

# MINISTRY

International Journal for Pastors

December 2002

*The hopes  
and fears of  
all the years  
are met in  
thee tonight.*



PHILLIPS BROOKS:  
*The Man and His Master*

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## COULD TIM CROSBY'S "CHURCH DISCIPLINE THE REDEMPTIVE WAY" BE ONE OF THE MORE IMPORTANT ARTICLES MINISTRY HAS PRINTED?

### August 2002

I was interested in Carlos Camarena's article "Seminary and the Local Church." After graduation I was blessed to return to the same church in the same position and with the same three ministers that I had worked with for over three years before going to the Seminary. After four months in my old position, a member shared her opinion that I was a better minister before going to Seminary. Yet as I look back, I can see that Seminary greatly improved my effectiveness as a pastor. I have heard many different opinions on how to better prepare seminarians for ministry, but I believe the key is flexibility.

I was blessed to complete my B.A. in Theology, then work in a multi-pastor situation, and then go to Seminary and return for the rest of my career, again to multi-pastor churches. I now serve as a senior pastor with two associates. Yet, I received the same Seminary education as a pastor holding a Bachelor's degree who had left Wyoming after working as a builder, and who would be returning to Wyoming to pastor a multi-church district.

It seems to me that there must be a degree of choice for each seminarian as each conference/area is different. Seminary must have the flexibility to examine the candidate, their gifts, background, needs and education, then with the seminarian plot a course that would provide him/her with a sound foundation to perform ministry

in the field that they are heading to.

My Seminary experience gave me the opportunity to do sound exegesis, read theology and greatly improve my study habits. As a senior pastor, I needed sound academics. I was blessed to work as an associate for six years with three wonderful men who shared their experiences and gifts. These two things, plus God's leading, made me the pastor I am today.

Camarena quoted that, "Hands-on pastoral education cannot be fully accomplished in the classroom or in the geographical area surrounding the Seminary"; he is right. I remember feeling frustrated that here I was with the Seminary library at my finger tips, studying from the greatest theological minds in Adventism and I had to do practices that my senior pastor had already exposed me to in the field. Good internships are needed, each conference should place interns with effective ministers who have the ability to nurture and prepare interns for ministry.

Not all seminarians are as blessed as I have been in my assignments. My opinion was in the minority when I was in Seminary. I wanted more academics, the majority of seminarians wanted less. Flexibility must be considered as a solution to these differences.

I also disagree with Camarena's opinion that Seminary teachers (theologians) should practice in the field as pastors too. Let gifted teachers teach and gifted preachers preach. These are

two different gifts. The teacher who opened my eyes to preaching was, with all due respect, an average preacher, but he had the gift of showing me how to become a much better preacher. Let him continue in that role and bless many other pastors.

—Douglas Elsey, Yucaipa, California.

The article by Loren G. Seibold, "Preaching to Anxious Times," about the historical date 9/11/2001, greatly moved me. The overall thrust of the article and especially the spirit of it, but I found that some parts of it could only be written by an American; someone belonging to the superpower nation. And it can do a great harm to many Adventists around the world.

The sentence, "The only thing that makes it possible for a fully-aware Christian to fight in a war is the hope that the sum total of tears be shed because of fighting the war will be fewer than the sum total of tears that would have been shed, had we not fought" does not suite to all what Jesus taught. What if Jesus with His followers would have fought against Herod or Pilate, so that it would be "less tears"?

How can the author write, "That countries may have to fight to prevent terrorism is clear. That we ought to honor and encourage soldiers who risk their lives in such a cause is also clear"? Where did Christ teach that we should go and fight in a war? Do the soldiers

*continued on page 30*

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# Preaching alive

It's Sabbath morning; you're ten minutes into your sermon. The congregation is with you, but as you transition to your next point, eyes that had been fixed in your direction shift away. Fingers fidget. Feet shuffle.

You've lost them.

What causes this well-known scenario? Some of the answer, I think, has to do with the use of feeling and emotion in preaching.

My daughter Amy is gearing up to write a Ph.D. dissertation in the field of literature. Part of her work involves the role of feeling or emotion in the interpretation, understanding, and appreciation of poetry. She has already documented how the strategy of identifying and then entering into the feelings in a given piece of poetry can powerfully engage students. Through this method, a teacher can capture the attention of students who, otherwise, might have considered the chip of verse in front of them as an imposed trek into some meaningless mental stratosphere.

There's clearly a legitimate link between this approach to poetry and our preaching. We must need to develop an eye or ear for the feelings inherent in the verses we are expounding. We must, ourselves, feel the feelings that flow from the text; only then can we communicate those feelings as we preach.

Take the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19). A preacher can say all kinds of good, rational things about this story,

WILL EVA



but when he or she gets into the apparent deep hungers of this little man, into the impulses of the crowd, and into the emotions of Jesus as he sees Zacchaeus, then the story comes to life.

But how does one get hold of such things in the text, and do it legitimately?

One must enter the story as completely as possible, and prayerfully ask questions such as, Is there anything aside from the shortness of Zacchaeus that makes him do as odd and embarrassing a thing as to run ahead and climb a tree? What might he feel as he does so (verse 4)? Why the running and why the climbing of that particular tree? Does the climbing depict anything about the inside of the man that at first may not be obvious? What is going on in the soul of this man as he runs and climbs? What are his desires hopes and dreams, as suggested in the text? How might he have felt about his shortness, and the obvious need to compensate for it? And later in the story, what actually passes between this little man and Jesus as Jesus reaches the spot and looks up at him in the tree? These are just a few sug-

gestive, feeling-related questions we might ask as we prepare to preach on a passage such as this one.

There is another crucial, more noted role for emotion in preaching. It has to do with how the preacher actually feels about the Lord. More specifically, it has to do with the preacher's actual feelings about what he or she is proclaiming.

Every sermon needs a certain "vision" to drive it. By nature, effective preaching does not allow for a stale or stunted vision. When the preacher's vision of Truth has gotten tired, when it has become commonplace and stereotyped and worn and threadbare and musty and shopworn; when it's archaic, outmoded and bygone in his soul, when to her it ends up contrived or staged, inevitably the sermon comes out flat, banal, and empty.

It is impossible for effective, communicative preaching to live without a fresh, felt vision. Effective preaching is ruthless in demanding objective and emotional congruence between text and testimonial, between the point and its proclamation.

I used to wonder about the unpredictability of a sermon's outcome as I preached. Then I realized that how well I preached on Sabbath was directly related to how deeply I felt about what I was saying. Now even before I get up to the pulpit, I almost intuitively know if I'm going to keep their attention or if, before long, eyes will wander and feet will shuffle . . . ■

# Phillips Brooks: The man and his Master

Roger W. Coon



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former associate  
director of the Ellen G.  
White Estate, is  
retired and lives in  
Berkeley Springs,  
West Virginia.

For more than a century Christians around the world have marked the miracle of the Bethlehem manger by singing "O Little Town of Bethlehem," one of the best-known Christmas carols of all time. How little we know about the man behind that song! His life was almost crushed by two early tragedies, but for the intervention of the Man from Bethlehem. That's what Christmas is all about: the story of divine grace that enables triumph over tragedy in a person's life.

But first, to the famous carol. Phillips Brooks wrote "O Little Town of Bethlehem" in 1868, while serving in his second pastorate, as rector of Philadelphia's Church of the Holy Trinity—a post he filled admirably and most successfully for eight years (1861-1869). In 1865, Brooks toured the Holy Land, and on Christmas Eve he reportedly went to the spot where, according to tradition, Jesus was born. The Church of the Nativity, in Manger Square, has graced the spot since 346 A.D. While there, Brooks attended a six-hour service, lasting from 10 p.m. Christmas Eve until 3 a.m.

"The music and the scenes so impressed him, that a new carol was faintly formed in his mind."<sup>1</sup>

Brooks, however, did not commit it to paper until some three years later when he wrote the carol especially for the children of his Sunday School in Philadelphia. He then gave his poem to Lewis Henry Redner, Holy

Trinity's organist, who had previously asked his pastor to write a text, for which he would supply the tune.

The organist went to bed on Christmas Eve 1868, awakening several hours later with the tune ("St. Louis") of the carol ringing in his ears. Redner quickly jotted it down, fleshing out the harmony when he got up in the morning. It was sung a couple of days later (Dec. 27) in the Sunday School. The carol was published in 1874. From then on it marched its way into the minds and hearts of Christians everywhere.<sup>2</sup>

Somewhat less well-known, however, are several significant factors in the early personal background of its author. And even still less well-known is the amazing story of a double failure in Phillips Brooks's earlier professional life, which almost doomed the future career of this 20-year-old Harvard graduate.

## Early life

Phillips Brooks was born December 13, 1835, in Boston. His later career in the ministry, after a brief stint at teaching, would ultimately be considered near meteoric. He was even asked to preach before Britain's Queen Victoria.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning his pastoral career at age 23, Brooks first became rector of the rather obscure Episcopal Church of the Advent in Philadelphia, remaining there two years (1859-61). Then he became minister of the Church of the Holy Trinity, in the same city, for eight years. It was here that he wrote his famous carol.

In 1869, at 33, he became rector of Trinity Church in his hometown, Boston, where he became increasingly well-known during his final 22-year tenure as preacher in this nationally significant pulpit. Yet his illustrious career almost never happened, because of two unfortunate failures at its very beginning, that today remain largely unknown.

## First failure

Upon graduation from Harvard, 19-year-old Brooks was given a teaching post at his alma mater, Boston's Latin School. Things started out well enough in that autumn of 1855, but by the beginning of winter, things began to turn sour. Brooks found himself incapable of controlling the 35 lively boys under his charge, and he wrote plaintively to a friend: "I believe that [the boys] consider me

as a sort of dragon with his claws cut, a gigantic ogre who would like to eat them. I am teaching them French which they don't, Greek which they won't, and Virgil which they can't understand or appreciate."<sup>4</sup>

Scarcely a month later his career collapsed and lay in tatters. Brooks lasted as a teacher for five months. According to one biographer, he resigned.<sup>5</sup> But according to another (which may be closer to the truth), he was dismissed.<sup>6</sup> One cannot help wondering whether anyone had warned the young Brooks at the time of his employment that two of his predecessors had been run off by a similar cause.

After Brooks's departure, his headmaster remarked ungraciously to an acquaintance that any change—no matter what—could hardly fail to be for the better!<sup>7</sup> And to Brooks himself, the headmaster, in an incredibly insensitive thrust, observed that he had never known of anyone who had failed as a schoolmaster to succeed later at any other calling!<sup>8</sup>

Charles Francis Adams, a friend of the young teacher, says that Brooks was "humiliated, discouraged, utterly broken down, indeed, by his complete failure at the threshold of life." And

Alexander V. G. Allen characterized this episode as "a catastrophe complete, final, and humiliating."<sup>9</sup>

But there was worse to come!

### **Second failure**

Licking his wounds, Brooks, in 1856, travelled to Alexandria, Virginia, to enter the Theological Seminary of the Protestant Episcopal Church. There he intended to study for the ministry. While there, he preached his first student practice sermon, which another biographer characterized as "almost as much a failure as were his first efforts in teaching!"<sup>10</sup> To homilectician Clyde Fant, this presentation was "an unqualified disaster."<sup>11</sup>

For one thing, the preacher spoke much too rapidly. Most preachers, then as now, spoke at a rate of some 120 words per minute. But Brooks sped along at between 190 and 215 words per minute!<sup>12</sup>

He showed neither the arts nor the polish needed for the pulpits of his time. Dr. Charles Parkhurst, editor of Boston's *Zion's Herald* and a contemporary of Brooks's said: "[His] voice is not resonant, enunciation is not clear, his speech had the rapidity of the mountain torrent. He frequently

misses the word wanted, and sometimes flounders in his rhetoric, he seldom looks his audience in the eye, but most of the time turns his gaze toward the sounding board above his head. . . . [His] gestures are infrequent and usually awkward."<sup>13</sup>

Incidentally, this "sounding board above his head" was a carpenter's creative attempt to amplify the preacher's voice by reflecting the sound waves toward the congregation in those times when there were no electronic sound systems. So Brooks generally preached the largest portion of his sermon to the ceiling directly above his head, instead of looking his congregation in the eye!

