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The mission and ministry of the Biblical Research Institute
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Ministerial Student Writing Contest

Ministry, International Journal for Pastors, announces its second Ministerial Student Writing Contest. All students enrolled in a full-time ministerial preparation program on the undergraduate or graduate level may participate.

Submission requirements
1. Writers must choose a category from the list below for their submission:
   a. Biblical studies
   b. Historical studies
   c. Theological studies (including ethics)
   d. Ministry (preaching, leadership, counseling, evangelism, etc.)
   e. World missions
2. All submissions must follow the Writer’s Guidelines as to length, endnotes, style, and other features of the manuscript. Please carefully read the guidelines found at www.ministrymagazine.org.
3. Submit your manuscript in MS Word to www.MinistryMagazine.org/swc. Please include the following information at the top of the manuscript: your name, address, email address, telephone number, category for which you are submitting (see above), religious affiliation, name of college/university/seminary you are attending, and title of your manuscript.
4. Ministry will accept only one submission per writer.

Prizes

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The evaluation panel will determine if all prizes will be awarded. The decisions of this panel are final.

Publication
1. All submissions become the property of Ministry and will not be returned.
2. Writers who are awarded a prize give the rights to Ministry as outlined in the Writer’s Guidelines. While the editors intend to publish such manuscripts, publication is not guaranteed.
3. Manuscripts that are not awarded a prize may be purchased at a price to be negotiated.

Submission deadline
All submissions must be received no later than JUNE 30, 2014.

Submissions due by JUNE 30
Don’t be left out!
The importance of sound doctrine

Not long after the founding of the Christian church, the apostle Paul gave some wise counsel to a young preacher named Timothy about the importance of preaching and teaching sound biblical doctrine: “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). Then the aged apostle prophesied about a falling away from sound doctrine: “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (vv. 3, 4).

Paul’s counsel and warning to Timothy is just as relevant for preachers today. We need to preach and teach the Word of God with clarity and power. The turning away from sound doctrine that began even in Paul’s day seems to be accelerating in our day. Another of Paul’s prophecies is also being fulfilled: “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:29, 30).

In this issue of Ministry, we want to introduce you to the Biblical Research Institute (BRI), a team of biblical scholars who serve the Seventh-day Adventist Church—encouraging pastors, church leaders, and the church membership at large to hold fast to sound biblical doctrine. Many excellent resources have been produced by BRI that can assist you to preach and teach the Word of God with clarity and power. By the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit, let’s study the Word of God deeply and then proclaim that Word with clarity and power.

Several other articles in this issue provide the opportunity for us to think deeply about the Word of God. We welcome the contributions of several district church pastors. Lennox Abrigo challenges us to view the words of Jesus recorded in John 14:1–3 as a betrothal promise to His bride. This perspective not only provides hope regarding His return but also gives us joy in His love and concern for us as His bride.

Stephen N. Allred addresses the issue of church discipline in his article on liberty of conscience and church discipline in the Adventist Church. His candid discussion of the tension between freedom of conscience and church discipline will challenge you to critically ponder this important topic.

Regarding our mission as Christ’s bride, while we wait for His glorious appearing, Ivan Leigh Warden encourages us to regard ourselves as kingdom builders. What does kingdom building involve? One thing is certain—it is quite different from the popular kingdom building of our self-centered, self-serving cultures. This thoughtful article will challenge you to move beyond "maintenance to mission."

Closely related to the theme of kingdom building is the article by Lilya Wagner, “Caring Is Not a Spectator Sport.” Wagner carefully examines a number of vibrant churches in the United States of America where caring is not just a theoretical concept or an appealing slogan—it is a way of life. These snapshots illustrate how it is possible to take the clear teaching of Jesus and put it into practice.

Writing from a northern European perspective, Vesa Annala notes that taking the message and the mission of Jesus to our cities and villages is a unique challenge in a secular environment. His article, titled “Evangelism in a Secular Context,” examines the problem and also explores some practical ways to connect with secular people.

You’ll find this month’s issue of Ministry packed with helpful material that can assist you as you preach, teach, and serve faithfully. As you step out in faith, be assured of our prayers. 

Tell us what you think about this article. Email MinistryMagazine@gc.adventist.org or visit www.facebook.com/MinistryMagazine.
Searching the Scriptures, serving the church: The mission and ministry of the Biblical Research Institute

**Editor’s note:** The editors of Ministry interviewed the theologians who comprise the staff of the Biblical Research Institute. They are Artur Stele, director; Ekkehardt Mueller, deputy director; and associate directors Elias Brasil de Souza, Kwabena Donkor, and Clinton Wahlen.

**Derek Morris (DM):** Tell us about the Biblical Research Institute (BRI). How did it come about? How long has it been functioning?

**Ekkehardt Mueller (EM):** BRI was established in 1975 by action of the General Conference Committee to facilitate theological research, apologetics, and service to the church. Its roots go back to 1943 when the Defense Literature Committee was established, and to the Committee on Biblical Study and Research, founded in 1952.

**DM:** How well-known is BRI among our church leaders and pastors around the world?

**Kwabena Donkor (KD):** As recently as ten to fifteen years ago, many of our people didn’t know much about the organization. That picture has recently changed because of an increase in BRI Bible conferences held around the world, and because of more involvement by the Institute in publishing theological and research works.

**DM:** What is the primary purpose of BRI?

**Clinton Wahlen (CW):** As church growth increases around the world in varying cultures, one of the fundamental challenges is to foster and maintain theological unity and faithfulness to God’s Word. Holding Bible conferences is one of many ways of doing that. We work closely with biblical research committees organized at the division level and periodically hold theological/biblical conferences in each division to deepen the study of the Bible, address local theological issues, and foster theological unity. We also hold Bible conferences for Adventist Bible teachers on the college and university level, publish books, and have a wealth of resources on our Web site, AdventistBiblicalResearch.org. Our quarterly publication, Reflections, is also available on our Web site. These resources help pastors and Bible teachers with questions they may have and the issues they face in their ministry. We also act as consultants when pastors or church leaders have questions, as they are encouraged to contact us.

**EM:** As mentioned earlier, we can summarize our tasks in three categories: theological research, apologetics, and service to the church. Theological research includes identifying and researching areas that need strengthening, and out of that grow practical applications. Let’s say we want to broaden our understanding, for instance, of ecclesiology, where we feel we are a little weak; then research is commissioned in that area, involving the best of our church scholars. Two books on this subject are now available on our Web site.

Apologetics is another category. Some people think that is the major part of what we do, but apologetics is only one of several areas of our engagement at the world church headquarters.
And then service: we help leadership at the world church and serve the world field by providing resource materials and Bible conferences. We take care of pastors and scholars.

**KD:** In recent times, BRI has released some significant publications that have increased its profile around the world. These publications cover such fields as ecclesiology and hermeneutics.

**EM:** A word about our organization. At the General Conference level, we have the Biblical Research Institute. Each division has a biblical research committee (BRC). They all meet in their respective territories twice a year. In addition, we have a worldwide committee (BRICOM) of forty leading scholars and administrators including representatives from all the BRCs. It meets twice a year here in North America.

**Artur Stele (AS):** Just recently an ethics committee was established to bring the best ethicists of the church to serve as a sounding board to help develop answers to ethical issues that arise from time to time. This committee functions approximately like BRICOM. Another function of BRI is to keep the church’s focus on Sola Scriptura. Scholars in systematic and biblical theology are at work to maintain the Bible as the essence and foundation of all our theological understanding and of all the information we share with the church.

