BRF Ministries

# News & Updates

*Inspiring people of all ages to grow in Christian faith*

# Welcome

**This issue of our newsletter looks forward to Advent and Christmas, taking its theme from our 2026 Advent book, *Treasures in Straw: Exploring the griefs and gifts of the Christmas story*, by Tanya Marlow. For many people, Christmas is difficult. We all know this, but how often do we allow ourselves space to ponder not only the joy but also the grief present in the nativity story? Jesus' life reflects all human life, so we should not be surprised to be reminded that both are present from the very beginning of his earthly existence.**

In *Treasures in Straw*, Tanya speaks to something incredibly profound. Sharing many stories of those who find Christmas difficult, she warmly and lovingly guides us through the Christmas period, allowing us to weep and mourn as well as to celebrate and treasure, always pointing us towards God's blessing. Those who know even a fraction of Tanya's life story will know that she is well-placed to talk about these things.

This push-and-pull of grief and gift was never more clear to me than the Christmas when my six-year-old cousin died very suddenly from a brain haemorrhage. What treasures could I possibly find in the dirty straw of grief? His funeral – which was full of celebration and joy in remembrance as well as deep, deep sadness – was on the same day as my opening night playing Aladdin in a local pantomime. I spent the day mourning with my family, and the evening making audiences laugh raucously. Both felt like gifts from God, and both felt healing. Coincidentally, one of the songs I sang as Aladdin was played days before at my cousin's school memorial service. What a gift.

Like Tanya, I am also disabled. I am aware that, as the years go by, my chronic pain is only getting worse. Christmas can be a particularly difficult time, with lots of travelling, sitting in uncomfortable chairs, or pews, and not following normal routines. It's easy to get sucked into despair, but Tanya's exploration of the season encourages us, without being trite, to look beyond our circumstances to our loving creator.

At BRF Ministries we aim to resource Christians at every age and at every stage, and in every season. No matter what emotions you feel around Christmas, our prayer is, as ever, that this book will bless you, and every reader, in miraculous and unexpected ways.

Every blessing

**Rachel Tranter**
**Publishing and resources team lead**

**NOVEMBER 2026**


- A holy stillness
- A quiet space
- Permission to be honest
- Power and Privilege
- Meet Jim Parratt
- and more…


## Pray with us...

In the words of this prayer from *Treasures in Straw* by Tanya Marlow

*Dear Lord,*
*in our disappointments*
*and broken dreams,*
*walk beside us, we pray.*
*Please protect our hearts,*
*reassure us of your love,*
*and lift our eyes to the possibility of*
*unexpected gifts in*
*the here and now.*
*Amen.*

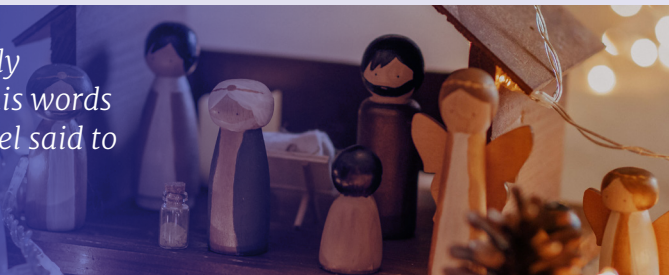
**Our prayer resources can be found at brf.org.uk/pray**

**Canon David Winter**

We were very sorry to hear of the death of Canon David Winter in late August. David had a long association with BRF Ministries, starting in the early 1990s when he became a trustee. He joined the team of writers for *New Daylight* and quickly became a much-loved regular contributor. A wonderfully gifted communicator and Bible teacher, David wrote numerous books for BRF Ministries and was also one of the joint editors for 'The People's Bible Commentary' series. Alongside his writing he led regular quiet days and retreats for BRF Ministries, all of which were inevitably fully booked! To many, David was regarded as part of the extended BRF Ministries family. We give thanks for his life, his ministry, and his many gifts. May he now rest in peace and rise in glory.