### **A possible third failure?**

Brooks must have struggled with what he and others could well have seen as a third failure. He never married and did not have any close relatives to call his family. Brooks himself once reportedly said that, upon reflection, he personally felt that it was a great mistake not to have married.<sup>14</sup>

So, with none of the graces that his time admired (and demanded!), and with a delivery that was awkward, a gaze fixed upon the ceiling, a collection of clumsy gestures, and a personality that was essentially lonely and shy, how did this lifelong bachelor succeed in his ministerial career and become the preaching sensation of the age, leading some recent biographers to revise the scorn heaped on him earlier?

Charles H. Lippy, for example, has characterized Brooks as "well known for his eloquence, dynamic preaching, charming personality, and tolerant views."<sup>15</sup> And another remarked upon his "compelling personality" and "great eloquence . . . by far the most attractive and widely loved preacher of his day."<sup>16</sup>

Wherein lay his astonishing turn-about?

### **Secrets of success**

Biographers have offered varied

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opinions about this question. Powel Mills Dawley, of the General Theological Seminary, New York, suggests that Brooks became great, at least in part, because of six significant factors: (1) his "wide human sympathies" (perhaps the loneliness of an undesired bachelorhood contributed to his awareness); (2) his "passionate yet undogmatic style of preaching"; (3) his "power and clarity" in presenting "the verities of the Christian gospel"; (4) his "integrity of mind"; (5) his "tolerant spirit"; and (6) his "compelling personality, [which] won the confidence and affection of all who came into contact with him."<sup>17</sup>

His *Encyclopedia Britannica* biographer adds that Phillips Brooks's "natural vigor," "innate gentleness and cheerfulness," and "a quality of winsomeness and serenity" appealed greatly to the large congregations that gathered to hear him speak.

Finally, in a most striking and historic irony, biographer John T. Faris concludes his narrative with these words: "What a blessing it was that Phillips Brooks was not permitted to be successful in the Latin School! If he had been able to manage the boys in his class, the brilliant, soul-winning, character-building minister might have been lost to the world. But the failure, spurring him on to new effort, was the training needed to turn that strong-willed man to the road where God wanted him to travel."<sup>18</sup>

Yet, in my judgment, there is something more about Brooks's success. The most significant explanation of Brooks's greatness—ultimately the defining personal characteristic—is to be found not in his improved personality, not in his well-known 1877 Lectureship on Preaching at Yale University. It is not even to be found in his world-famous Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," but rather . . . in statuary!

The world-renowned sculptor, Augustus St. Gaudens, gave to the citizens of Boston in 1810 a remarkable statue of Phillips Brooks. Today it stands in a portico within a garden

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setting, outside Trinity Church, whose pulpit he so distinguished for 22 years. In this statue Brooks stands behind (and somewhat to the right of) his lectern, his left hand casually draped over its leading edge. His right hand is raised, upwardly, outwardly, invitingly beckoning his hearers to come to Jesus at once!

Yet the most impressive—indeed, majestic—aspect of this work of art is not the statue of Phillips Brooks, but, rather, a second statue. Standing immediately behind this powerful preacher is the figure of Phillips Brooks's Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose right hand reaches forward and rests gently in affirmation on the right shoulder of the speaker—a graphically moving symbolism!

I visited Boston some 40 years ago and saw this dual statuary up close. I was touched so deeply that the whole scene was forever indelibly imprinted upon my mind. I, like many other ministers, was reassured once again that Jesus stands behind me when I

preach to give wings to my words and persuasion to my utterance.

Phillips Brooks not only wrote of the little town of Bethlehem, but he personally knew the Man and the Miracle of Bethlehem. He knew the Man who stood, ever and always beside him. It is this reality above every other that turned what could have been a mediocre ministry into a permanent, inspiring triumph. ■

1 Wayne Hooper and Edward E. White, *Companion to the Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Hagerstown, Md. Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1988), 188, 189.

2 Ibid.

3 Clyde E. Fant, Jr., and William M. Pinson, Jr., *20 Centuries of Great Preaching* (Waco, Texas. Word Books, 1971), 6:117

4 Cited in John T. Faris, D.D., *The Book of God's Providence* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1913), 116, 117.

5 Ibid.

6 Fant and Pinson, 114.

7 Faris, 117.

8 Ibid., 118.

9 Ibid., 117.

10 Fant and Pinson, 115.

11 Ibid., 122.

12 Ibid., 113, 114.

13 Ibid., 121.

14 Fant and Pinson, 119.

15 "Phillips Brooks," *The World Book Encyclopedia* (1993), 2:651.

16 "Phillips Brooks," *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (1988), 2:552.

17 "Phillips Brooks," *The Encyclopedia Americana* (1991), 4:619.

18 Faris, 120.

# Being friends with postmoderns

Jeremy Arnall

**T**he postmodern person makes sense of his or her world, arriving at “truth” through up front observation. Somewhat in contrast to this, most Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists, treat truth much as we treat science: through careful, in-depth study of the evidence. Consequently, if someone wants to understand or know what Adventists believe, we refer them to our neatly-packaged pod of 27 fundamental doctrines. If they wish to understand end-time events, we display one of our prophetic time charts. When we have done this we tend to feel our work is done.

Yet, in describing ourselves this way, we must yet strongly affirm that we are deeply grateful that we have indeed carefully studied truth, and that what we have is immensely valuable to us. However, in all this there is an inherent danger in having the wonderful resources we now have. We may take our grasp of truth too much for granted.

If given the chance, the postmodern person in our neighborhood might be quick to point this out to us, telling us that we come across as though we “possess the truth.”

To which some might say, “But we do!”

## Possessing the truth?

While we as a church have been blessed with a great deal of light and truth from God, to say we possess the truth can be misleading

and an unnecessary turn-off to our postmodern neighbor who may say, at least under his breath, “How arrogant! Who are you to say you have the truth?”

For the postmodern, reality or truth is something that varies for different people because each of us is brought up in his or her own culture and environment in which reality is differently perceived and explained.

Therefore, many criticize postmoderns because they tend to say that everything is relevant . . . to someone. Thus the onlooker often concludes that, to the postmodern, there is no such thing as absolute truth.

However, in his book, *The Church on the Other Side*, Brian McLaren enunciates an important distinction. He writes that postmoderns (at least those more thoughtful) tend to reject absolute knowledge but not absolute truth.<sup>1</sup> That is, the postmodern doubts that anyone can fully understand truth because it's bigger than any of us, and our language is incapable of communicating it.

Nietzsche described the beauty that is lost when we try to contain truth. For example, he states that the concept of a leaf doesn't adequately describe leaves. He says we can form the concept of leaf only by overlooking the many differences inherent in leaves. Thus a certain beauty is lost when we categorize leaves by saying leaf.<sup>2</sup> So in reality, postmoderns show a respect for truth that perhaps we more traditional moderns have lost. Perhaps, in this sense, we must learn once again to reverence truth more, as do many with a postmodern bent.

It is for this reason some have begun to realize our current approach to evangelism needs review. In communicating, even inadvertently, that we possess the truth we have appeared to be irreverent when it comes to that which is transcendent in truth. While we love truth and have a great passion and zest for it, perhaps we have come across as having it bottled up and ready to distribute, or worse still, to market.

The postmodern would say, “You can't simply dish up a serving of truth for me. I have to behold it and savor it. I have to experience truth for myself.”

## Our dilemma

If Seventh-day Adventists (some, at least) do in fact believe that we can and should simply “dish up” a 27-course meal of truth in



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our evangelistic endeavors, we are faced with a dilemma: We must effectively communicate our very well conceived understanding of truth, but doing so in the traditional way (which will, of course, reach some) will strongly and unnecessarily repel the rising numbers of postmoderns in the typical Western city.

At present, we may sense two basic approaches in Adventism to this dilemma. One is to continue as usual with the typical crusades and seminars which might then be followed up with books and tapes. In this approach, the evangelist typically travels from city to city and stays for six to eight weeks. Working with the local pastor, he becomes the center of a given evangelistic campaign.

Another less traditional approach is to avoid the overt confrontation often associated with public evangelism. Here, we might attempt to mingle with and befriend people, seeking to open the way for people to see Christ working in the local Church, and thus leading them to make their own choice. Such an approach may seek to help people by meeting their felt needs. Eventually, under these influences, we believe that those involved will start asking questions and open the door for us to share our complete message and lead them to baptism.

### Blending our approaches

All this is valid, and we should not be blindly and negatively critical of it. But in the light of all that has been said so far, it seems imperative that we come to the place of blending our approaches. It is critical that we become friends to the people about us who may have a postmodern worldview.

The problem is that while our traditional methods are quick to call for a decision or a commitment, the friendship approach by itself tends to slow us down too much when it comes to the matter of leading people to come to such a decision.

Why not therefore blend the more

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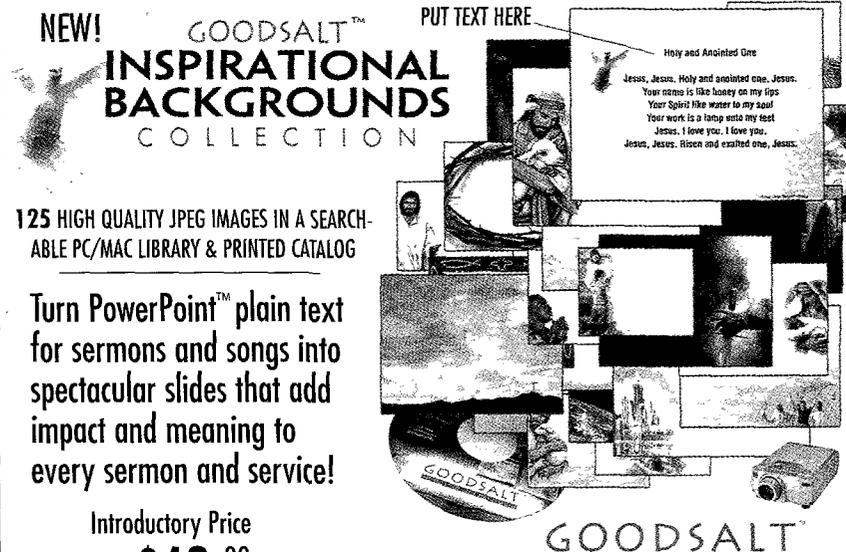
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direct approach of the six-week evangelistic crusade with the friendship, silent-witness approach and include with it all a mature understanding of postmodern concerns?

In some situations we could take our blending a step further and include the element of church planting. In the church planting context, the approaches described above can be properly blended, because while a church planting initiative could include a short six-to-eight-week evangelistic emphasis, at the same time the church planter is called on to settle in and live with the people he or she is working with in planting the church. He or she intermingles with them and becomes involved, listening to their stories, ideas, hopes and sorrows.

In planting a church our methods can by all means seek to be responsive to postmodern orientations, but this does not mean the direct appeal needs to be neglected. Again, in such situations, more inductive approaches may be used, with more stories and art, for example, but in such approaches we can still call our new friends to step forward and come to Jesus, with the implications that such a step involves.