**Willie Hucks (WH):** We sometimes don’t think of the local pastor as a theologian—just a practitioner. What counsel can you give pastors as it relates to conducting effective theology within their congregations?

**AS:** Well, unfortunately, we dichotomize practitioners (pastors) and theologians. Actually, every pastor, in a sense, needs to be a theologian, for pastors are theology’s trumpets, so to speak. They proclaim the Word, so their work, whether preaching, counseling, or praying, needs to be theologically sound. If pastors seriously take the Word as the Word of God, they must study it. And the very fact that a pastor studies the Word seriously, he or she is, in effect, doing theology. We at BRI would like our pastors to be involved in biblical study and research—begin with reading the wide literature BRI provides and participating in Bible conferences.

Reading theological literature is important, but a deep and regular study of the Word of God must never be neglected. We cannot say that theologians work at the table and the pastors go and work in the field. In reality, both are doing the same work. So, the key is to prayerfully study the Scripture and all available materials.

**EK:** Our regular newsletter may be a little more technical than Ministry in some respects, but not always. Reflections goes to all the pastors around the world. When I was a pastor, I was always interested in seeing what was going on in the church by reading materials produced by the church. Even among theologians, there’s sometimes a divide: you have the biblical scholars with systematicians on one side, and then practical, applied theologians on the other side. We have tried to bring them to work more closely together. You cannot have one without the other.

**KD:** What we are seeking to do in the Sola Scriptura committee that meets twice a year is to see if we can find a basic bottom line, a common methodological framework for the way we approach Scripture. This does not mean that all theologians should be using the same method. Biblical scholars have
methods suited for their discipline, just as systematic, historical, and practical theologians employ different methods in their disciplines. What we are seeking is a common intellectual/philosophical point of departure. When we begin from the same point with the same perspective on methodology, we can arrive at the same goal.

WH: What pastoral needs or challenges does BRI address?

KD: A common need pastors have is proper hermeneutics. And for that, BRI has published two volumes under the titles Understanding Scripture and Interpreting Scripture. Volume one is more about theological understanding—how you would interpret prophecy, poetry, psalms, parables, for example. Volume two deals with the more difficult texts and passages. This particular publication has been very helpful to pastors.

CW: Pastors should especially have Interpreting Scripture, because it deals with the most difficult questions they face, such as, How do we relate to the Bible? Are there errors in the Bible? BRI has also published other important works like Message, Mission, and Unity of the Church—a very practical book on how to accomplish our ministry and mission.

KD: Some pastoral needs are regional in nature. This may require contextualizing the message within a region, addressing their unique needs. For example, the creeping in of African tribal religious beliefs and practices into the Christian church.

AS: BRI is also working with Logos Bible Software to have our books in electronic format for iPads and iPhones so that readers may have easy and better access to them.

WH: What are some of the big theological challenges facing the church today?

EM: Hermeneutics is one. For example, in the recent ordination debate, we have different camps, and all of them claim to use the same method of interpretation but arrive at completely different conclusions. This is dangerous, for it may pave the way for saying, “Let’s forget the Adventist method of interpreting Scripture and go somewhere else.”

CW: That is why the church has set up an extensive study process. We are a Bible-based denomination. We believe that who we are arises from Scripture. So the answers to every question of faith and practice should be founded on Scripture. The basic question of our identity is something people are asking everywhere I go. For example, many do not
younger generation. Worship is another challenge. How we worship speaks volumes. Sometimes we practice things that, theologically, would raise big questions. We need to find a way of worshipping in truth and spirit.

**EBdS:** Also, the Judeo-Christian worldview is no longer taken for granted. In fact, there is a growing rejection of the biblical worldview in modern society. So it is a real challenge to communicate theology in this so-called postmodern culture.

**EM:** Another challenge for us as a church is that members don’t read the Bible, and there’s a kind of disinterest in theology and doctrines.

**DM:** It has been my observation that many pastors stop reading after they finish seminary. They get into the busyness of pastoral ministry. What practical things did you do in your ministry that kept time for careful Bible study?

**CW:** We’ve all been pastors. I know what it means to preach once or twice a week in addition to leading out in prayer meetings, and so on. It is not easy. People need to carve out time for enrichment and continuing education regardless of which profession they are in, but particularly in ministry where they are expected to be available twenty-four/seven. That’s one reason why we publish books and a quarterly newsletter.

As far as resources, a good Bible software system is a great help. I personally like Accordance Bible software. Others prefer Bible Works, Logos, or PC Study Bible. Whatever the system, it should enable you to dig more deeply into the original languages and provide a range of scholarly, exegetical, theological, and devotional helps. Other resources include *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* and *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*; the Ellen G. White app; *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*; a good study Bible such as *The Andrews Study Bible* produced by Andrews University; and *The Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (with five volumes for the Old Testament and four for the New). Also available is *The Bible Background Commentary* with one volume for each of the Testaments). The *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, found at www.atsjats.org, is another valuable resource.

**KD:** When a pastor stops reading, his or her ministry enters into a dangerous zone of what I call the “maintenance mode.” Many Adventist churches can go on and on without any vision. Vision is what provides a goal and direction to pastoral ministry. And as long as you keep that goal alive, you cannot help but study, because you have to put together programs and activities that will lead you to that goal. But when we go into a mode where we sing routinely and preach any kind of sermon, that’s the real sign: it’s time to read, study, and create a vision.

**EM:** When I left college I made a commitment to myself: I’m not going to preach without looking up the text in the original language. That takes time, I know, but in the end you’re blessed. As a pastor I set aside the morning for studying. Pastors should challenge themselves. They could offer a seminar on topics one cannot deal with in the sermon. I had Sabbath afternoon seminars on solid Bible topics. To do that, I had to study and prepare. When seminar attendees asked, “Can we ask questions?” I would say, “OK. Ask questions. I will try to answer them.” I never knew what was coming, so I had to prepare.

We do that sometimes at Bible conferences too. Things like that help...
us train church members. Teach them some exegesis. In order to do that, I must know the task myself. To enable the pastors to do this, the administration has the responsibility to facilitate continuing education for all pastors in all branches of theology, not just in practices. This is somewhat lacking in our church. Every profession requires constant upgrading. Ministry cannot afford to lag behind.

AS: When we say to pastors, “You must read,” they may react by saying that their schedule is busy. But we need to develop a culture that says, “You cannot afford not to read.” If don’t visit members and don’t read, I don’t know what to preach. If I visit members and read constantly, I always know what to preach. Pastors cannot afford not to read, because it makes their lives so much easier. And, by the way, church members recognize very quickly if their pastor stops reading because he or she preaches the same thing from different passages.

CW: Writing will also help, because clear thinking is assisted by writing, and vice versa. As we write it out, our thoughts become clear. And I know that Ministry is always looking for good articles from pastors. In the process of writing, we have to do more reading. Pick areas of interest that the congregation wants to know more about. Write it out and preach it.

EBds: Pastors should be required to set goals for themselves. In some parts of the world, they are used to baptism goals, tithe goals, and they know how to measure those goals. So I would start at the beginning of the year with some specific goals. Let’s say this year I will study certain themes or sections of the Scriptures in Hebrew or Greek. If it is important to have goals in regard to baptism, tithe, congregations, visitation, we should have intellectual goals too. Personally, as ministers, we should evaluate ourselves at the end of every year. It may be that the conference or union does not put emphasis on that, but we should personally do that for our own sake and to be of better service to the church.