*The angel went to Mary and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God.'*

**LUKE 1:28–30 (NIV)**



# Hello from Julie and the fundrasing team

**It's hard to believe that we are coming to the end of another year and Christmas will soon be here. We are extremely grateful to everyone who has supported our ministries throughout the year in so many different ways.**

There was a wonderful response to our annual appeal and we have welcomed many new regular givers. Thank you to all those who left a legacy to BRF Ministries during 'Make a Will Month' in October and special thanks to those who have tirelessly cut out and sent us their used (and sometimes unused) postage stamps to raise funds.

We hope that you will support our Christmas activities which will help us to continue to inspire people of all ages to grow in Christian faith and embrace the birth of Jesus, the most wonderful Christmas gift of all.

**If you would like to make a donation to support any of our ministries or become a regular giver – a Friend – please visit brf.org.uk/give or telephone us on: 01865 319700**

Every blessing

Julie

**Julie MacNaughton, MCIOF (Dip)**
**Head of fundraising**

# Meet Jim Parratt

**Jim Parratt is an emeritus professor in physiology and a longtime fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He became a Christian as a student, through the ministry of John Stott, and went on to work for ten years in Nigeria at the country's first medical school. He also worked extensively in eastern Europe in communist times, and after 'retirement' lived and worked in Hungary for many years.**

Jim wrote to us earlier in the year to say how much he and his wife Pam enjoy our *Bible Reflections for Older People*.

Jim is, however, bemused. 'There are a few things that cause chuckles within the family,' he wrote. 'It looks as if 'older' people are getting 'younger'. Like the age of your contributors. Is 60 or 70 really old? 80 is, in our experience, perhaps slowly getting there.' In their 80s, Jim and Pam were still travelling to see family in Australia, and Jim began writing. First, he wrote *Marvellously Made* (Handsel Press, 2017), then *Highways of the Heart* (Handsel Press, 2019), and his memoir, *A Scent of Water* (Handsel Press, 2021). Still writing at 94, he's working on *Jim's Jottings* for his grandchildren, 'who may have wondered what their grandad got up to in his 90s!'

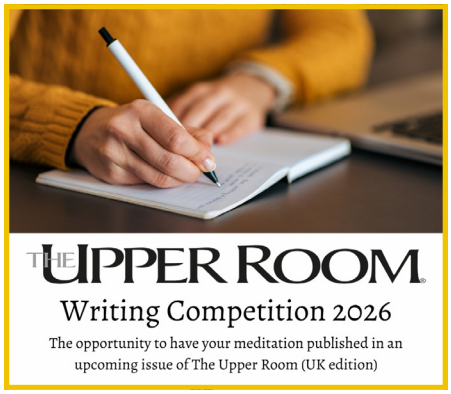
'The older years are rich spiritually and certainly bring us closer to the Lord,' he says. 'Your books help; we use them for family prayers. Carry on the good work! God bless you and the ministry you serve.'

**Read a longer article about Jim Parratt in our 'Subscriber spotlight' on 11 October at brf.org.uk/category/articles**

We always love to hear from you with your comments, stories, and feedback. So, if you have anything you'd like to tell us or share with us, please fill in our contact form at **brf.org.uk/contact-us**, or email **enquiries@brf.org.uk**, or phone **01865 319700** to speak to one of our friendly supporter care team.

## The Upper Room writing competition

If, like Jim Parratt and his wife Pam, you're a fan of our Bible reading notes, would you like the opportunity to write for us? When you're a new or experienced writer, there's still time to enter the 2026 Upper Room writing competition, though you'll have to be quick as entries close at midnight on 30 November 2026.




*The Upper Room*, with the tagline 'where the world meets to pray', is a unique Bible reading notes series published in 33 languages and read by an estimated three million people worldwide every day. What makes *The Upper Room* special is the fact that its readers are its writers. Contributors from the widest imaginable range of backgrounds and locations share their faith experiences and biblical insights with the entire Upper Room community.

One winner and two runners-up will have their reflections published in a future issue of *The Upper Room* (UK edition). They will also receive a year's subscription to *The Upper Room*, or, if they are already a subscriber, to another of our Bible reading notes series. For the first time this year, the winner and runners-up will receive goody bags, including their choice of three books from a selected list of ten of our titles.

**Deadline for this year's competition is midnight on 30 November 2026.**

**Find out more brfresources.org.uk/upper-room-competition**

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Contact our **fundraising team** at **giving@brf.org.uk**, call us on **01865 319700** or drop us a line at the address on the back page.