In some respects, the new community may look different from other Adventist churches, but it will still remain Adventist. It will still hold to 27 fundamentals, while it may describe them in different language. Nonetheless, it will hold to these fundamentals in order to be in line with Jesus' call to "come out" (Rev. 18:4).

### Christ's method

We are all familiar with the well-known, wise insight from Ellen White which reads, "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me.'"<sup>3</sup>

This approach will reach the postmodern heart. Jesus did not use good deeds as bait. He sincerely cared for people, physically, mentally, and spiritually. But He did not beat around the bush when it came time to explaining what it meant to follow Him. He told one interest, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but

*continued on page 23*

# Here to learn: Lessons from a career transition

Skip Bell

**W**hy did you leave your work as a conference president to teach at the Seminary?" One of my students suddenly turned our Sabbath dinner conversation to a question that made me pause and gave me an opportunity. A pause to reflect once again on a personal journey that has gone on within my own soul. An opportunity to share what I have learned about myself, my relationships, and my church in the process of transition in my calling, a process that has been challenging, revealing, encouraging, and disturbing.

The journey begins with processing a call to enter the academic world. It continues through adjustments to a new and challenging environment. I share here some very personal discoveries, in the hope that my story will help someone else understand his or her own a little better.

## Who is at work?

First, I have learned how difficult it is for me to trust God's providence. If you were to inquire about my personal faith, I would describe the miracle-claiming variety. But all too often, God seems to do the unexpected!

In my dreams or plans I had never seen myself teaching at the Seminary. Years ago Gerhard Hasel, then dean of the Seminary, had caught up with our family as we were in the midst of a transition to serve the Ohio

Conference. I had completed my Doctor of Ministry degree, and he invited me to join the faculty of the Seminary. I had a convenient reason to say No, as we had already committed ourselves to the Ohio Conference, so it would not be ethical to go back on our word.

The truth was, I had no interest. It was not something to which I aspired. I respected Seminary professors and appreciated their incredible contributions to our mission. They shape and prepare pastors, scholars, and teachers to serve the world church. But I liked the action on the front line. I considered myself a "doer." I needed to be "out in the field."

Then repeated conversations initiated by the Christian Ministry department of the Seminary began in the fall of 1999. I was polite and did not want to close a door arbitrarily. However, each conversation edged toward an invitation. I was afraid. I loved my ministry as president of the New York Conference. My respect for our members and churches had grown to love and attachment. The people I was serving were the most incredible Christians I had ever met. We had gone through difficult challenges together with united prayer and friendship. I enjoyed my work. I did not want to leave.

We had been in New York for nearly eight years. Was God leading us elsewhere? Was it time for a change? Perhaps the conference needed new energy and vision. Maybe God wanted us to go to the Seminary. Maybe He knew it was best for our children. I prayed over months that God would remove the initiative from the Seminary, but He did not.

When asked to interview, I declined. Instead, I was invited to engage in a telephone interview. Was I ready to close the door entirely by refusing even this, or should I leave it open in case God wanted us to make a change? It is hard to find a way to escape a telephone interview! I left the door open. The dialogue during the telephone interview stirred me, and I began to feel this was God's leading. The interview became the decisive, transitional point.

How does God work His providence? Joni, my wife of 32 years, believes He has a purpose for everything, that He works in the small matters, such as impressing someone to keep a decision before us. I am learning she is right.

## Career over family?

The second lesson is the realization that I



*Skip Bell, D.Min., is an associate professor of church history and director of the Doctor of Ministry program, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.*

have prioritized career over family. It took me 29 years to figure that out. I would have denied it before this transition, just like many who are reading my story right now. In fact, in many ways, I would still protest the suggestion.

Throughout our marriage, when faced with a call, Joni and I have prayed earnestly and thoroughly discussed them, and we considered our children carefully. Even if interested in the call, I would not move until I was convinced it would be all right with the children and a constructive move for them. They were first.

Early in my ministry, a renowned Adventist leader was asked during a seminar at one of my churches, "With all the travel you do, how do you find time for your children?" He replied, "I have told God I will serve Him, and He must care for my children." I cringed with unbelief and disgust. No, I was better than that. I put family first!

At least that's what I thought.

Sometimes we do not understand ourselves until we are put to the test. Let me explain. While considering our invitation to move to the Seminary, the opportunity to have our youngest at home again was a momentous factor. He had three more years in the architecture program at Andrews, giving us the opportunity to be with him for those years.

Our daughter was about to be engaged, we felt, to a young man who would be a senior at Andrews. Perhaps they would end up there if he continued his studies at the University, as it appeared he would.

To be near my children was one of the desires of my heart, and it would be a perfect situation for Joni. Still I hesitated; I even resisted! Why? I realize now that love for my ministry sometimes seemed more important than what was best for my family. I almost said No, disregarding my family's needs. Recognizing and changing my priorities has been surprisingly difficult for me.

These discoveries, of course, are not the pronouncements of a perfect soul. You are seeing the rough texture of humanity; confessions emerging from quiet, yet at times troubling, reflection. There is something good about seeing ourselves without the masks we wear so constantly that we forget what we truly look like; even masks that some may consider respectable.

### **Power: A substitute for love?**

Which leads me to the third lesson. My identity had become intertwined with my ministry as a church leader. There were small signs. Joni pointed out that I had lost my sense of humor. I responded that I was simply developing sensitivity. People, especially church employees, could take my word very seriously. Something said in jest, a moment of wit, or even the teasing I had learned as an expression of love shared with brothers in my childhood, could discourage someone. I simply needed to be careful for the sake of others. But losing my sense

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of humor was not “me.” It was the conference president.

As I considered the invitation to join the Seminary faculty, I realized that my identity as a conference leader was similar to a “suit coat,” a specific jacket I had worn. I could put it on and take it off. People “saw” the coat. I had apprenticed for years in church administration. I knew what I was getting into, but when I actually wore the “coat,” I was still surprised by the response. Friends multiplied. People cared about me while another in genuine need nearby was overlooked. The jacket made a difference.

I became so comfortable with the effects of the jacket that I forgot I was only wearing it, and that it would be taken off and put aside. Without realizing it, I had grown to enjoy the new identity the jacket provided.

lest we consider my story too

unusual, it must be emphasized that I am not unique or extraordinary. All this is very much a humanity we all share. I had thought I would be unaffected by my position of service; that my identity would not be influenced. But when I prepared to remove the jacket, I found myself wondering whether I could be as happy if I did not wear the jacket that seemed to give me so much.

When I removed the coat, people’s attention followed the coat. My identity changed instantly. Curiously, a few who have personal baggage with people of authority—people I had never met before—still treat me differently because I once wore the jacket. Now they are free to tell me what they really think!

Celebrating and liking myself as I am is a better option than an induced identity. It is not easy. To truly love,

or be loved, is harder than assuming an identity. Dare I say that power is a terrible substitute for love?

### **Who are we or what do we do?**

The final lesson I learned was that we can develop a spiritual dependence on the experience of being needed, of being a “blessing to others.” This is a genuine concern for all who serve in the name of God. Here is what I mean.

My spiritual gifts suited the ministry of leadership. My abilities complement those gifts. I believe God truly led and used my ministry during the past years. He enabled me to help the conference I served. People frequently expressed their genuine gratitude for my leadership. I experienced sincere relationships with those I served, and that’s a good thing.

It’s also a dangerous thing. My sense of acceptance before God, my peace with myself, was interwoven with my ministry. There was a real and tangible blessing. The kind of blessing I have always longed for. That we all long for. When I knew I was a blessing to others, then I could feel accepted, as though I had found my place. Their need of me provided me with a sense of personal authenticity. I came to depend on that realization and knew I would miss it terribly when it was gone; that is, when I ceased to be a conference president.

It was this realization that caused me to know instinctively that I should accept the call to the Seminary. God was reaching out to me for the sake of my soul.

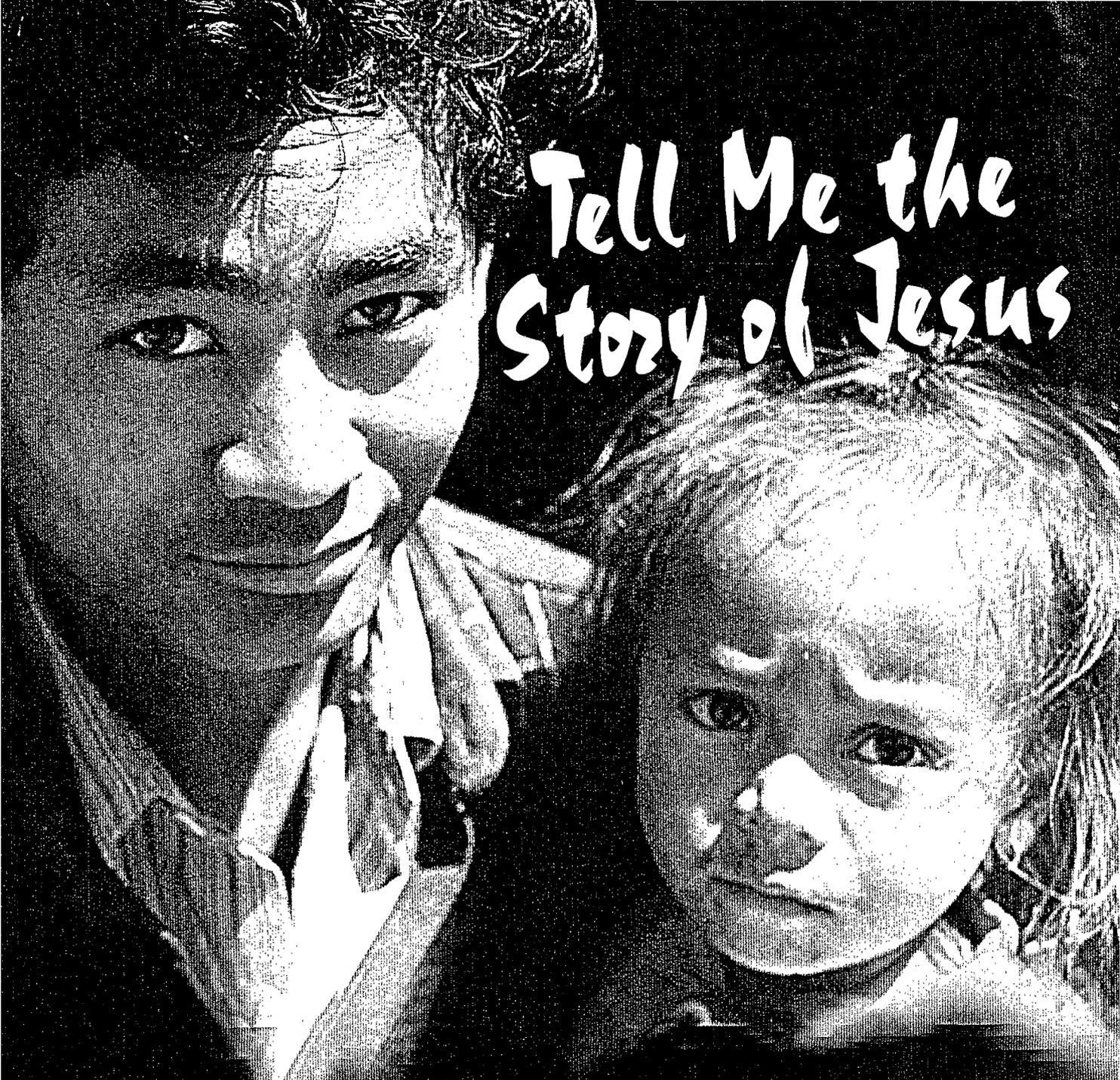
So what of my decision? My years of service in the New York Conference will always be the high point of my ministry. They were filled with God’s providence and blessing. But the challenges of today’s journey are also learning ones. Life is learning, and what better place than the Seminary to continue to learn?