WH: What counsel would you give to students preparing for pastoral ministry, and especially those who have an interest in pursuing advanced or terminal biblical or theological studies?

EBds: Before coming to BRI, I taught in the Theological Seminary at Northeast Brazil College. Students would ask, “What advice do you have for me, because I want to become a scholar?” My answer would have four points.

First, have a strong devotional life. Students are used to a more devotional approach to the Scriptures in their home congregations. When they preach and teach at home, they do it in a devotional way. This feeds them and the congregation. But when they come to the seminary, they tend to develop a more academic approach to Bible study. In that context, they often risk neglecting the personal appropriation of the Scriptures. They shouldn’t forget studying the Bible devotionally and keeping up their prayer life.

Second, develop a high view of the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures and learn to think bibliically.

Third, read as much as you can. Sometimes we received students who were not fond of reading. They just wanted to get a diploma and work in the field. They were not committed to the academic process. Someone who wants to pursue an academic career needs to enjoy learning, reading, and doing research to find scriptural answers to theological issues.

Fourth, be focused on what you are going to do. What is the area of your interest: Old Testament, New Testament, systematics, or philosophy? You need to start reading as much as you can in that area. When a person becomes competent in the chosen area of study, the church is well served. When you study the Bible, when you investigate, you are involved in intellectual work. You can honor God by what you do in any of these fields. So take it very seriously.

KD: There are people acquiring degrees and not studying theology with the point of view of the integrity of Adventist theology. Adventists have a unique way of doing theology. So wherever you are, keep in mind the integrity of Adventist theology.

CW: Especially if you’re going to pursue an advanced degree, write a thesis or dissertation, make sure that it is a topic that not only you are interested in but one that your readers will be as well. If you’re going to invest that length of time, make it a topic that will be helpful for the church and theology and understanding our purpose as Adventists.

EM: Whatever you do, strive for excellence. We are not here to be placed on a pedestal—we are here to serve. Try to do the best you can. Remain humble. Learn from each other. Listen to the church, and colleagues. This is the advantage we have in BRI, that we can bounce ideas off of each other.

CW: To illustrate that point, a Bible teacher whom I respected very much once said, “You can call me ‘Doctor,’ but I would prefer if you would call me ‘Pastor’ or ‘Elder’ because the trust that was placed in me when I was ordained to the ministry in the Adventist Church means the most. More than any doctoral degree, more than any academic degree, the calling of God as a pastor is the most important one to me.” That’s the ideal I want to emulate.

DM: Thank you for your practical counsel to present and future pastors, and for sharing about the important ministry of the Biblical Research Institute.

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Evangelism in a secular context

Sweden, perhaps, is known as the most secular country in the world. According to one study covering 1986 to 2011, the average Swede attended a worship service or religious meeting seven times a year. These visits include funerals, weddings, baptismal services, and Christian holidays, for example. Another study showed that 23 percent of Swedes believed in God, 19 percent say they do not believe in God, while 53 percent believe in some kind of spirit or life force. All in all, Swedes take first place in admitting that they are atheists, agnostics, or nonbelievers. Next come people from Vietnam, Denmark, and Norway.

Often described as “postmodern,” the secular individual is known as an individual who has a strong, individualist outlook on life. Characterized by gadgetry, the postmodern has and would like even more gadgets. Often people say that the postmodern individual no longer believes in the “big stories” we find in the various religious books (including the Bible). This mentality has led many to throw the major Bible stories into the “historian’s hotchpotch,” as the former archbishop of Sweden, K. G. Hammar, is credited to have once expressed.

While saying that the postmodern individual has lost his or her faith in the big stories of the Bible, individuals find it easy to forget that a large majority of people (at least in Sweden) believe in the big story that was created by modernity, that is, the naturalistic story of how our earth came to being. In this naturalistic big story, the big bang cosmology, life’s spontaneous formation in nonliving material, Darwinian evolution, and the origin of humans from apelike ancestors occupy a central position.

In Sweden, 70 percent of the people believe in this postmodernistic story. The faith in evolution often takes a religious flavor. “Do you believe in Darwin?” is a question I face. This is like asking, “Do you believe in God?” The funny thing is that when you deny faith in Darwin, it feels like you are almost committing a mortal sin, or at least intellectual hara-kiri. Charles Darwin and his followers can be regarded as this big story’s “prophets” to whom Nature has revealed her own story of its coming without God’s involvement.

Based on these modern presuppositions, Sweden is a country where a large majority of people are rather post-Christian than postmodern. Sweden has left behind the Christian story and embraced a new story. When we are talking about the post-Christian, we know that we are talking about people who no longer believe or embrace the Christian faith and its most central beliefs in God’s existence, God’s creation, the human fall, sin, Jesus, and so forth.

These post-Christians are today’s challenge to be reached with the gospel.

God answers prayer and speaks through His Word

When my wife, Aila, and I moved to Kalmar, Sweden, in June 2011, we had all this knowledge in our “baggage.” Our congregation in Kalmar is small, and the majority was elderly. We knew that the congregation would die out if we did not get new people from outside. So, the question and the great challenge was, How do we reach out to these post-Christians?

After we moved, we learned that a small prayer group composed of people from other Christian churches in Kalmar had, for a time, been praying that the Lord would send someone to Kalmar who would come with new ideas to reach out to people. We knew nothing about this prayer group but then came in contact with one member of that group. She told us that they believed we were God’s answer to their prayers.

The message in Mark 4:26–28 was also helpful. It says that the only thing the sower does is to scatter the seed. After the sowing is completed, he does nothing more. He just goes out and sees how the seeds germinate and grow, but he does not know how all this takes place. What a relief to know that our part is to scatter the seed, and the “soil” (the Lord’s care) will do the rest.
The Lord asked us to “scatter the seed,” and when we have done this, our work is finished. All by itself the soil would bear the harvest. At the moment I am writing this, we are in the midst of this “scattering” work.

**Reaching post-Christians with the gospel**

With these thoughts in the background, we contacted political parties and other authorities in the society and invited them to our church to participate in an open discussion about the big questions of life. The response was overwhelming positive. We had no difficulty to get participants. One of the politicians told me afterwards that this was the first time they had talked to each other about the meaning of life.

A panel consisting of myself, a humanist, and a physician led out in discussions on death. I have also debated a humanist (an atheist and former Christian) on topics such as, Does God’s exist? and Did Jesus rise from the dead? I have given lectures on indoctrination, theophobia, and Creation and the Flood, for example. Three times I have joined an atheistic professor to give public lectures on morality, the nature of humans, and suffering as an existential experience.

The most important thing for me has been the opportunity to present the gospel of Jesus to these post-Christian people. Thus, by interacting with people without any prejudice toward their beliefs or lack thereof, I found a meaningful way to share my faith. In this way, the society was able to see the church’s relevance. By relevance I mean faithfulness to the Bible and the gospel. Nothing can be more relevant than the faithful preaching and witnessing for Jesus.