# A holy stillness

**When Jean Kerr first heard about the fledgling Anna Chaplaincy, it touched a deep, personal chord. 'It took me back some years to when we were in Bolton, and my mother was living with dementia at home in Hastings. Because I couldn't run up and down there all the time, I used to pray that somebody from the church would look in on her, but they never did.'**

When Jean was appointed director of mission and ministry for the diocese of Rochester, one of her priorities was to set up Anna Chaplaincy, knowing the great need there was for the ministry. In a lovely 'God-incidence' she moved next door to Julia Burton-Jones, now training and development lead on the national Anna Chaplaincy team. Together, Jean and Julia established the ministry in Rochester, and when Jean and her husband Paul moved on, allegedly to retire, she began developing it in Canterbury Diocese, again with Julia, and specifically in St George's, Deal, where there is now a team of nine Anna Chaplains and Anna Friends.

The focus of Jean and Paul's week is the Wednesday morning Communion service attended by around 50 older people. With the sole exception of Christmas Day, the service always takes place. 'We can't manage it Christmas Day,' says Jean, 'but we have managed it Boxing Day, as well as Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve, because festival times often heighten people's sense of loss and loneliness.'

Grief, loneliness, regrets, ill-health, family tensions, break-ups, financial worries: everything is exacerbated at Christmas, and Jean has seen how Advent can add to that. 'It's a time of reflection, preparation, waiting, isn't it. And all sorts of painful stuff can come up. So we always run an Advent reflective day to help to prepare people for Christmas by looking back and forwards.'

Other Anna Chaplains might offer a 'Blue Christmas' event, with a similar aim, according to Julia Burton-Jones: 'Anna Chaplains are aware of the sense of sadness and loss Christmas brings for many older people who are missing the friends and family members who played a central role in celebrating the season in years past. Blue Christmas services – named for the Elvis Presley lament and often held on the shortest, darkest day – acknowledge that for many older people Christmas is challenging.'

When it comes to Christmas Day itself, Jean treads carefully and makes no assumptions. 'What is it you want on Christmas Day?' she might ask. 'Would you like to go to somewhere else for Christmas? Would you like people to bring you food?' And a number of our older people tell her, 'I would like to be on my own. I would like to be on my own because I want to do my crying on my own, or my wondering on my own, or I think I might just dust the spare bedroom.'

'That's in keeping with what's known as the "trauma-informed" approach,' Jean explains. 'The principle is that you always give people the choice and let them decide. Plenty of people do accept invitations for Christmas Day, but no one is pressurised. It's really important to give space for people to be honest about what they're feeling and experiencing. There's a lot of pressure, particularly in certain Christian circles, to always be positive, as if to be down, or sad, or frightened, or grieving shows a lack of faith. But that's so wrong. It's not wrong to be honest with God, to shout at God – the psalmist shows us that.'

Jean also thinks there is a question for the church on how to help people who have been bereaved in the last year to prepare them for the first Christmas without their loved one?

'You could equally say, first anniversary, first birthday, first Easter Day, first holiday on your own. But Christmas is such a public thing. It's all we hear about from the middle of September, and there's an intensity that's different from the other "firsts" perhaps, especially in the face of the general demand to be jolly and happy.

'When we do our Wednesday service nearest to Christmas, we always hang little memory cards on the Christmas tree. It's really important to people and even those who struggle insist on hanging their memories on the tree themselves. They won't let me help them! The moment the tree is full of memory cards you feel a deep holy stillness and know God is with us.'

SPIRITUAL CARE
SERIES

## Self-learning online course

**The highly regarded Spiritual Care Series is a comprehensive eight-session online course designed to support the delivery of high-quality spiritual care to older people in their local communities. For care home professionals and volunteers, and interested individuals, it is now available as a self-learning course, enabling learners to fit the course around a busy schedule. The course helps learners to understand the ageing process, support older people in reconnecting with their past, and cope with the losses that ageing can bring. It also covers the importance of good listening skills, effective communication, and appropriate boundaries in the provision of spiritual care.**