So my answer to a wonderful student at the dinner table that Sabbath could have been very short: “I also have come to learn.” ■

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# Can dying churches be resuscitated?

Russell Burrill



Russell Burrill, D.Min., is director of NADEI and chair of the Christian Ministry Department, Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

**E**ighty percent of all Christian churches in North America, including those of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, have plateaued or are in a state of decline.<sup>1</sup> Many pastors spend time and energy attempting to revitalize an existing church only to be frustrated.

George Barna surveyed churches across America, looking for an adequate number of “turnaround churches” to include in his study. To his amazement, he failed to find a sufficient number of successfully transformed churches to make his research statistically valid. His conclusions point out that it is rare for a church in decline to turn around.<sup>2</sup>

In the turnaround churches examined, Barna found that change occurred with the arrival of a new pastor who brought new vision to the church. Such turnarounds required great sacrifice on the part of the pastor, who worked an average of 80 hours per week during the transition. Barna concluded that it takes so much energy for the pastor to accomplish the turnaround that only younger pastors should attempt it, and that only once in a pastor’s lifetime!

Obviously, these conclusions are not encouraging. The problem is that churches on the plateau or decline usually have lost their sense of mission. They have become a community of saints rather than a movement that reaches out in specific ways to help the world

around. It is much more comfortable for congregations to be pampered than it is to “get dirty” reaching the lost.

Seventh-day Adventist churches are not much of an exception to these scenarios. Many of them have lost their sense of mission. The ultimate result is that the churches become virtual country clubs for the saints. The more one caters to them, the worse they seem to get spiritually, and the more care they seem to require.

Recently, Barna released another shocking study of the religious beliefs and practices of overcomfortable Christians.<sup>3</sup> This random study surveyed those who listed the denomination they most frequently attended. The study scrutinized the 12 largest denominations in America, which included Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>4</sup>

The questions about belief highlighted points that every Adventist should agree on. Yet the results of Barna’s study showed that only 67 percent of Adventists believed the Bible to be totally accurate, 42 percent felt they must tell others of their faith, 73 percent felt religious faith important, 37 percent believed Satan to be a literal being, and only 32 percent believed that works don’t earn salvation. Amazingly, only 45 percent of Adventists felt that Christ was sinless, while 76 percent believed God was an all-powerful Creator.

Further, Barna ranked Adventists seventh out of the twelve denominations studied, when it came to the question of religious purity. Adventists might be inclined to dismiss this study, but George Barna, one of the most recognized and respected researchers, cannot be dismissed so lightly.

Later, Barna released the results of another part of the same study. This dealt with particular religious practices of the twelve denominations. Again Adventists did not fare well. Most startling was the report on prayer: “By far the most common religious practice among adults is praying. Overall, 82 percent of all Americans—including 90 percent of all Protestants and 88 percent of Catholics—prayed to God within the past seven days. The figure was highest among those who attend a Pentecostal church (97 percent of whom said they had prayed in the past week), and lowest [were] among those who attended an Adventist church (79 percent).”<sup>5</sup>

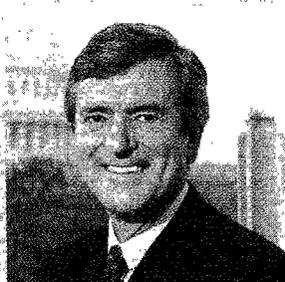
This was not the only religious activity in

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which Adventists did not score well, but it is the most striking. Apparently, there is work to be done to improve spirituality among Seventh-day Adventists.

### **Spirituality and involvement in mission**

On a more positive note, the North American Division Evangelism Institute (NADEI) has processed Natural Church Development surveys from many Adventist churches.<sup>6</sup> The two characteristics that have averaged highest in Adventist churches are “need-oriented evangelism” and “passionate spirituality.” Since this survey is given only to active church members, the results may be more reflective of what those who are at the heart of the church feel, whereas Barna’s research indicates that spirituality has not captured the attention of those outside that inner circle.

All this data indicates that at the root of any turnaround strategy among Adventists should be a plan to reignite the spirituality of the members of the church. No particular method can accomplish this change. While strategies are important and helpful, they can never replace the work of the Holy Spirit in revitalizing those who believe in Jesus. Hopefully, the people of the Advent faith will once again recognize and take hold of the Spirit’s power and become spiritual giants. Only then can our churches truly be turned around.

At the same time, one cannot simply wait until the spiritual problem is solved before one starts working to turn a church around. Revitalization and spiritual growth occur when members become involved in the mission of the church. Few churches turn around by just concentrating on improving their spiritual life. In fact, sometimes the more a church concentrates on improving spiritual life, the more Laodicean it becomes. Spiritual life is ignited only by involvement in mission.

“Those who would be overcomers must be drawn out of themselves,

and the only thing which will accomplish this great work, is to become intensely interested in the salvation of others.”<sup>7</sup>

The church is a living organism. It is not a dead organization. All living organisms go through a life cycle, including birth, growth, maturity, decline, and death. We don’t like to think that a church must someday die, so we try to move it away from death by institutionalizing its past. The ultimate result is that the church ceases to be relevant to the present society, leading to death anyway.

No living organism lives forever in this world. How does the church continue? In nature, life is perpetuated by reproduction. So it is with the church. The church continues to grow and expand by reproduction: creating new congregations with new life cycles. One research has pointed out that the older a church gets, the less effective it becomes in reaching lost people. This study found, for example, that churches under ten years of age usually require ten people to baptize one new convert, whereas churches that are 50 years or older require 100 people to baptize a new convert.<sup>8</sup>

### **Life cycles in a church**

Robert Dale divides the church’s life cycle into several stages.<sup>9</sup> The first four occur when the church is on the upswing. First the church is birthed with a dream. It then codifies its beliefs as it defines what it is all about.<sup>10</sup> Third, there comes the development of goals. These are set to accomplish what the church’s beliefs have specified.

Finally comes the development of a structure to support the accomplishment of those goals. At this point the church may be described as having come to maturity. It may continue there for several years, riding the crest of the wave that God has helped it to create.

Ultimately, however, a church moves to the downside of the life cycle. Dale suggests four stages in this downfall.<sup>11</sup> The first is nostalgia.

Things aren’t happening like they used to, so people start recalling the “good old days.” They then move to the second stage in which they start questioning some of the things they are currently doing. Third, they move into polarization. Some remember one way it used to be; others a different way. Ultimately, the church may divide into warring camps, disagreeing on what has gone wrong with the church. Finally, the church ends up in disintegration. People start leaving, and the church may finally decline and die.

When churches get on the downside of the life cycle, they sometimes try to go back to the upstage area of structure. They think that the road to revitalization lies in redoing the structure of the church. Rarely, if ever, does this work.

Here it is crucial to remember that originally the structure was created to help the church accomplish its original dream and goals. The correct application for a church that is on the downside of the life cycle is to go back and rebirth the dream or define another just vision and then create the new beliefs, goals, and structure to support the new dream.

### **Dream for the future**

The most basic step in helping a church move off the plateau or stop the decline is to help it rebirth its dream for the future. Most churches begin with a dream, but as the years pass, the dream is forgotten. Thus it may not even be conveyed to those who join the church as time goes by. This usually causes, at first, an imperceptible wandering, an ill-defined, aimless amble into the future.

One reason that a church gets stuck on a plateau is the fact that when it was planted, it inevitably took on the characteristics of the generation that birthed it. As time continued and that generation moved on or slowly passed from the scene, few people continued to passionately subscribe to the core values held by the original generation.

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It is during this period of aging that the church becomes irrelevant to the new societal challenges in which it finds itself and that it is a part of. Thus, fewer people join the church, and it heads into decline.

This is why the average life of a church is about the same as that of the average human: 70 years. The only way to extend the life of a church beyond the usual threescore years and ten is to keep it young by continually redefining the dream and making the church relevant to the society it must now reach. This does not mean that the church should redefine its doctrinal beliefs, but it must reconsider how it relates those beliefs to the surrounding culture.

### Three questions

There are three vital questions that church leadership needs to answer as it negotiates revitalization with existing churches. (1) Why are we here? (2) Where will our present course take us? (3) If this is not where we want to

go, what must be changed?

Note that the first step is not change, but the reestablishment of mission. Answering clearly the "Why are we here?" question is the most important step in the process of revitalization. The dream cannot be birthed until this question is fully explored. Leadership must then move on to the remaining questions, which, among other things, help a church realize that the present course will continue to lead the church in the way it has been going. And in most cases, that is death. So, what needs to change in order to make the new dream happen?

As George Barna indicated, turning churches around when they are in steep decline may be almost impossible. In such cases, it might actually be best to close the church and replant it. If the church is still on the plateau or if the decline is just beginning, it is much easier to help the church. Half the battle in such churches is enabling the church leadership to rec-

ognize that there is a problem and they need to rediscover and birth the vision and dream God has for their church here and now.

If the leadership can be convinced to recognize the problem and deal with it before decline becomes too obvious and overwhelming, there is a good possibility that the church can be reignited for the accomplishment of the mission of Christ. The process is much like giving a heart transplant to a dying patient. Suddenly, life looks good again. Growth begins to occur, and the life cycle gets repeated for another 50-70 years.

This dream renewal, however, cannot be done through mechanical means alone. The whole process must be bathed in much prayer and searching the wisdom of God to understand God's vision and dream for this church here and now. The church must be immersed in spiritual revival.

There is no one method for turning churches around, but there is one

*continued on page 23*

# Evangelism and interfaith relations

Bert B. Beach



Bert Beach, Ph.D., is an expert on interfaith relations and former director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Being an authentic Christian implies being able to love. Being an authentic Adventist demands that and being an evangelist at the same time. While it is popular in Christian churches today to lift up the Great Commandment of love, there is an increasing tendency to overlook the Great Commission to “go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). The last recorded words of Jesus call for His followers to be witnesses “to the uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Many of these “uttermost parts” are dominated by such world religions as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and, to a lesser extent, Judaism. Therein lies the potential for friction, if not confrontation.

## The world is the Adventist parish

Early Adventists developed a world vision of “the work.” Over a few short years they moved from the stifling “closed door” concept to the broader view of their “field” being the United States, and, finally, on to the exciting vision of a world church going to the ends of the earth.

The Christian church is, of course, called to be a world movement. This was confirmed for all time at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) where it was made clear that the church is not to be a Jewish subset, but a world church with a universal gospel, not a local or ethnic sect.

John Wesley was correct when he said,

“The world is my parish.” This concept, however, was not appreciated by the ecclesiastical establishment of his day. Even today, there are various religious forces that promote, some with legal support, established, canonical territory. Thus there are nationalistic and cultural traditions that inhibit world evangelism. The Seventh-day Adventist answer to such limitations has been, and still is, to maintain the mantra that “the field is the world,” “the harvest is the end of the world” (Matt. 13:38, 39), and there is urgency to go “from everywhere to everywhere.”