**Basic principles**

Of course, we do have some basic principles behind our work—to regain the respect the Christian faith had early in Sweden and to show openness toward the post-Christian society. During the last decades, the state-church system has destroyed the credibility of the Christian faith. Also, the free churches are losing members and are considered as small ghettos of those already saved. So, we started working in an open way to create credibility. Credibility provides answers the Christian faith gives to life’s big questions. Openness allows post-Christians to participate in activities in the church building, such as an atheist being given the opportunity to sit in a church and question the church’s most basic doctrines.

**The importance of personal conviction**

Conviction is the key. If I, as a Christian, cannot show a genuine belief, how can I convict those who are listening to me?

There is a lot of difference between faith without reflection and faith with conviction that is built on good historical and factual base. Conviction has another important aspect. While I am convinced as a Christian, I am also convinced that other specific belief systems and philosophies are not fully true and might even be false. Not many, perhaps, are aware that the Christian faith contains a worldview that provides answers to life’s great questions: What is truth? What is knowledge? How do we get knowledge? Where do we come from? Where are we going? Who am I? Is there a God? Who is He? Who was/is Jesus? What is science? What is evolution? What is data? The Christian faith is a belief system, a worldview about the whole reality. You cannot read the Bible with open eyes without being convicted of that.

To have the correct perspective on evangelism, you need to first realize that the Christian faith has an all-inclusive worldview. Our world struggles between different worldviews, ideas, and perceptions of reality. As Christians, we believe that God has given us, in the Scripture, a basic revelation of the reality of the Person of the Godhead, how the world came into being, the existence of evil, the reality of love, the meaning of history, and the future of life. Our faith must be based on the Scripture. As Paul writes in Colossians 1:13–17, our Lord Jesus Christ is at the core of our faith.

**Approaches and results**

In order to reach out to the wider public, we have used advertising and posters. In our panel discussions, participants present their views on the topic. Then they can ask each other questions and provide clarification. One important part has been to allow the public to take part in the discussion, with a person moderating the discussion.

We were surprised by the positive response received. Engagement from the public has been admirable. Many of the participants have praised our church for our openness toward the secular community.

On one occasion when we debated God’s existence, our small church with room for 80 people was almost packed by nonbelievers. On average, we have had some 30 people attend, of which a large majority is post-Christian, often middle-aged. About 65 to 70 percent of our audience are men. This shows that the basic questions of life and current issues in society appeal to men in our city. We have had meetings where only nonbelievers have attended. Even humanists attend our meetings, the very people who form our fikarum critics of Christians.

When it comes to the question-and-answer sessions, most of the questions have been directed to me. To lift up the gospel of our Lord has been a wonderful occasion. Questions have been about my faith, our church’s view on homosexuality, euthanasia, hell (a standard objection to the Christian faith), science, etc.

One result of such meetings was the opportunity I was given to speak on the local radio station regarding what and why we are facilitating these meetings. At the end of one of these radio talks, a journalist asked me if proselytization was the reason we are conducting these public meetings. The journalist was surprised when I agreed with what he said. I continued to tell the radio listeners that Jesus wanted all the people to be His disciples. Paul was praying
that people should be like he was (the disciple of Jesus), and this was the very same thing we wanted. We hope that all in Kalmar should be disciples of Jesus. The journalist certainly expected a reply in which I would try to evade his claim. And this is important. We must have the courage to say honestly and sincerely that we want to do what Jesus said in the Great Commission: make all people His disciples.

As a fruit of this activity, we have been able to form a group that meets regularly to read and study the Bible. We read only a few short passages, ask questions, and talk about what we have read. This has been proved to be very popular. Rumors have spread that in the Adventist Church one can hear the gospel clearly presented.

In spite of all these positive experiences, however, we know that it is a long way for post-Christians to submit themselves to God and receive Jesus as their Savior. We have no illusions here. The post-Christians must be able to recognize that their worldview has been false.

Can others use the same concept?

Of course, some wonder if the same method can also be used elsewhere. If you want to reach out to post-Christians, my answer is Yes. This kind of work requires, however, that one is aware of issues post-Christians have embraced and believe in. Doing your homework becomes very important, along with mastering the arguments and knowing the opponents’ arguments. At the same time, we must recognize the importance of not overestimating the opponents and their knowledge. Personally, my experience has been that people, in general, are not fully aware of the Christian faith and its worldview when it comes to arguing its claims.

Of all worldviews, the materialistic story of evolution has received the widest acceptance among post-Christians, at least here in Sweden. This unfounded belief system is embraced uncritically through educational systems and media. When working with post-Christians, you must be aware of their concept?

We need to prepare for the impossible.

1. “What do you see?” asked the angel.
   “I see the golden lampstands, the lamps, the olive trees on the right and left. But what is this all about?”
   “This is power, and yet it may be much better not to speak or think of it as power. This is Spirit doing, utterly outside your notions of might and power. And you haven’t seen anything yet.” (See Zechariah 4.)

   Zechariah’s messenger teaches us that God allows Himself freedom to do a God thing among His people. Yes, gas, electricity, electronics, and dynamite may have their place in what God wants to do. Any of them may serve as metaphor for speed, force, or explosiveness hidden in God.

   But genuine revival is as incomprehensible as God Himself. Genuine revival is unfathomable in the quality of its experience because life originates exclusively with God. What we have is nothing to what we shall yet have. Genuine revival and reformation are unfathomable in their consequences, not simply because we do not know about tomorrow, but because God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are His ways our ways. His are as much higher than ours as heaven is higher than earth. (See Isaiah 55:8, 9.)

   Whatever that means, it signifies that God’s figuring on adequate strong conviction in this materialistic story. For them this is the Truth, with a capital T.

   My work with post-Christians has convinced me, personally, that people want to know the truth: the truth about our world, society, God, and human life. In loyalty to Jesus’ calling us to witness for Him, we must be penetrated by sincerity, conviction, and humility. These are the qualities the post-Christians value in life, and as a Christian you must ensure you have those qualities. Most of all: you must know Jesus personally. You must be able to tell the story of Jesus always and everywhere.

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4. Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm, ed., Världsbild och mening (Sweden: Bokförlaget New Doxa, 2001). This figure is still higher among young people.
5. Fika is a Swedish word used when people are sitting around a coffee table and chatting.
Persecution in the Adventist Church?

I recall a conversation with a church member who expressed frustration with the Adventist denomination. The church, he felt, was limiting people’s freedom of conscience. He wished that the Adventist Church would stop meddling in personal lives by making beliefs and lifestyle issues tests of fellowship (even though I am not sure how many Adventist churches in the Western world actually do that anymore). Instead, he said, the church should allow members to choose what they believe and how to live.

The freedom-loving church member obviously understood freedom of conscience differently than I did, and he also misunderstood the nature and role of the church and of biblical church discipline. But he also had a point. Some things are so explicit in the Word of God that the Adventist Church has chosen to make those issues tests of membership. Other issues, however, are not so clear and should be left up to each individual’s conscience.

What is freedom of conscience and persecution?

For starters, there is the question of freedom of conscience, which involves the premise that all human beings have the right to believe or not believe as their conscience dictates. No one ever has the right to force another individual to violate his or her conscience.

God gives His creatures the freedom to choose in matters of faith. Lucifer and millions of his angels were allowed the freedom to choose to rebel against God. Adam and Eve, and their offspring, were created with a free conscience. Unfortunately, most of us misuse our freedom of conscience, but even so, God does not take away our freedom.

