 1982, Pittsburgh, PA