**Find out more at brfresources.org.uk/spiritual-care-series-self-learning**

**Find out more about Anna Chaplaincy at annachaplaincy.org.uk**

# A quiet space

**Claire Biggs works for the Church of England, in the Halas parish where she lives. A teacher by training, she has the rather wordy title of 'new worshipping communities coordinator', a role focussed on community outreach, looking at new ways of worshipping, and connecting church with the community. After a significant grant from central funds, Claire was appointed two years ago, along with a children and families worker, as part of a major renewal project. She accepted the job on certain conditions.**

'At the point I went to interview, the 1,000-year-old church had never had toilets. They used to direct people over the road to the pub, or you had to get the key for the church hall out of the safe and unlock a separate building. So part of my acceptance was, "Please, please, we need to have the toilets done!"'

The builders were contracted and the simple addition of toilet facilities changed everything. 'It gave us a real platform to do so much more family work and twelve months ago, in September 2025, we launched our first Messy Church, and it's just been amazing.'

Claire has a long history with Messy Church. 'I came to faith through Messy Church when my children were little. My daughter is 17, so it was about 15 years ago that I discovered Messy Church in my local Methodist church, and I have to say, it probably saved me. My daughter was a toddler and I was pregnant with my son and I was struggling with that transition from professional, career-driven teacher to being a mum and being on my own with this little one who was so dependent on me. I walked in, and the first thing somebody said to me was, "What's your name?" Not to my daughter, but to me. "And would you like a cup of tea?" I could have cried at that moment, and all these years later, here I am giving it all back. Messy Church makes church so accessible to people, and that's where my heart is: accessibility. It's opening up church and God to people who might not normally be able to sit through a service or come through the doors.'

Given Claire's own experience of struggle, she's acutely aware of the struggles of others, especially in the hyped and heightened atmosphere around Christmas.

'Our November Messy Church fell on the same day as the big Christmas light switch-on in the town. In the morning was our Christmas fair, and normally they would have closed the church at 2.00 pm. The bell ringers come in at 4.45 pm, before the lights go on, so we had a gap. I was like, 'Why are we not open? Why are our doors shut at a peak time when people are in the town?'

'We thought it's going to be really busy in the town. There'll be loads going on: fairground rides, lights flashing. Let's be that quiet space that some families – especially SEND families – need. So we decided to show *The Snowman* film by candlelight. There are no words; it's just music. One of our young helpers plays the piano, and she played the soundtrack at the start and the end, which was amazing. We served hot chocolate and marshmallows. We made little toilet-roll tealight candles that they could sit with in the pews, and we showed the film. Then we stepped outside at the end as the bells started to ring, and we all watched the light switch-on. We were away from the hustle and bustle, and it was more than I could ever have hoped for in terms of peace. So many families commented on it and have asked if we're doing it this year!'

## New Christingle session!

Discover our new Messy Church Christingle session for December from *Get Messy! Volume 4*, endorsed by The Children's Society. Explore the symbols of the Christingle and celebrate the good news that God loves everyone and Jesus' light is for all the world, bringing hope to all. With ten creative activity ideas, the opportunity to make a Christingle, and prayers from The Children's Society, it's perfect for a joyful, hope-filled gathering.

**brfresources.org.uk/get-messy-volume-4**

# Permission to be honest

**As soon as she heard about the theme of this newsletter, Parenting for Faith's development and relationship lead, Jess Rodewald, was full of thoughts and ideas. Why did the idea of 'gritty Christmas' strike such a chord?**

'When I heard about "gritty Christmas", I immediately thought, "Yes – I have a little soapbox about this." I've worked in church, or been part of church, for all my life. When I was ordained, I remember thinking: what is the one thing I would love to do at Christmas? And it was to acknowledge that Christmas can be really, really hard. I wanted so much to run a service for people who find Christmas difficult. But that idea was received in quite an interesting way.'

'Interesting' is a word chosen carefully. Jess was never able to take the service she dreamed of.

'Whenever I raised it, people responded by saying, "But Christmas is all about joy and celebration – it's the birth of Christ." That in itself is an interesting way of looking at Christmas and what it means for people. There can be this narrative that we have to be happy and smiling all the time at Christmas. We use the word "joy" so often in our carols, but what does joy actually mean? Theologically, we can sometimes limit what Christmas means for people, and that can isolate those who don't feel able to join in with the usual celebrations. I'm passionate about making sure people feel involved in the faith story and the God story.'