During the Dark Ages, when the church and state in many parts of the world were united, the church routinely persecuted dissenters either directly or through the arm of the state. Much evil resulted from this unholy alliance of the secular power (the state) with the religious power (the church). The church leadership decided what people should believe and how they should live and then made sure that all within their jurisdiction complied. Those who did not were harassed, hunted down, arrested, fined, imprisoned, tortured, or executed.

In the United States, where church and state are supposed to be separate, it is much more difficult for a church to persecute dissent. In the American context, you can choose to be a member of any church that you like; and you can choose to leave any church at any time that you desire. Of course, there are still incidents of church organizations using intimidation and harassment. But any church that goes too far will run afoul of the law.

The church and discipline

So, is it persecution for a church to engage in biblical church discipline? Is a church’s effort to remain doctrinally pure guaranteed to violate someone’s freedom of conscience?

This needs to be looked at carefully. Churches usually come into existence because a group of people who believe a certain way or have a similar goal organize themselves into a church. Hence, we have the United Methodist Church, the Lutheran Church, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church, for example. New members can become a part of their church denomination if they accept the church’s doctrines and subscribe to a certain creed or lifestyle, depending on what the particular church denomination decides. Some churches have a policy that those who do not ultimately adhere to the beliefs or practices of the church are to be disciplined or disfellowshipped.

Pastor Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church, for example, requires that members sign a covenant that requires, among other things, faithful attendance, service, living a godly lifestyle, and regular giving.1 In the Adventist Church, becoming a member currently
requires agreeing to, at a minimum, the 13 baptismal vows and, some would argue, the 28 fundamental beliefs. In the Adventist Church context, discipline usually refers to admonishing an erring member that his or her lifestyle or belief is out of line with church teachings or standards and, perhaps, disqualifying the erring member from holding church office. All this, of course, is with the goal of helping the erring member to change his or her mind. Discipline can also involve removing the member from church fellowship if they choose not to repent.

The idea of the church meting out correction to those who voluntarily join its ranks has scriptural support. For example, Jesus noted that if two members have a conflict between them, the one wishing to redeem the other can ultimately “tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17, NIV). While it is not clear what Jesus meant by treating them like a pagan, what is clear is that the church, as a corporate body, does have a redemptive and corrective role to play in the interpersonal and personal issues of its members.

Another even more explicit command in Scripture regarding engaging in church discipline is given in Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth. Paul noted that it had been reported to him that a member of the Corinthian church was involved in sexually immoral behavior, a very personal issue. And yet, Paul did not hesitate to tell the Corinthian church to get involved. “Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?” (1 Cor. 5:2, NIV).

What gave the church and its leadership the right to address such personal issues? Perhaps it was that the church of biblical times viewed the church as a family where love and accountability were all a part of the mix. And maybe the church of Bible times saw people within the body of believers as being disciples rather than mere members. The concept of becoming a disciple and experiencing loving discipline go hand in hand. Perhaps those of us who live in highly individualistic societies, where we often resent communal input, have something to learn about how today’s church ought to function more as a community and family and how discipline is a part of discipleship.

Church discipline and your conscience

Is it, then, a violation of freedom of conscience for a church to lovingly hold a member accountable to live according to the church’s beliefs and admonish the erring member to change their sinful lifestyle? What about when a church removes from its fellowship a member who stubbornly refuses to repent? In the Bible, the church has authority over spiritual matters within its borders and is tasked with lovingly holding its members accountable. Of course, inflicting criminal or civil penalties in order to harass or coerce does not fall within the church’s jurisdiction.

Keep in mind that to violate someone’s conscience, coercion needs to be involved. Where that is absent, a violation of conscience is not at issue. And while it may seem coercive for the church to tell one of its members that they are being removed from fellowship (perhaps against their will), no one should force them with threat of civil, criminal, or physical punishment to change their beliefs but merely ask them to resign their membership. Just as they joined the church freely, they are able to leave freely (or choose to change the offending behavior).

But what about a church employee who lives in violation of church teachings? In that case, there are legal repercussions, such as loss of employment and resulting financial hardship. Some might think that losing a job for failure to live in accordance with a church employer’s teachings equates with persecution, but is that really the case, especially if the member employee knew at the outset of employment that adherence to church beliefs was imperative to maintain employment?

Tests of fellowship versus debatable matters

In the Adventist Church, the challenge, it seems, is determining which beliefs, standards, or lifestyle issues ought to rise to the level of tests of fellowship. As mentioned at the outset, there are certain doctrines and beliefs that each church lays out in its fundamental teachings or creed that it views as non-negotiable. The Adventist Church has decided that adherence to 28 such fundamental teachings, or at least 13 baptismal vows, is a baseline for membership in the denomination. Logically, a church either ought to be faithful to its acknowledged fundamental beliefs or change them. The same goes for members. To do otherwise is disingenuous and leads to a confused
sense of identity and mission in both the organization and the individual.

On the other hand, most Adventists in the Western world would also agree that if the Adventist Church desires to follow Scripture, certain issues that the Bible has left unclear should be left to individual conscience. In Romans 14, Paul referred to these as "disputable matters" (NIV), and they are what we would refer to today as theological gray areas. In Paul’s day, these disputable matters included food sacrificed to idols and observances of Old Testament feast days exclusively connected with the Jewish temple (see Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8; and Colossians 2:14–17). Paul’s advice to the church in these areas was that "each [member] should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5, NIV).

For Adventists today, deciding what constitutes a disputable matter can be a contentious process. It seems that for now, at least, the 28 fundamental beliefs (or maybe only the 13 baptismal vows) are theoretically not debatable. Consequently, if Adventist members feel judged when they are asked to live in harmony with these baseline teachings, it does not make a lot of sense to cry that they are being persecuted. No one forced them to become a part of the church that embraces and upholds these teachings.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, a commitment to freedom of conscience will lead us to respect the opinions and choices of those with whom we disagree. Disagreement, however, is not the same as persecution. And when a church organization makes clear what the church stands for and what it expects of its members, that is not persecution, either. If individuals find themselves in a church that does not fit their beliefs, they ought to consider either (a) that they have some growing to do, or (b) that it is time to find another church. But they should not complain that their freedom of conscience is being violated. No one is taking away their right to choose what they believe for themselves. 

1 Rick Warren, "One Way to Increase the Commitment Level of Your Members," Pastors.com, pastors.com/one-way-to-increase-the-commitment-level-of-your-members/.
2 See the Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual, 18th ed. (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2010), 46, 47 at www.adventist.org/ChurchManual_2010.pdf.
3 "Beliefs," Seventh-day Adventist Church, www.adventist.org/beliefs/fundamental/.
4 If you are wondering how the church discipline that the ancient Israelites inflicted upon dissenters fits into this discussion, see the article by Ellen G. White, "If a Theocracy Was Good for Ancient Israel, Why Not for America?" sacredconscience.com/2012/11/07/if-a-theocracy-was-good-for-ancient-israel-why-not-for-america/.