While the writings of Ellen G. White are clear regarding the necessity to fulfill the task of world evangelization, she offers very little guidance as to how to meet the non-Christian religions. Mrs. White makes practically no reference to Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Sikhism, or Taoism. She makes one statement about Muslims and their denial of the divinity of Christ, and urges Christians to be zealous in teaching “the preexistence of the only Savior of the world.”<sup>1</sup> However, Mrs. White does enunciate an overriding principle: “Christ recognized no distinction of nationality or rank or creed. . . . Christ came to break down every wall of partition: He came to show that His gift of mercy and love is as unconfined as the air, the light, or the showers of rain that refresh the earth.”<sup>2</sup>

## Dealing with Judaism—some suggestions

The one non-Christian religion Ellen G. White actually deals with is Judaism. She says that many Jews are to be won to Christ. Perhaps she was referring to latent anti-Semitism when she wrote that Adventists “should not despise the Jews”<sup>3</sup> and that “there is to be no erecting of barriers. . . . Our work is to be given as freely to the Jews as to the Gentiles.”<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. White also presents two principles in dealing with the Jews that could very well have some general application to other world religions:

1. The approach should not be to destroy the “Jewish economy,” but to develop it with the truth. In other words, we are to work on the plan of progression, rather than discontinuance.<sup>5</sup> Of course, this is clearer in the case of Judaism than it is in the case of other religions. Nevertheless, can we not suggest that

our task is not to “destroy,” but to “develop”?”<sup>6</sup>

2. Jews are to be used as an effective force to labor for Jews.<sup>7</sup> The principle is to use those best acquainted by personal experience with the religion concerned. This can be a most effective bridging contact.

There is, however, one demur. Converts, at times, because of the trauma associated with change and conversion, can be a little unbalanced or extreme, and this can mitigate against their effectiveness in working with others from their former community.

When working with Jewish people, Ellen White underlines the importance of “linking” the Old and the New Testaments.<sup>8</sup> Seventh-day Adventists should be in a better position to do this than most other Christians. The Sabbath, unclean foods, the Day of Atonement, the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, and Christ’s high-priestly ministry are all links in the chain connecting the Old and New Testaments. However, we need to be aware that many rabbis will resent this approach as having a dangerous pseudo-Jewish nature.

With other world religions, there are, no doubt, some general principles that apply across the board, and there are some specific attitudes and approaches that are more especially applicable to particular religions. To consider just a few:

### **Islam**

For example, in dealing with Muslims, it is vital to emphasize the *oneness* and unity of God, as clearly affirmed by Moses and Isaiah. We must remember that much about the nature of God has not been revealed to us. Muslims respond affirmatively to the oneness, immutability, and mercy of God.

Further, as with many Jews, Adventist dietary practices are a plus, especially since Muslims have a strong abhorrence for consuming any swine flesh. A strong plus is the Adventist position against the consumption of

alcoholic beverages. That is why the anti-alcohol approach, e.g., through the International Commission for the Prevention of Alcoholism and Drug Dependency (ICPA), has opened doors to Muslims in our communities.

### **Buddhism**

Buddhism places great emphasis on the inner experience of enlightenment. Does this not have some relationship to what Christians call conversion? Of course, there are important differences, but there is also a commonality. In Mahayana Buddhism there also appears to be a more open attitude and some concept of salvation by faith and grace, on which a relationship can be built and developed.

### **Taoism and Confucianism**

Taoism emphasizes order, nature, simplicity of life, and the avoidance of self-seeking. It is, in essence, a system of ethics affirming order. Here is a useful opening for Adventists with their emphases on obedience to God’s law; respect for God’s creation; simple lifestyle; and self-denial in Christ, the Man of sacrifice.

Confucianism, in addition to Taoism, is a significant system of ethics influencing hundreds of millions of Chinese, even though it appears to be collapsing under the weight of a growing Western culture. In these world religions, the emphasis is upon duty and proper relationships between people. The Golden Rule (“don’t do unto others what you don’t want them to do to you”) is emphasized, giving opportunity to present the Golden Rule in its more positive Christian wording. Respect and responsibility are certainly also Christian values.

### **Absence of contacts**

Perhaps one of the weak points in interfaith relations is the absence of contacts between Adventist leaders and leaders of other religions. Contacts with such religious leaders and the intelligentsia of other world

religions have been minimal. The tendency to withdraw into one’s own religious cocoon and neglect leadership contacts with representatives of other religious bodies is seen as a mark of sectarianism.

We need to actively oppose this perception of Adventism by stepping out of isolation. Doing so certainly does not mean that we will embrace outlooks hostile to true Christianity or Adventism.

### **Principles of interfaith relations**

Some general principles of interfaith relations apply across the board for Seventh-day Adventists wanting to understand other religions and meet their members.

*High ethical standards.* When meeting persons of other faiths, only the highest ethical standards are acceptable. We need to be truthful, transparent, and fair.

We should never knowingly make false statements regarding the teachings or official practices of other religious bodies. We should be sure that we actually understand those we are approaching, and we need to follow Peter’s suggestion that in giving an account of our faith, we do so with humility, respect, and honesty (1 Peter 3:15, 16).

*Knowledge of culture.* Religion, culture, and history are often closely intertwined. It is difficult for people of another religious persuasion and culture to take us seriously, if they find us to be both illiterate and naive regarding what has for centuries made their civilization what it is.

*Standing for morality.* Immorality is rampant around the world, and not least in Western societies. Religious fundamentalists and extremists within the world religions see the West, led by the United States, as promoting forms of gross and satanic immorality. In approaching those belonging to other religions, Adventists must be seen as standing tall for the highest expressions of communal morality and personal ethics.

Morality includes both honesty and obedience, and also respect for human dignity and life. Adventists should let those they are trying to reach see that they "are conscientious."<sup>9</sup> While Adventists are in the work of leading others to Jesus Christ and the faith of the Bible, any solicitation and subsequent conversion should never be influenced by the allurements of material inducements, gifts, cajolery, or any siren song, which would make "conversion" a sham.

*Pro-family stance.* In many third world countries, the family plays a dominant and all-pervasive role. Adventists need to be seen in the world for what they are as pro-family, especially when anti-family forces (particularly in some Western cultures) are seen to be chipping away at the family, and even undermining the whole concept of the family unit.

*Context and adaptability.* Adaptability is a valuable quality for inter-

faith contacts. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-22, Paul expounds on the value of adaptability when seeking to win people for Christ from all classes of people, without violating any Christian principle: to the slave, he became like a slave; to the Jew, he was a Jew; to the Gentile, he became like a Gentile. Always conscious of his duty to God, he sums up his strategy: "I have become everything in turn to men of every sort, so that in one way or another I may save some" (verse 22, NEB).

This is not practicing deception, but it is critical to what today we call the contextualization of the gospel, and the approach of the person presenting it. The gospel must remain pure, but the way in which it is presented in a given context can, and, indeed, must change.

There is no point in shocking others by nonconformity to their customs in regard to dress, food, terminology, and even external aspects

of religious services. In evangelistic outreach, personal or organized, it is helpful to conform to certain customs and even perhaps prejudices, if basic principles and conscience are not in danger of being violated.

*Establishing credibility.* When approaching non-Christians (or Christians of another denomination, for that matter), it is wise to first refer to a "point of doctrine on which you can agree."<sup>10</sup> It is counterproductive to introduce early on "objectionable features of the Seventh-day Adventist faith."<sup>11</sup>

The issue is not one of "hiding" the truth, but how best to reach other faiths. It is destructive to produce the whole message immediately and burst in on other religions like the proverbial bull in a china shop.

A pedagogically sound approach is to proceed slowly and in stages. First, we need to establish credibility and sincerity and "dwell on the necessity of practical godliness" and "give them

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evidence that you are a Christian desiring peace, and that you love their souls."<sup>12</sup> This will take some time, but you will gain their confidence.

*Flexible approach.* In dealing with other ways of thinking, Adventists should not use only one fixed approach, but be ready to vary and alter the manner of coming closer to the followers of another religion. We should align our approach to the actual circumstances to be dealt with.<sup>13</sup>

### The danger of syncretism

While considering interfaith dialogue, we need to be aware of the issue of syncretism—that is, an attempt to unite or reconcile diverse or opposite doctrines or beliefs. Many people believe that all religions are legitimate paths to truth and salvation. They would say that Christianity may be “better,” but only to a degree, and therefore it behooves individuals and churches to find ways to synthesize and harmonize Christian doctrines and lifestyle with the belief systems of other religions.

This is standard postmodern thinking. Frederick the Great’s dictum nicely summarizes this view: “Everyone is saved in his own way.” This was the worldview of the Greco-Roman world in New Testament times. In contrast, the apostle Peter made it unmistakably clear: “For in all the world no other name has been given to men but this, and it is by this name that we must be saved!” (Acts 4:12, Phillips). Indeed, the Seventh-day Adventist global message must, in the final analysis, always be, that in no one else but Jesus Christ can salvation be found.

Let us be aware that in today’s syncretistic climate, the syncretistic approach to religion and interfaith relations is definitely more dangerous than a head-on collision with atheism, because the former appears to offer an attractive global dimension of faith and human relations.

### Can non-Christians be saved?

We often hear it said that no one

who has not heard and responded to the name of Christ can be saved. Furthermore, we are told that the millions who die every year and “go to Christless graves” will suffer the pangs of hellfire throughout eternity!

As Seventh-day Adventists, we strongly disagree with such views. Our motivation for missionary evangelism is not that without hearing and accepting the specific Christian biblical message, non-Christians cannot be saved, but it is because Christ commands us to be His witnesses proclaiming the good news of salvation, leading people here and now to a better and fuller life, calling people to greater light, challenging them to respond positively to the stirrings of their conscience.

### Christ: The light that lighteth every person

In reaching out to non-Seventh-day Adventists, the following three truths need to be remembered:

1. Not all Seventh-day Adventists will be saved.
2. Not all Christians or only Christians belonging to a church will be saved.
3. The important Pauline principle, “For God has no favorites . . . when gentiles who do not possess the law carry out its precepts by the light of nature, then, although they have no law, they are their own law, for they display the effect of the law inscribed in their heart. Their conscience is called as witness” (Rom. 2:13-15, NEB).

What Paul is saying to the Romans is that Gentiles may have no knowledge of Christ or of biblical principles as such, but through their conscience and experience, they demonstrate the operation, in their thoughts and actions, of the law of God, the presence of which is endorsed by their own struggles of conscience. God will judge “the secrets of the human hearts,” and any salvation will come from and by Jesus Christ, who died for every human being.

In John’s Gospel, we find that

Christ is “the true light” that comes into the world and illumines the existence of every person for both salvation and judgment, even though men and women may not know or fully comprehend Him (John 1:5, 9).

There is truth in every religion, for the true light of Christ is at work everywhere. However, salvation comes only from Christ, and the salvific value of religion, if at all, is only in proportion to the extent it points and leads its followers in the direction of divine truth, and that truth is, at its heart, Jesus Christ Himself.

### From everywhere to everyone

We have a great task to accomplish. Ellen White talks about classes of people who need to be the object of special work at the time of the end. Maybe some of these special classes are the millions who belong to non-Christian persuasions. Today this challenge has an additional context that was not there in Ellen White’s time: *globalization*.

In this context, we can and must go from “everywhere to everyone.” To buoy us up in our global mission, we have two divine promises: The everlasting gospel will be preached in all the world, and then the end will come as the whole world is lightened with God’s glory. ■

- 1 Ellen G. White, *The Home Missionary*, September, 1892.
- 2 ———, *Testimonies for the Church* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Pub. Assn., 1948), 9:190.
- 3 Manuscript 87, 1907
- 4 Feb. 3, 1908.
- 5 Letter 87, 1907.
- 6 See White, *Evangelism* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1970), 554
- 7 GC Session, May 24, 1905
- 8 White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Pub. Assn., 1911), 381
- 9 ———, *Gospel Workers* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1948), 120
- 10 *Ibid.*, 120.
- 11 White, *Evangelism*, 246.
- 12 ———, *Gospel Workers*, 120
- 13 *Ibid.*, 118, 119.

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# Not because I am worthy, but because He is

I was 23, perhaps 24, when the Lord began calling me to ministry. I had graduated from Columbia Union College with my associate degree and been married for several years. I decided to take a spiritual gifts class at CUC from Dr. Bill Liversidge—a class that would be one of the most influential of my life.