Jess' passion isn't only theological: it's rooted in personal experience. 'I've been in that space myself: it's Christmas, something has happened, and I've gone to services thinking, "I don't feel like being joyful." If you've never experienced that, you may not realise how hard it can be. But theologically, Emmanuel – God with us – means God is with us in all circumstances. We can be joyful that Jesus is with us, but that doesn't necessarily mean we have to be happy or smiling, because he is with us in the difficult places too.'

Both in ministry and in life, Jess sees people struggling with Christmas every year, whether through loneliness, grief, regret, family tensions, health issues, or financial worries. 'I think there is something beautiful about recognising that God is with us in those moments. He doesn't leave us alone and wait for us to put on a smile.'

Long involved with Parenting for Faith – 'even before it was called Parenting for Faith'! – Jess knows the value of some of the ministry's key tools in helping people of all ages through their 'gritty' Christmases.

'You can take a real-life situation and use the tools to explore what is going on, where God might be in it, and how you can connect with God. For this subject in particular, one tool is called Creating Windows. It gives parents, carers, or other adults the opportunity to show what it looks like to love God while finding Christmas really difficult. You might say, "Sometimes I have a little cry, and that's okay," or, "I put this decoration on the Christmas tree for Grandma, because I really miss her." You're allowing your child or teenager to see what it looks like to be sad, frustrated, or honest about difficult feelings at Christmas.'

'Another key tool is Chat and Catch, which is about talking to God and then catching a response from him. I remember using it when I was a children's pastor with a child who was angry with God but didn't want to tell God that. I said, "You can tell him you're angry." He tried it, and God met with him in a really significant way. He was crying, but in a way that showed he had encountered God, because he realised he could talk to God honestly.'

And for all of us, Jess has some thoughts on what we might do to help people feel included, whatever they're going through.

'There are small things we can try to do. If I'm leading a service, I won't assume everyone is happy. If I'm chatting to someone at Christmas, I won't say, "Isn't it great? Isn't it wonderful?" Instead, I might ask, "How is Christmas for you?" or, "What does Christmas look like for you?" That opens things up and it avoids making assumptions. It's about modelling that openness and giving people permission to be honest.'

If you read the May newsletter, you'll have seen the advance notice about The Foundry. This is an exciting new online learning community for paid and voluntary leaders who are passionate about helping children, teens, and families flourish in faith, launching this December!

Explore the Parenting for Faith approach and discover how to put it into practice in your church. Each month, explore a different aspect of the approach, reflect on your ministry, share ideas, and learn from others.

£50 for ten monthly training sessions and community.

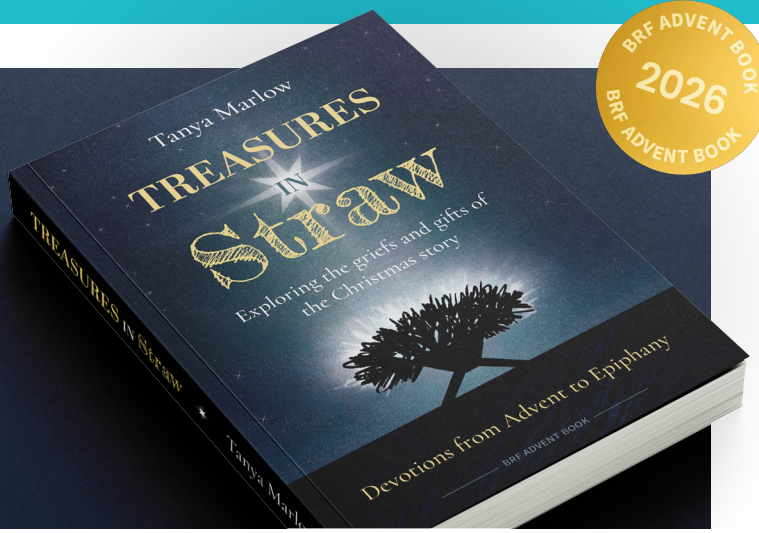
**Book your place today!**

**Find out more at parentingforfaith.brf.org.uk/the-foundry**

**Explore all that Parenting for Faith has to offer at parentingforfaith.org.uk**

***'Finally, an Advent book for all of us – for those who weep and mourn as much as for those who anticipate and celebrate. Release your pent-up breath and receive God's loving balm as you read this treasure.'***