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Kingdom building

Ellen G. White had a passion for kingdom building in the cities. She often spoke of and even experienced thought-provoking dreams about its vital importance. White recalled the following dream:

“I dreamed that several of our brethren were in counsel considering plans of labor for this season. They thought it best not to enter the large cities, but to begin work in small places, remote from the cities; here they would meet less opposition from the clergy and would avoid great expense. They reasoned that our ministers, being few in number, could not be spared to instruct and care for those who might accept the truth in the cities, and who, because of the greater opposition they would there meet, would need more help than would the churches in small country places. Thus the fruit of giving a course of lectures in the city would, in a great measure, be lost. Again, it was urged that, because of our limited means, and because of the many changes from moving that might be expected from a church in a large city, it would be difficult to build up a church that would be a strength to the cause. My husband was urging the brethren to make broader plans without delay, and put forth, in our large cities, extended and thorough effort that would better correspond to the character of our message. One worker related incidents of his experience in the cities, showing that the work was nearly a failure, but he testified to better success in the small places.”

Kingdom building must happen everywhere: in rural communities, small towns, and large cities. “There once was a time when big cities thrilled and amazed people. It is the metropolis of the universe, the garden of the world,” Arab historian Ibn Khalidum wrote of Cairo in 1382. English traveler Thomas Coryat described Renaissance Venice as a “beautiful queen.” French artist Marcel Duchamp, in 1915, called New York City “a Complete Work of Art.” Since their appearances around 3,000 cities have always been the natural center of everything that mattered: the temple, the court, the market, the university. For anyone with a particle of ambition, there was little choice but to be in the city. Even though cities have been the fountains of civilization, many thinkers, from Rousseau to Jefferson to Thoreau, have regarded cities as the source of corruption and evil. “The universal myths of earliest Edens are always set in the country; the city is what happens after sin sets in.”

Jesus gives ample evidence about His kingdom. “When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices, and when the wicked perish, there is joyful shouting” (Prov. 11:10). Everyone is eligible to become a member of the kingdom. The kingdom concept is past, present, and future. Speaking in the present, He said, “‘Abraham, Isaac and Jacob [are] in the kingdom of heaven’” (Matt. 8:11). This speaks of a kingdom past. The kingdom of God is present (Luke 17:21). And the future is represented when we pray, “‘Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come’” (Matthew 6:9, 10a). Kingdomship has always been available for humankind to choose.

Looking back at Proverbs 11:10, if the city is not rejoicing, what does that say about the righteous? Should the city benefit from the presence of the righteous? The text says Yes.

Pastor Timothy J. Keller, in a sermon delivered on January 16, 2005, said: “‘The righteous’ [Hebrew is tsad-qa'am] are the just, the people who follow God’s heart and ways and who see everything they have as gifts from God to be stewards for His purposes. The righteous in the book of Proverbs

Everywhere you find people, you find an opportunity to build the kingdom.
are by definition those who are willing to disadvantage themselves for the community while the wicked are those who put their own economic, social, and personal needs ahead of the needs of the community.4

What we can learn from this statement is that the righteous give to the city and community justice and peace. There is intentional stewardship of their time, talent, and treasure. Call it a taste of the kingdom.

Revival and reformation leads to kingdom building. People building is kingdom building. Some examples of Christ’s kingdom building are Jesus and the woman at the well (John 4), Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3), and Jesus and the woman of Canaan (Matt. 15). People are very important to God (Matt. 25:35–40). Everywhere you find people, you find an opportunity to build the kingdom.

Martha Rollins, an antique dealer in Richmond, Virginia, was many times voted of owning and running the Best Antique Store. One day Martha began getting serious about her faith.

Her pastor counseled her to use her well-developed vocational skill set to make Richmond a better place. She started driving around the city looking for a place to help. Eventually, she came to the Highland Park community, a section of the city that needed much love, economic recovery, and development.

God guided her to cross the path of Rosa Jiggets. The two women formed Boaz and Ruth (B & R) Enterprises. With Martha’s leadership, seven businesses were launched. Each employed ex-offenders. They worked in the second harvest store, in moving, in furniture restoration, on eBay, in the restaurant business, and for other B & R enterprises. There was and continues to be great rejoicing in the Highland Park area of the city.

Pia Cayetano, the youngest member of the Philippine Senate and one of only three women in the Senate, was a difference maker, a kingdom builder in the Senate. She made sure she was a consistent voice for the underdog, particularly women, children, and senior citizens. She worked to pass legislation to enable the poor to buy economically priced prescription medications and to establish a food and drug administration. Cayetano spoke for the protection of women and children in war areas—especially for those sexually abused by peacekeeping forces.5 Helping people is kingdom building. Many shout and rejoice because of the voice of Cayetano. Using her gifts enabled sections of the city to rejoice.

In 1994, at the age of 20, Wendy Clark from Durham, North Carolina, started a business called Carpe Diem Cleaning. Kingdom values guided her in this business. Most of her employees were single mothers. Clark designed their work schedules to accommodate their needs—keeping in mind day care...
hours and getting their children back and forth to school. During the summer-time, Wendy holds training sessions for her employees in a rural setting so that their children can attend camp and the adults can also have a little vacation. Thanks to Wendy’s kingdom building, there is much rejoicing in that city.

Are our employees rejoicing because of their work environment? Do they feel and know they are valued? Are our tenants, students, and congregations rejoicing because of our presence?

Minnie McNeil, a nurse by profession, was led by the Holy Spirit in 1988 to acquire some property that included a few buildings. She wanted to be a difference maker, remembering how the Holy Spirit led her in the past. Those buildings are now home to a community education and resource center; transitional and permanent housing for homeless men, and low-income apartments. There is rejoicing right now in the city due to Minnie McNeil listening to the Lord.

In 1982, the late Elder W. W. Fordham became the pastor of the First Coatesville Seventh-day Adventist Church in Coatesville, Pennsylvania. Though retired, he immediately asked what impact the church was having on the city. He reminded the congregation that churches sit on the best real estate in town without having to pay taxes and that the First Coatesville church should be intentional about giving back for the well-being of the city. He encouraged the church to find the greatest need of the city and see how the church could help. The idea of a shelter was born; and in March 1983, the shelter opened. It served men, women, families, and orphaned children. For the next six years, the shelter was housed in the Sabbath School rooms of the church from Sunday night to Friday morning, until it was moved to a new site.⁶

Wherever people are, there is potential to build the kingdom of God. Keep on helping people until one day King Jesus will turn and say to those on his right hand, “ ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’ ” (Matt. 25:34).

Go and be about your heavenly Father’s business; be a kingdom builder in your community. 

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1 Ellen G. White, Atony to the Cities (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estates, 2012).
3 Unless otherwise indicated, scriptures are from the New American Standard Bible.
4 Pastor Timothy J. Keller, in a sermon titled, “Creation Care and Justice,” delivered at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City on January 16, 2005.
6 Information obtained in an interview with Minnie McNeil in spring of 2013.
Caring is not a spectator sport

Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher-mathematician, wrote in his autobiography: “Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life.” The first two were a longing for a love and a search for knowledge. The third was “unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind.” He added, “Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart.”

These same echoes also reach our ears in such a stream and with such intensity that, perhaps in the din of life, we have lost our capacity to hear them. We who are not crying in pain perhaps have become so desensitized to the sensory and emotional stimuli that we suffer from something like boilermaker’s deafness—a condition common among workers exposed to intense noises of the trade before ear protection was used. They became deaf to certain frequencies because the corresponding receptors in their ears had been destroyed.

If Russell, an agnostic, could have such sensitivity to the pain of this world, should not Christian ears and hearts be even more receptive and not suffer from boilermaker’s deafness? Yet sometimes it seems this is a prevalent condition, if only because we do not know what to do about those echoes of cries of pain.