During that class, Dr. Liversidge, along with encouraging me to write, planted the seed in my mind that the Lord might be calling me to pastor. I listened respectfully. Nice thought—but one that frightened me. So, I just shelved it—didn't think about it, went on with my life.

His encouragement to write, however, took root. His eight little words—"Have you ever thought about becoming a writer?"—gave me the courage to begin submitting my articles for publication. As far as pastoral ministry was concerned, however, the thought receded into the background, where God left it until I was ready!

Several years later, a friend of ours, Tim, who was the youth pastor at our church, asked my husband, Roy, and me whether we would be willing to sit in with him on a Bible study with a young couple. We agreed.

The wife had been an Adventist, but left the church and married while away. After the second or third study, Tim told us he couldn't continue the study and asked whether we would lead it. Who would want to say to a young couple eager to study the Bible, "Oh, no, I can't do that. The thought scares the daylight out of me"? So we went ahead with the studies.

Since I had a more flexible schedule, Roy and I decided that I would lead out in the study. Halfway through the studies, Cindy said to me, "Bonita, I have attended Adventist schools all my life, but I never learned how to accept Jesus



as my personal Savior. How do I do it?" And, in the quietness of her kitchen, for the first time in her life, Cindy accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior.

As Roy and I drove home that night, I said to him, "Nothing has ever given me as much joy." Later, Cindy, her husband, and their daughter were all baptized.

Roy and I attended Wednesday night prayer meetings at our church about this time. One particular evening, our pastor came through the door right before the meeting was supposed to begin. "I have an emergency. I can't stay," he said. Then he looked at me and asked, "Bonita, would you lead out tonight?" Again, I ask, who's going to answer the pastor and say, "Sorry, Pastor. Not me. The thought scares the daylight out of me"? So, I went forward, found his notes on the podium, and began leading the meeting. As I stood there leading the people in spiritual dialogue, I felt an unusual sense of calm. I felt at home.

During those same Wednesday night prayer meetings, Erwin Gane was conducting a meeting on the topic of the Holy Spirit. It was at this meeting that all the events started coming together for me. As he stood there, explaining so articulately and beautifully the work of the Holy Spirit, the thought invaded my mind, *This is it! This is what I want to do. I want to lead people in understanding*

*God more clearly. I want to help them understand God's Word and how it is relevant to their lives.*

What did all this mean? I wondered. And as I pondered, Roy was also pondering. I don't remember Roy and me actually talking about all that was happening, but as we were driving down Franklin Avenue in Takoma Park one afternoon, both lost in our own thoughts, Roy interrupted with the declaration, "Bonita, if you want to go back to school to be a pastor or a teacher, I will support you." OK, Lord, I think I'm getting the picture!

Originally, I enrolled as a religion major, to teach religion. That was safe. Yet, as time went on and I counseled with one of my advisors, it became clear that I needed to switch to theology. After making that switch, I went home and, lying on my bed, suddenly had a flood of thoughts about all the things that were wrong in my life.

Though it was not an audible voice, it was a voice nonetheless that said to me sneeringly, "Who do you think you are trying to be a pastor? You're not good enough for that."

After I'd been there a while, feeling as if a fifty-pound weight was on my back, I cried to God, "Why are You calling me to be a pastor? I'm not good enough." And, again, not an audible voice, but a voice nonetheless, compassionately spoke to me, "I'm not calling you because you are worthy. I'm calling you because I am worthy!" And with that, the weight immediately lifted.

That message from the Lord has sustained me through many difficulties. As ministers we all know how it goes: In the morning, we may be thinking, *It's a good day. My ministry is going pretty well.* But by that same evening, our thoughts are, *Lord, why am I here? I am so inadequate.* It is at those very times that the Lord repeats that message to me, "I

didn't call you because you are worthy. I called you because I am worthy."

For many years, fear kept me from answering God's call. I feared I wasn't good enough. I feared I didn't know enough. I feared the commitment. But once I tasted the sweetness of what it means to be used by God, and that He who called me would equip me, life has never been the same. Ministry has given me the most challenging, painful, stretching years of my life. It has also given me my most joyful, rewarding, and satisfying years. I wouldn't trade any of them. And these days I do my ministry through the power of the written word.

From the beginning of my ministry, the call of the prophet Jeremiah has given me courage (Jer. 1:5-9). Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is going on despite the fear. Courage is allowing the Lord to calm our fears. Courage is allowing God to cover our shame in the glory and assurance of His grace.

"Here I am, Lord." ❏

Bonita J. Shields is an assistant editor of the Adventist Review.

## Can dying churches be resuscitated?

continued from page 17

Spirit who can enable the church to work through the difficulties and empower it to once again be vibrant; a true movement of God in its surrounding society. ❏

- 1 Win Arn, "Church Growth Associate Leadership Training," Pastor's Growth Leadership Conference, June, 1990, Module III, 18.
- 2 George Barna, *Turnaround Churches* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1993).
- 3 ———, Barna Research Online, "Religious Beliefs Vary Widely by Denomination," June 25, 2001.
- 4 In the study one percent of the U.S. population claimed to be Adventists. However, Adventist membership is much less than one percent (2.5 million people) of the U.S. population. Therefore the figures released do not reflect actual membership, but only those who claim Adventism as their church preference. Since this is true of all denominations studied, we should look at how Adventists compare with other denominations. That is a more accurate reflection of this study.
- 5 Barna, Barna Research Online, "Protestants, Catholics, and Mormons Reflect Diverse Levels of Religious Activity," July 9, 2001.
- 6 Natural Church Development is an instrument that measures church health in the area of eight quality characteristics. For further information on this church analysis tool, see *Ministry*, January 2001, March 2001, and May 2001 issues. Or you can purchase the book, *Natural Church Development*, through the online NADEI bookstore, located at [www.nadei.org](http://www.nadei.org)

- 7 Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Pub. Assn., 1923), 207.
- 8 Phillip Barron Jones, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline*, eds. Dean Hoge and David Roizen (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1979), —.
- 9 Robert Dale, *To Dream Again* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981), 16.
- 10 Not their doctrinal beliefs, but their belief in what they expect God to do for their church.
- 11 Dale, 16.

## Being a true friend to the postmodern

continued from page 9

the Son of man hath not where to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20). When appropriate, we must not be afraid to take this approach. We cannot afford to neglect the friendship, which requires time and effort, nor can we neglect the appeal, which requires courage and faith. We must simply be true friends to those with whom we share our faith. ❏

- 1 Brian D. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 2000), 166.
- 2 Stanley J. Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1996), 89.
- 3 Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1905), 143.

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# Ellen White, inerrancy, and interpretation

Woodrow W.  
Whidden



Woodrow W. Whidden, Ph.D., is professor of religion at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

**S**eventh-day Adventists have been profoundly shaped by the prophetic thrust of the biblical writers. We are not only steeped in apocalyptic prophecy, that is the “foretelling” messengers, but have also been shaped by the classical prophetic tradition, that is the “forthtelling” prophets.

Elements of both these prophetic types were also manifest in the long and productive ministry of Ellen White. Key questions confronting Adventism today concern the role of Ellen White and whether we understand and correctly interpret the nineteenth-century prophetic messages, and if we do, how we will view or treat these messages. Does Mrs. White’s ministry, embodied in her writings, measure up to biblical tests of a prophet who communicated “the testimony of Jesus Christ”? Does she truly communicate the truth about Jesus and His Word?

## A ministry in crisis

Ellen White and her ministry do not seem to find ready acceptance in some contemporary Adventist quarters. The crisis involves not only direct attacks but a subtle neglect. Three reasons account for this trauma:

1. Her practical, deeply theological/spiritual understanding of the centrality of Jesus in the “great controversy” has been swallowed up by preoccupation with peripheral minutiae. Ellen White as an influential force will continue to

recede unless the Christo-centric core of her ministry is recovered and given the emphasis it so deserves.

2. Her devoted “true believers” have not only majored in the marginal but have also tended to make her appear extreme by arbitrary and forced selections from her writings; usually with the most negative connotations being accentuated.

3. Many have tried to claim too much for her in an attempt to secure the authoritative reliability of the prophetic message and have thus taken the focus off the central purpose of her ministry.

Such overwrought claims have featured a misplaced demand for some sort of fundamentalistic “inerrancy” which usually majors in minor factors of “cheap truth” and numerous unproved assumptions. The term, “cheap truth” is used here to refer to such issues as absolute textual, historical, and scientific accuracy. This type of thinking asks questions that are alien to the prophet’s concerns. Thus, in a sincere attempt to save her prophetic authority, many have gotten their vision of the “visions” severely out of focus.

This article will analyze these key factors, in an attempt to lay out a corrective, interpretive protocol for the writings of Ellen White.

## Interpretation and the core message of Ellen White

As noted already, the central focus of Ellen White’s ministry is Jesus: His profound role as the key agent of the Godhead in restoring sinners to God and into a deeply satisfying and living relationship with Him. In other words, any correct interpretation of Ellen White must begin with the foundational question: Is the central burden of her multifaceted ministry Jesus the Savior and Lord of our lives and the Church? Does she truly manifest the “spirit of prophecy” that consistently testifies of Jesus (Rev. 12:17 and 19:10)?

To find an answer to this question, we may look at five of her more prominent books: *The Desire of Ages*; *Steps to Christ*; *Christ’s Object Lessons*; *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*; and *The Great Controversy*.

If one can walk away from reading these books declaring that they have not (1) been drawn closer to Christ, (2) been drawn to Scripture, (3) been inspired to Christian service and moral rectitude, and (4) received a deepened sense of dependence on God, then

there is nothing much we need further to say about Ellen White and her prophetic ministry.

Such a conclusion might seem extreme. The truth is that if her writing does not have these effects—that is, if the loving Lordship of Jesus Christ is not seen to be centrally mediated through her work, and if there is no resonance with a Christ-centered foundation, the mature Christian reader is then unprepared to profit from the prophet and to go on to the next interpretive steps.<sup>1</sup>

### Steps toward interpretation

1. *The broad picture.* The next step in interpreting Ellen White is to view a particular issue she takes up in the context of the broad picture and principles that she has developed. In other words, if you are going to deal with Ellen White's teaching on milk and eggs, don't start with milk and eggs. Rather, it is important to first understand the broader principles of health (physical, mental, and spiritual) and

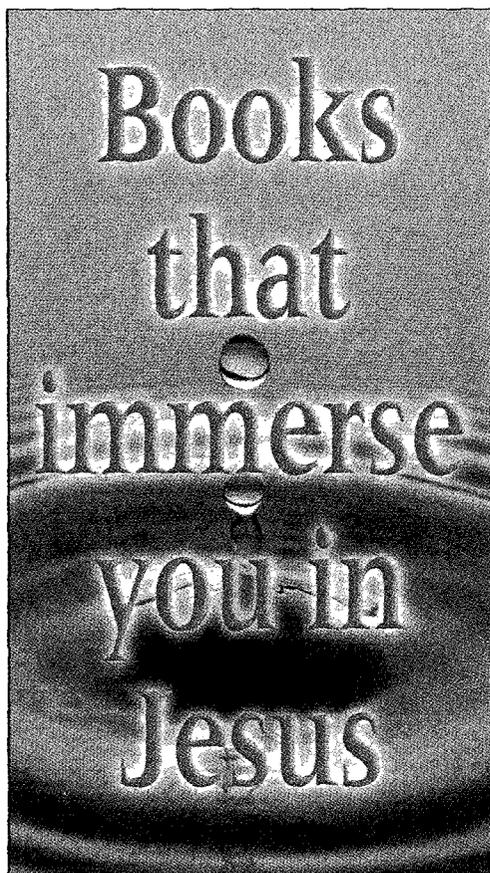
diet, and then come back to how milk and eggs fit into that wider context. This approach prevents us from misinterpreting or taking an inaccurate stand on the matter of milk or egg consumption. In this context, one may begin with *Ministry of Healing* and *Counsels on Health* before taking on the more context-specific compilation, *Counsels on Diets and Foods*.

