



LILLIE KNAULS

Our beautiful country, America, would not be what it is today without the pioneering spirit in the hearts and minds of those who forged ahead ... being the first to enter into and settle in unknown regions and contribute to its development.

It is good that our lives can be strengthened when we are connected to Christian pioneers. My definition of a godly pioneer is one who has a very special intimate relationship with Jesus that spreads encouragement and touches the hearts and lives of everyone they meet. I can't imagine what my life would be like today—or even where I would be had the yellow brick road not been laid for me to follow. They were the mentors who took the time to show me the road, the trailblazers who have laid the bricks, always saying to me what a true pioneer, the apostle Paul wrote: "Imitate me as I imitate Christ."

I am one who has led a life of privilege, as God was gracious to place several pioneers in my life through the years:

I returned home from a tour traveling with the Edwin Hawkins Singers (our No. 1

hit was "O Happy Day") and I learned there was a wonderful thing happening monthly at a church in Los Gatos, California. It was an Audrey Meier sing, so when I was not traveling I was able, for seven years, to sing there each month. (Occasionally Andrae Crouch dropped by!) Audrey and I became dear friends and I never made a decision unless I first spoke with her and then God. She was a wonderful mentor, advising me on all I would ask her about. It was exciting for me to convince her to come to one of the Gaither Homecoming tapings. She loved being there and hearing the group sing the beautiful song she had written—"His Name is Wonderful." She was a great preacher licensed with the Foursquare Church and what a blessing that I was given most of her sermon notes when she passed away in 1996.

Then, five years ago, when I was past 70 years of age, God knew that I needed another pioneer in my life. I was introduced to dear Mother Strong. She had seen me on the Homecoming videos, which she watched regularly. She loved being able to sing along with the old songs. I was happy when God



Audrey Meier



Mother Strong



told her she was to mentor me—she was 86 years old and a beautiful saint who walked closely with God. I went to her house for an hour each week. It was like sitting at the feet of Jesus! There was so much wisdom that flowed from her heart to mine. She poured into me very practical advice and always exhorted me to "trust God's Word." I shall never forget those three years of having her in my life before she went to be with Jesus.

And of course, there are two other very special folk who have always been there for me—producing two records and allowing me to travel with the Bill Gaither Trio. I shall forever be grateful to Bill and Gloria Gaither for being pioneers in the world of music and making Southern Gospel music available to the entire world. Thank you, old friends.

Yes, because my life has been shaped by many pioneers and mentors, my prayer is that we will all be mentors in the lives of those who need to hear from God and want to hear from us about what we have faced and how we have kept the faith.