The faceless statistics are often overwhelming and disturbing. We may feel compelled to do something but instead succumb to compassion fatigue. Yet we cannot afford to sit on the sidelines, oblivious to the suffering, deprivation, and desperation around us. We cannot afford to be apathetic just because those faceless statistics are far away and impersonal. We cannot afford to remain insensitive because we have moral, humanitarian, and Christian obligations to fulfill.

But most important, we cannot afford to remain uninvolved because Jesus showed us that caring is not a spectator sport. Jesus said, “ ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’ ” (Matt. 25:40, NIV).

Fortunately, there are a significant number of Adventist churches following Jesus’ injunction of caring for the “least of these,” and their experiences and examples are both inspirational and instructional. These churches, pastors, and members believe in building bridges, in going into the highways and byways of life in the areas where many fear to tread, and bringing in the “least of these” by programs that truly exemplify the meaning of caring. They are not mere spectators. They are players in the game of eternal life and are bringing some of heaven into reality right here on earth in their own communities. We shall consider four moving stories of churches that care.

The caring Bereans

The Atlanta Berean Church engages in numerous community-based activities, including the Berean Outreach Ministry Center, founded during the ministry of senior pastor Dr. Carlton P. Byrd. This Atlanta church fosters an evangelistic culture that includes community initiatives on a consistent basis.

The Berean Outreach Ministry Center provides daily services to neighborhood residents through a state-of-the-art youth activity center, barbershop, beauty salon, health and fitness center, juice bar, clothes closet, and food pantry that services more than 1,000 people on its weekly food distribution day. The ministry of the food pantry was recognized in an ABC television documentary entitled Help the Hungry.

Given this growing ministry awareness, a gentleman in the Atlanta community donated an eight-unit apartment complex to the church designated for a women’s and children’s shelter. Additionally, in January 2009, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) awarded a $5.2 million grant to the Atlanta Berean Church, and the church subsequently constructed a 50-apartment senior citizens’ housing facility for church and community senior adults alike, enabling residents to live in a safe, Christian environment at affordable pricing.

Lilya Wagner, EdD, CFRE, is director of Philanthropic Service for Institutions, North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.
These and other seeker-sensitive community initiatives, coupled with biannual public evangelistic campaigns, greatly contributed to the overall evangelistic growth of the Atlanta Berean Church as 1,817 persons were baptized and became Seventh-day Adventist Christians during this five-and-a-half-year period. Presently, Dr. Byrd serves as the senior pastor of the Oakwood University Church in Huntsville, Alabama, and as speaker and director for Breath of Life Television Ministries. The community-based ministry of the Atlanta Berean Church continues under the current leadership of its senior pastor, Fredrick Russell.

**Working the inner city**

The Shiloh Adventist Church is located in the inner city of Little Rock, Arkansas—an area that is rife with crime, poverty, and drugs. Sounds of police car and ambulance sirens and of gunshots, along with the sight of boarded-up houses, are commonplace. This leaves many people feeling hopeless. In this setting, Shiloh has been identified by city officials as the flag-ship church in the area because of its exemplary involvement in community service.

Two pivotal community service events were the 2011 and 2012 block parties. Both events had approximately 27 booths, including community and church vendors, with 350 to 400 attendees. In addition, a neighborhood association held monthly meetings at the church last year. To complement Shiloh’s long-standing reputation, Pastor James Roberts has devised a plan to have a stronger spiritual presence through evangelism. Every quarter Shiloh hosts Creation Health cooking classes, a prophecy seminar, and sermons focused on teaching the fundamental beliefs of the faith.

Church members participate in ways that reach community members. Alfred Hampton, one of the elders, heads a small group that delivers gifts and literature to neighborhood homes every third Sabbath. They give out items such as pens, lotion, and bath soap. Approximately 75 to 100 people are served. Deacon Ronnie M. Woolfolk holds a Bible class at his home twice a month. He gives gifts to St. Francis House, a residential facility that houses homeless veterans. Woolfolk says gifts “make them aware of our presence in the community.” James Davies leads a small group called United for the Master. Once a month, the group distributes laundry bags with various laundry items, Adventist books, and health magazines. The group visits Laundromats, college and university campuses, a domestic violence center, and a barber shop. Their ministry has served at least 700 people in the past year. Davies says their ministry has “brought us closer as a group and has been a blessing.”
Debra Brown has a book ministry; she buys Christian books and donates them to people who seek good reading. She also heads a free telephone prayer group called Fruit of the Spirit Network. The group meets Sunday mornings to “encourage, fellowship, share devotions, and witness.” Vouncile Harris uses her passion for children to tell children’s stories on Sabbath. She also is a professional storyteller who speaks at public schools, churches, and community events. Her desire is to talk “to people about Christ and our church.”

Thus, the Shiloh church has gone beyond being the brick church whose members worship on Saturday to slowly becoming friends of the community and truly exemplifying the principle that caring is not a spectator sport.

The innovative and the traditional

Two churches in South Chicago, under the leadership of Pastor Gordon Fraser, have found innovative as well as traditional ways to make a difference in their respective communities. The Beverly Hills and Goshen churches conducted a community analysis that revealed that the primary needs were health and employment. Following the assessment, both churches wanted to intervene and better their communities. The Beverly Hills church carried out an Overcoming Obesity parade, and the Goshen church held a job fair.

Instead of regular Sabbath services, the Beverly Hills church took to the streets with police and fire truck escorts, along with a Pathfinder marching band, an antique car, a truck bearing a banner, and church members with banners and invitations, inviting the community to the church for nutrition information, live music, programs for the children, and so much more. The entire event was held outside in the church parking lot. People from the community who had never before set their foot on the church grounds came to the event.

The Goshen church is planning one of the largest career fairs sponsored by any church in the community. Each employer will come to the career fair with at least two jobs ready to employ any qualified candidate. On that day, church members will help with résumé revision, distribute clothing for the “dress for success” class, and coach attendees for meeting prospective employers.

The community assessment showed that one of Chicago’s biggest problems contributing to youth violence is children left alone at home. The Goshen church believes that a community-based facility will keep young people safe and off the streets, so the church plans to purchase a building and establish such a center that will also include pick-up and drop-off services for added safety.

The Straford Memorial Church is also in South Chicago, an area notorious for poverty and crime. For the last three summers this church has been involved in what they call the annual back to school Community Health Fair. This is one of their annual outreach events that begins the day before with a parade through the community. Members of the community are invited to participate in a day-long fair where they receive free school supplies such as notebooks, paper, pens, and book bags. In addition, the fair provides free physicals and health immunizations. The church members teach kids and their parents about the eight laws of health and provide nutritious vegetarian treats, watermelon, and snow cones, along with other food and snacks.

An added feature is a small petting zoo, which is always a big draw for many of the young people in the community who have never seen some of the animals before. They also give away free bicycles, T-shirts, and other prizes; conduct free blood pressure and cholesterol screenings for adults; give free back-to-school haircuts; and highlight the various ministries of the church by asking each leader to set up a booth. During the fair, the family life leader was able to build a relationship with a group of single mothers, which resulted in their meeting weekly at the church to seek God’s guidance and support.

This ministry impacted church members as well as the pastor. One member shared what had taken place during the registration process. While registering the kids, she asked them to give her their addresses and, to her surprise, many of the children had no clue what she was talking about. This troubled the church member to the point of tears. Ultimately, it showed everyone just how great the need is in their own community.