2. *Gather appropriate information.* The next step is to try and get all the key statements, or "testimonies," on any particular subject under consideration.<sup>2</sup> When this is done, the balance and perspective of Ellen White emerges with marked clarity.

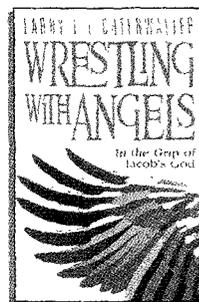
For instance, I have devoted a significant amount of my scholarly effort on Ellen White's understanding of salvation and perfection. Studying a broad spectrum of the documents on perfection led me to discover what Ellen White was really saying when she wrote about perfection: a dynamic growth in grace and coming to the place where believers become so

responsive to God's redemptive leading that they would rather die than knowingly go against His clearly expressed will. Such an experience indicates that they are so much in love with Jesus Christ that they no longer indulge in known, willful transgression of His will.

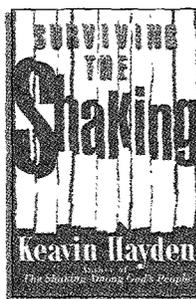
This is certainly a very different picture from the discouraging vision of sinless "perfectionism" that has so often been portrayed as Ellen White's position. This will not automatically solve the meaning of every single statement that she wrote on this subject, but it certainly depicts the main outlines of her practical teaching on justification (forgiving grace), sanctification (transforming grace), and perfection (victory over inherited and cultivated tendencies to sin). Clarity, when it comes to the main features or issues in Mrs. White's salvation theology can save us from the deep ditches of cheap grace on the left and pharisaic legalism on the right. This, of course, is also true of other issues.



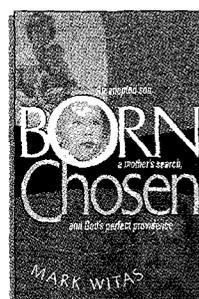
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## "Problematic" statements?

Along with the emerging patterns and themes of central importance, there will usually be "problematic" statements that don't seem to fit; these statements need to be pondered carefully. More detailed exegesis is needed, and this involves a number of steps:

1. *How are key words used in various literary contexts?* Look at the key words in the statement and make sure how the writer uses them in the context of the subject being investigated.

2. *Ascertain the social, historical, political, and personal contexts.* Often the study of a context might clarify what may at first sight seem puzzling or even contradictory.

3. *Distinguish between the "ideal" and the "real."* George Knight states that in our approach to a prophetic message, it would be well to discern between the "ideal" and how the prophet might be modifying the "ideal" in order to meet a practical situation that is less than "ideal,"

because of the demands of the "real."<sup>3</sup>

For example, Ellen White holds up the ideal of vegetarianism in her writings. There are, however, circumstances where the "reality" of the situation demands something less than the "ideal."

A. G. Daniells, a contemporary of White and the president of the General Conference, tells about visiting a very conscientious missionary in "Lapland" who was determined to maintain his vegetarian convictions. Daniells noticed the poor health of this worker and later reported that "he put the fear of the Lord in him that he must eat reindeer meat or else." Ellen White discourages the use of "drugs," but surely this does not apply to situations where "drugs" are necessary to combat malaria, especially in its final and extreme stages!<sup>4</sup>

4. *Don't try to prove things the prophet is not proving.* This final principle deals with the question of inerrancy and views of inspiration that suggest the dictation of words by God to the

prophet. The false concepts normally conjured up by the idea of inerrancy in a prophet, usually produce two scenarios.

The first, inerrancy, usually majors in minors and side issues, rather than the central, shaping issues of the prophet. It feels the need to have every detail of what the prophet writes absolutely free of any error, including minor matters that have little to do with the ultimate calling and thrust of the prophet's ministry.

Second, when these kinds of unreal expectations are not met, there follows the threat, if not the reality, of a lost faith in the veracity and trustworthiness of the prophet and the prophet's message.

## "Inerrancy," infallibility pitfall

"Inerrancy" is a concept assumed by many "fundamentalists" to suggest that the Bible has no errors of any type in it. Many earnest and sincere believers in Ellen White's inspiration hold, at least implicitly,

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the same position for her writings. This alleged lack of error involves not only doctrinal and spiritual matters, but also demands absolute inerrancy in the tangential scientific and historical scope of the prophet's writing.

Closely related to the concept of inerrancy is the idea of God's "verbal dictation" of God's message through the prophet. In this view, inerrancy is guaranteed because God is seen to dictate every word that makes up inspired and authoritative messages.

Are such claims realistic?

First, it is critical to categorically affirm all the doctrinal and spiritual reliability and authority of both the Scripture and the writings of Ellen White. To claim, however, that there are no errors of any kind is not only untenable, but, as alluded to above, is fraught with the prospect of disillusionment, that normally results from failed expectations.<sup>5</sup>

Ellen White's counsel stands valid: "All the mistakes [this appears to be a tacit affirmation of the fact that Ellen White knew there were "mistakes" in inspired writing] will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth."<sup>6</sup> In other words, if you can't accept the total veracity of inspired writing because you have noticed some irrelevant defect in an inspired piece of writing, most likely you will also have trouble with the "plainest revealed truths."

Certainly, if one wants to major in minor defects or errors, they can usually be found. But if one wants to major in the big picture which inspired writers have "painted" for us (human though they be), the path laid out by inspiration is sufficiently clear so that none need be lost on the pilgrimage to the eternal kingdom.

Second, it is important to identify the basic motivation of people who hold to verbal/dictation and inerrancy views. The argument is that if any part of the Bible or Ellen White is not totally reliable, it would compromise the doctrinal, ethical and spiritual reliabil-

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ity of the whole. Thus, by implication, a compromise in the absolute inerrancy of a body of inspired writing, would entirely destroy the authority of inspired writings. Ironically, such an argument makes the authority of inspiration dependent on human intellect, judgment and recourse. It must therefore be rejected.

Third, what about the inerrancy claims for inspired writers which pertain to history and science?

No serious Adventist Christian would want to spend a lot of time emphasizing any supposed or real errors in the Scripture or Ellen White. But, assuming the possibility of historical and scientific error, what are the facts that can be clearly affirmed? Did God allow factual mistakes into the Bible and Ellen White's writings?

I would suggest that the best position for the believer in special revelation is to simply admit that we do not know all the facts, and that we do not currently have evidence to support all the statements of the Bible

and Ellen White. While there is an abundance of evidence to demonstrate the predominant historical reliability of inspired writings, this evidence is only *probable*, rather than *coercive* in nature. Thus there is much that we cannot prove beyond the proverbial "shadow of doubt." This is where the need for faith is evident.

What about science? The inspired writings are not a treatise on science; neither are they anti-scientific. Inspired writers are not so much seeking to *describe* how the heavens work as to *prescribe* how believers may find their way to heaven. These writers speak in terms that are largely narrative, historical, poetic, dramatic, and so forth, rather than scientific and technical.

What seems to lurk behind the main presuppositions of the inerrancy advocates is the assumption that faith requires such *total* historical and scientific evidence that it would enable believers to prove *absolutely* every detail of the inspired writings

to be true. This kind of thinking immediately raises the question: Should the believer's practical experience of faith have to depend on such improbable, detailed evidence? Is there not enough probable evidence to justify faith in the authority of God's prophetic messages?

### **Inerrancy versus a concern for the great truths**

The issues that involve history and science could be addressed this way: Have you ever met a person who was saved from sin by finding out about Newton's law of gravity? Has the profession of belief in the historical fact of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln ever saved anybody? Such facts add to one's knowledge, but do they have saving efficacy?

Is it not true that most of the facts of history deal with what could be characterized as "cheap truth" (see above)? Is it not also true that the issues that inspiration concentrates on are matters involving more significant and "costly truths"—such as confession of sin, the practice of moral commitment, holy covenant, the reception of grace, atonement, and the exercise of justice and mercy? These are matters that scientific enquiry and critical historical research simply do not, and in themselves cannot, deal with.

While the Bible and Ellen White deal with issues that are scientific and historical, their approach has much more to do with the theological meaning of science and history rather than establishing every fact and nuance of science and history. The worldview of God's prophets assumes that we live in an objective reality made by God, governed by divinely instituted natural laws that form the essential backdrop for any meaningful scientific research to take place.

The prophets view history as an objective, factual reality, rather than a myth. What is quite profoundly arresting about the messages of the prophets is not so much what the facts are, as what the moral and spiri-

tual meaning is behind these facts.

God's inspired messengers are not primarily historians but rather "providential interpreters" of history. For them history is the setting for the "drama of the ages" in the conflict between good and evil. In the arena of the inspired interpretation of these facts, the expensive truths that shape the moral and spiritual dimensions of history reveal themselves.

All the facts of history and science cannot begin to compare with the biblical declaration that "God is love" and that in love He has created this world. There is nothing really anti-scientific or a-historical about the works of true prophets; they simply have a story line whose concerns transcend the questions which preoccupy research scientists, academic historians and antiquarians.

### **Inerrancy and the bottom line**

Every truth that really matters concerns issues of probable faith, rather than what can be objectively, scientifically proved beyond the proverbial "shadow of a doubt." The rationalistic demands that lurk behind the assumptions of the inerrant fundamentalists seem quite trivial when compared with the great moral and spiritual issues the prophets of God seek to address.

While no one can scientifically prove the existence of human consciousness to a confirmed skeptic, most of us go on living by faith that the probability of self-conscious existence is a more trustworthy alternative than total skepticism. We are at a loss to define clearly why we love God or why He loves us, but we have good probable evidence that He does in fact profoundly love us.

It is this love that makes our lives meaningful and gives us the dignity of self-worth in a world that has nearly choked on the cheapness of historical enquiry and scientific demonstration.

### **Inerrant fundamentalism's misplaced focus**

What is possibly most disturbing

about the inerrantist, fundamentalist claims for inspiration are their misplaced focus: They spend so much time and energy seeking to establish the authority of the primary medium of special revelation that they can easily lose sight of its powerful message.

In other words, the ultimate key to the authority of the Bible and Ellen White is not the formal authority granted them by those who deem them sufficiently accurate and trustworthy, but the authority which lies in the power of their message. Theologians usually express this by distinguishing between the Bible's *formal* and its *material* authority.

The power of the message of the prophets is self-evidently the source of their authority. The Bible and Ellen White have self-authenticating claims to authority due to the transcendent power of their revealed message. The authoritative claims of the Scripture find their best vindication when struggling, frustrated sinners discover the self-evident sufficiency of its saving message.

In conclusion: Is it possible to grasp the meaning of inspiration? Of course it is. Will believers be able to satisfy every question that might come up? Of course not! Yet if one focuses on the big picture and judiciously employs the rules of interpretation, sufficient progress can be made so that serious interpreters will one day be able to sit down with the Author of all inspired writing and get the rest cleared up. Where is our focus going to be? ■

- 1 For more in-depth treatments of the principles of interpretation (hermeneutics) to be employed in reading Ellen White, see George Knight, *Reading Ellen White* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1997) and Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Pub. Assn., 1998), 372-465.
- 2 This process has become much easier today with the computer technology that the Ellen G. White Estate has developed for the study of Ellen White.
- 3 Knight, 90-94.
- 4 See Knight, 98, 99, for a tragic example of a sincere but misguided application of Ellen White's counsels on the use of "drugs."
- 5 Knight lists a number of such manifestations of prophetic fallibility, 105-118.
- 6 White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958, 1980), 1:16.