**AMY BOUCHER PYE, AUTHOR OF CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS**





# *Treasures in Straw!*

**You'll know from Rachel Tranter's welcome letter that our 2026 Advent book, *Treasures in Straw*, is written by Tanya Marlow. Tanya is a writer, spiritual director, and lecturer in pastoral theology, as well as a popular conference speaker, despite being mostly bed-bound with chronic illness. Her passion is combining biblical texts and 'sacred storytelling' with honest theologies of disability and suffering. Here she shares her reasons for writing *Treasures in Straw*.**

Christmas can be a magical time – or a painful one. Yet in that first Christmas, all of life is there – disgrace and honour, uncertainty and hope, sorrow and celebration. *Treasures in Straw* explores the themes of loss and blessing throughout the nativity with thoughtful research, pastoral insight, and honest stories.

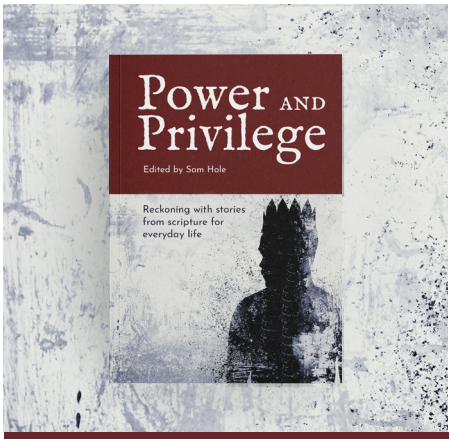
I wanted to write a devotional beyond the usual tinselled tellings of wonder at Christmastime, and get to the grittier faith beyond our children's nativities. We know the story so well we assume the happy ending, but actually there was a lot of danger, sacrifice and loss wrapped up in the various characters in the Christmas story. For me, digging into those darker aspects made the blessings shine more brightly. There is a costliness to the Christmas story, and I think that is relatable.

I once had a conversation with a sound engineer who said that Christmas was so painful for him because of singleness and grief, that every year he boycotted it and went abroad to volunteer. When I asked for stories of people's worst Christmas, I wasn't fully prepared for the replies: there were some heartbreaking stories which people rarely speak about because of society's 'grief rules' that we can't be sad while others are celebrating.

I'm writing for those who struggle in some way or hold hidden griefs, either in life in general or particularly at Christmas, and who ache for some hard-won hope that recognises the pain of loss.

Despite the material and temporal struggles of the original Bible characters, they found spiritual blessings, and that is what I hope for the readers of *Treasures in Straw*: honesty about the loss, but a far, far greater gain in Christ.

**brfresources.org.uk/treasures-in-straw**


The themes of power and privilege are a dominant discourse in society today, even in churches. This collection, edited by Sam Hole, draws together internationally renowned scholars and practitioners to consider what may be learned for Christian life today from the biblical stories of how individuals handled (and mishandled) the responsibilities of power and privilege.

***'This book feels timely and necessary. [It] is searching, constructive, and genuinely helpful: real wisdom about holding and using power well.'***

Jane Williams, McDonald Professor in Theology, St Mellitus College

**brfresources.org.uk/power-and-privilege**



As a charity, we rely on fundraising and gifts in wills to deliver Anna chaplaincy, BRF Resources, Messy Church, and Parenting for Faith. Your gift helps us impact thousands of lives each year. Please support our work.

brf.org.uk/give +44 (0)1865 319700



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Images: p. 1 – person sitting on a bench under a tree from pexels.com/@david-kanigan-239927285, a wooden nativity scene from pexels.com/@doralin-tunas-126287710; p. 3 – morning Commonion service and memory cards hanging by kind permission of Jean Kerrs; p. 4 – modelling butterfly mask, *The Snowman* by candlelight, and tealight candle craft by kind permission of Claire Biggs; p.5 – hugging in front of Christmas tree from unsplash.com/@blavon; photos of Jim Parratt, Jean Kerr, Claire Biggs, and Tanya Marlow used by their permission; other photos © BRF Ministries.



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