## The power of a visit

**R**on and Sue Carlson are pastoral heroes to Sharon and me. Several years ago we learned that a dear friend had moved to their area.

As a young, discouraged widow, our friend had left the church and we were eager for her to experience a renewed and supportive contact. Hoping that she might respond to a friendly visit, we prayed that Ron's busy pastoral schedule might include a contact with our friend.

Sure enough, soon after receiving our message, Ron and Sue stopped by our friend's home to introduce themselves as Jim and Sharon's friends. Without exerting pressure, they extended a gracious invitation to attend services. That brief visit prompted our friend to consider her own desire for fellowship, and she began to attend.

Soon our friend sent us a letter describing her appreciation for "her pastoral family" and the kindness of the congregation. As her renewed relationship with Christ grew, she formally reestablished membership and rejoiced in the acceptance and nurture she was experiencing. Later we learned that she had met a man, also a member, and that they had married.

You can imagine why we think such pastoral care is heroic! We have learned some important insights from this redemptive process:

**Never give up.** You may not know how the Holy Spirit works to woo a loved one back. Distance from the church is never distance from God's love.

**Value one soul.** Remember the worth that Jesus places on the individual. It is one thing to reflect that "God so loved the world," it is another to proclaim that God still loves the world and wants the very best for each person He died to save. The gospel emphasizes the significance of one individual. Consider Jesus' parable of the importance of one

JAMES A. CRESS



lost sheep out of a hundred total. Preach the present reality of God's grace and help people realize that they can return to faithfulness. Emphasize the potential that Heaven sees in every soul. God sees my sinfulness, but He promises that I can return just as I am.

**Prioritize personal contact.** Ron and Sue introduced themselves as "our friends." The apparent agenda of their visit was motivated by mutual friendship, and, thus, they found ready acceptance. Seek to learn as much as possible about those you hope to win. Remember, every person is someone's loved one. Others are praying for the success of your endeavor.

**Seek opportune moments.** Pray that God will move in advance of your visit. By praying and planning specific times to make evangelistic contacts and invitations, you enable the Holy Spirit to prepare hearts and minds for your visit.

**Make short visits.** A first contact need not be everlasting in order to have eternal results. A friendly introduction, a gracious invitation, and informative details of location, time, and program features are sufficient. Offer your availability for when they need a pastor.

**Await results patiently.** God's timing is not our timing. The seed you plant today may bear fruit on a schedule different from what you envision.

**Preach grace-based, hope-filled**

**messages.** When our friend began to attend church services again, she told us of her appreciation for the powerful messages and the emphasis on Jesus' love, power, and righteousness.

**Extend gospel invitations.** Our friend was so impressed that Pastor Ron opened the doors of his church, thus encouraging people to act on what they had heard from God's Word and to make spiritual decisions in response.

**Meet returnees halfway.** Don't create difficulties for those desiring to return. The prodigal's father ran out to meet his son and accompanied him home rejoicing. If people start toward home, make it easy for them to return and smooth the path for troubled souls. Protect them from those who would impose private opinions or scold them for what they may lack or may have done while they were gone.

**Restore the past.** Treat those who come to church as children of the King, which Christ's forgiveness and acceptance assures them they are. You cannot actually restore the lost years, but you can make their forgiveness real, build their faith, help them discover their spiritual gifts, and utilize their deepening love by deploying them to reach others.

**Involve gracious members.** Fellowship was an important factor in our friend's newfound relationship with her church family. She felt that others accepted her and their interaction encouraged her desire to grow spiritually. Ultimately, Jesus even led her to a life-partner right there in the church family.

**Rejoice.** Jesus says one returning sinner causes all heaven to rejoice. When backsliders return, the least the church can do is host a potluck lunch!

**Commit now.** As you approach the new year, intentionally design time in your schedule for making visits. They are so powerful, they can affect eternity! ❏

## Letters

*continued from page 3*

only "risk their lives" in a war, or do they kill also? Should we honor such the people that kill other people?

I am sorry that an Adventist pastor could write something like that.

—Julian Hatala, Poznan, Zeylanda, Poland.

**Editorial Note:** *It was certainly not our intention to even suggest a political or "American" bias in the publication of Loren Seibold's article, and truly regret the expression of anything in the article that might have led to that conclusion. We do urge our readers to refer to the whole of the section in the Seibold article (the section entitled "Understanding war") from which the above quote is derived. We may in future issues of Ministry discuss the question of the Christian's role in times of war.*

Abraham J. van der Kamp's letter, highlighted at the top of your Letters page, quotes a Roman Catholic colleague who inquired, "Do you believe that in the future, I am going to persecute you, or even kill you?"

Pastor van der Kamp responded by saying (in his letter), "I do not believe that you will do this, but I am expected to believe and proclaim this." Whether Pastor van der Kamp is expressing his own personal doubts about our prophetic stance, or merely expressing the difficulty he feels it puts him in, I'm not sure. I do know this: Sin is a mystery (2 Thess. 2:7; Rev. 17:5), and it cannot be explained or understood.

Imagine telling a young husband, beaming with love and fatherly pride as he stands next to his young wife while holding his firstborn child, that someday he will crush the heart of his wife and child by abandoning them for another woman. The young man would predictably, adamantly deny that he would ever do such a thing. Yet it happens far too many times. . . .

And about the end-time scenario as presented in *The Great Controversy*, Jesus told us in John 16:2, "that whoso-

ever kills you will think that he does God service." I believe it's coming, that it will happen just as we Seventh-day Adventists have presented it. It's not a psychiatrist we need to consult, but Jesus, on how we may more successfully give the warning to our pastor friends and the world.

—Douglas Carlson, Ludington, Michigan.

Rob Wilcox's excellent article "Lifestyle Standards: A Middle Approach" identifies one of our great needs as a church. He correctly points out that, from that all-too-often legalistic emphasis on standards, many have swung to the opposite extreme, and lifestyle standards have fallen, sometimes to the extent that there is little difference between the professing Adventist and the world. His statement that "the only proper context for lifestyle change is that of the converted heart. That transformed heart alone can produce a behavior that is pleasing to the Lord" is truly the heart of the matter.

When our people are truly converted and led by the Holy Spirit of Christ, then our dress standards, our dietary practices, our music, and every other aspect of our lifestyle will increasingly reflect the character of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. The members of our churches will be recognized, not by the lifestyle itself so much, as by the overall impression of a people who know and love God. Christ, and His righteousness will be not only our theme, but a living principle directing our lives. A people so possessed, so inspired of the Lord, will attract unbelievers and the disaffected into the church. They will indeed be a people prepared to meet the soon-coming Savior with joy and gladness.

We, as ministers of the gospel, need, ourselves, to be all that the previous paragraph describes; then only can we lead our people into that experience which they must possess before we are ready for Jesus to come.

—Edgar E. Hulbert, Watford, England.

Could Tim Crosby's "Church Discipline the Redemptive Way" (October 2002) be one of the more

important articles *Ministry* has printed? In my opinion, he covered almost all of the bases in a superb way. With tongue in cheek, I suggest the article should be required reading for every seminary student and SDA pastor, teacher, and administrator. . . .

Having been in leadership positions in local churches for some 40 years, I have struggled over the question of how to do "redemptive discipline" with the emphasis on "redemptive." In recent months, a powerful quote from the Spirit of Prophecy came to my attention. It clearly delineates improper (the first paragraph) and proper (the second paragraph) methods of discipline.

"Our words and works are to be channels through which the principles of truth are conveyed to the world. Those who do not cultivate personal piety cannot be lights in the world, but bodies of darkness. Those who allow themselves to be dictatorial, who accuse and judge their brethren, seeking with unsanctified heart and unholy temper to mend their wrongs, drive souls from God. Such believers are a source of weakness to the Lord's work, for they are not abiding in Christ.

"Do not think that you show love for one another by allowing that which God condemns. Do not let sin strengthen in the church. God requires His servants to exercise faithful watchcare. But be sure to manifest Christ's love. Go to the erring one, and pray with him. Draw him to Jesus. Press together, heart bound to heart in the love of Christ. Then will be seen in the church the mighty power of God. Then many souls will be brought to the truth" (*Manuscript Releases*, 18:150).

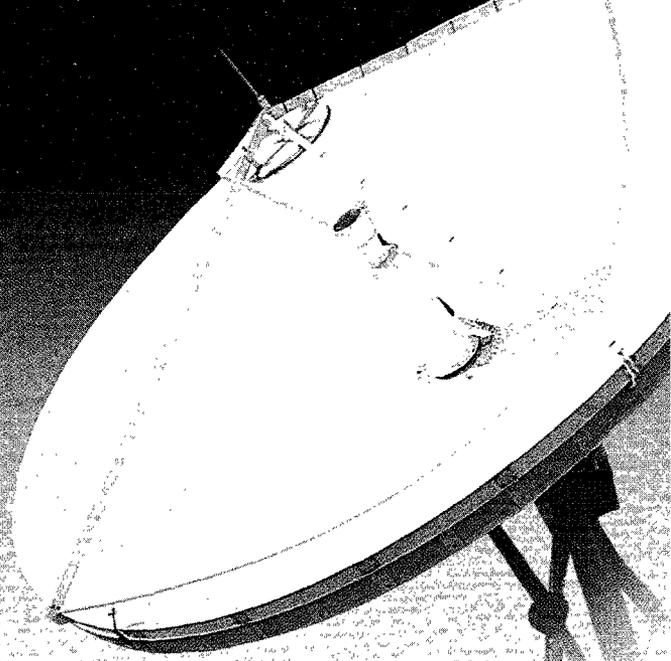
The last two sentences are powerful. For years we have talked about church growth but really haven't seen much. Here is one of the keys, if not the key to turn around the dismal record of church growth we have seen in this country. Surely every committed Seventh-day Adventist, be he/she pastor or layperson, wants to see our church grow and see the mighty power of God demonstrated in the church. ■

—Donald E. Casebolt, Farmington, New Mexico.

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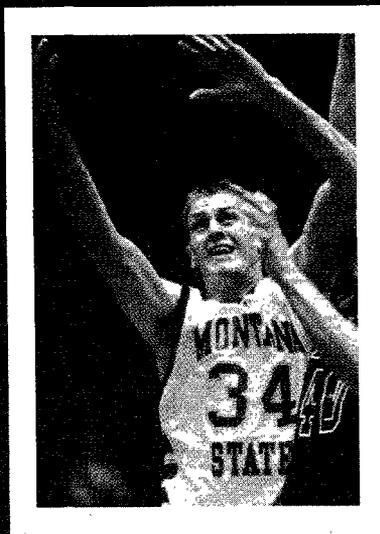
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**TOM DUFFY**

Tom entered Montana State University on a basketball scholarship. When game days were changed by the NCAA to Friday night and Saturday day games he was relieved as starting "center" by the coach because he refused to violate his conscience and play during Sabbath hours.

**CANDACE & CHAD YOUNG**

In December 2001 this young couple was baptized together. Chad was immediately fired for refusing to work overtime on Saturday. His unemployment benefits were initially denied, but after citing *Hobbie* and *Sherbert* the decision was reversed and Chad received his benefits. Candace ran into Sabbath work problems within 8 months of being baptized. At the time of printing both cases were still ongoing.



**ANNA TATUM**

With 15 years seniority, Anna works as a clerk and now a supervisor for a police department. She became an Adventist in January 2002 and within weeks found out a Saturday work schedule was in the plans. Anna's seniority should be enough to give her a Sabbath accommodation, but officials in the department have set an arbitrary rule that she must work on Sabbath. At the time of this printing, the case was still ongoing.



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