Another outreach is community movie night. They set up a giant screen in the church parking lot; showed a family oriented film; and gave away free prizes, popcorn, and soda. On a
regular basis they gather the contact information of the people who attend so that they can be contacted about future events at the church. Over the last two years, they have been able to meet and establish contact with more than 300 people in the community. Most of these contacts were made through the Community Services biweekly food and clothes distribution program.

The Straford Church remains proactive and innovative. Each year they try to improve their outreach ministry by adding new dimensions to events and finding innovative ways to introduce members of the community to Christ.

**Toward economic empowerment**

The Word of Life Adventist Church, under the leadership of Pastor Fred Batten, provides many services to the Frayser community in the Memphis, Tennessee, area. In 2013, it added free tax preparation to their outreach programs. Pastor Batten saw a need, and although it took three years to make it a reality, they opened a Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program in partnership with the United Way in February 2013.

The volunteers have given more than 420 hours of their personal time. Appropriate training allowed for qualified staffing and knowledge to prepare tax returns. Being able to provide this service to the community has been a very rewarding experience for everyone. Sixty-nine families received assistance, and the result was approximately $24,000 of economic empowerment returned to low-income families. But the recipients of the services weren’t the only ones who benefitted. In the process of helping others, the volunteers learned a very marketable skill that will be helpful for themselves as well.

The Word of Life Church applied for a federal grant under the VITA program for 2013. They want to partner directly with the Internal Revenue Service to one day make this outreach program a gateway to helping teach fellow brothers and sisters about economic empowerment as another way to help in their community.

This church also has a young adult ministry program, providing lunch for children and families at St. Jude Hospital and Ronald McDonald House, serving about 150 people and performing a puppet show for children. They hold an annual Back-2-Skool block party and a Basketball Extravaganza. The family life ministry includes Shoes for School gift cards for 20 students, school food baskets for 25 families, and an adult financial seminar Vacation Bible School program. Recently, the church adopted the Westside Elementary School B.E.S.M.A.R.T. Summer Camp along with former WNBA player Grace Daley. Other programs include the Good Stuff Giveaway through which Christmas toys are distributed, grief seminars, and prison ministries.

**“You did it for Me”**

These churches, with their pastors and members, ensure that caring goes beyond being a spectator sport. They are involved in ways that meet proven needs. They reach way beyond the walls of their own church buildings, both real walls and behavioral walls that sometimes separate the “insiders” from the outside world. They will, no doubt, hear Jesus Himself say, “When you did this to the least of these of My children, you did it for Me.” Their active caring is an example and inspiration to us all.

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2 To join this prayer group Sunday mornings at 7:00 a.m. CDT, call +1-805-399-1000 and use code 397541#.

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Jesus’ “betrothal promise” is His bride’s guarantee of heaven

Why do Christians who eagerly anticipate and passionately proclaim the second coming of Christ often find themselves trapped in a feeling that they may not be among those who will be taken home by the returning Savior to be with Him forever?

A possible answer may be found in the Master’s parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1–13). We draw that inference from two literary features of the parable. First, Jesus Himself stated His purpose of telling the parable: since no one, including the disciples, knew the date of His return, He wanted all of them to be ready for it (v. 13). Second, to help His hearers better understand, retain, and relate to His second coming, Jesus framed His message in the familiar setting of a first-century Jewish bridegroom returning to his bride’s home, where she was earlier betrothed to him, for the sole purpose of taking her to his father’s house for the marriage ceremony, to consummate their union, enjoy the wedding feast, and occupy their new house.

Amy-Jill Levine comments, “Jesus had to have made sense in His own context, and His context is that of Galilee and Judea. . . . Jesus cannot be fully understood unless He is understood through first-century Jewish eyes and heard through first-century Jewish ears.” This means that the specific Messianic role in “the kingdom of heaven,” illustrated by the bridegroom in the parable, will become clearer to modern readers only as they take into consideration the first-century Jewish constructs.

A critical question, therefore, is what was the first-century Jewish concept of bridegroom in Galilee and Judea? The title “bridegroom” was commonly given to one who permanently covenanted in betrothal ceremonies to marry his bride at a later date. Jews had no concept of temporarily committed or uncommitted bridegrooms. Therefore, if modern readers think of Jesus as the kind of bridegroom His parable indicates, then they are also required to see Him as having a bride who was betrothed to Him.

But who is this bride? Writing to the church at Ephesus, Paul used two familiar comparisons that assumed the existence of a first-century bridegroom/bride relationship between Christ and the church. We know this because he appealed to it as the authentic model that believing wives must emulate in their relationship to their husbands. The same appeal undergirded his command that believing husbands must love their wives (5:22–25, 32). He also stated it explicitly: “for I have espoused (betrothed) you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2b).

Jewish wedding customs

According to Ari Goldman, “there are two aspects to the Jewish wedding: erusin, or the betrothal, and nissu’in, the marriage proper.” And because of the deep moral, religious, and existential significance marriage had in the community, the beginning of each aspect was marked with ceremonial activities. The marriage covenant was made and ratified in a betrothal ceremony some 12 months before the wedding ceremony.

The bridegroom’s father took control of initiating his son’s marriage. Sticking, at least in part, to the Abrahamic model (Gen. 24:1–4), he or a representative made the match by selecting the right woman for his offspring. Once that step was completed, the young man went to the bride’s parents’ home, with gifts and the dowry, to ritualize their formal acceptance of the marriage covenant, in the betrothal ceremony.

As such, betrothal ceremonies were the first public steps in Jewish weddings. They required both parties to obligate themselves to binding terms. These were...
enjoined upon the bride and groom, and the covenant ratified, when the bride’s father received the bridegroom’s negotiated monetary payment—“bride price” (mohar). Once the set amount was paid in full, the community considered the couple to be husband and wife.

Betrothals also included a feature that was later used to commemorate the establishment of the marriage covenant: the bridegroom and bride shared a cup of wine, over which a betrothal benediction was pronounced. Partaking of the cup signified acceptance of the covenant, so it became the defining symbol of the existence of the marriage covenant relationship.

When all betrothal tasks were completed, the bridegroom returned home and began constructing an addition to his father’s house to accommodate the new couple. During the building period, his wife, who was now set apart exclusively (sanctified) for him, remained with her parents, preparing herself to undertake the enormous task of establishing a home and raising a family.

Betrothal gave a bride a high degree of certainty about her husband’s loyalty and reliability regarding these matters. That certainty made her joyfully confident about him returning to take her to their new home, even though she had no knowledge of the day and hour of his “second advent.” But not only was the bride unaware of the specific time he would arrive, the groom, too, did not know when his journey would begin; only his father knew. The reason is the new house and all other preparations for the wedding had to meet the father’s approval, so the husband customarily waited on the patriarch’s consent before leaving to go to his wife’s home.

Despite these unknowns, the betrothed wife immersed herself in excited preparations for her husband’s arrival. In almost every instance, she anticipated and waited for the event with ecstatic expectation, without apprehension created by confusion, uncertainty, and doubt about their marital status and its consequent future blessings.

When the bridegroom did come, his entourage was comprised of friends shouting and blowing trumpets, and if at night, carrying torches. As they got closer, messengers ran ahead of the procession to inform the bride of her bridegroom’s soon arrival. This early warning helped her know it was time to get dressed and be ready, along with her bridesmaids, to receive her bridegroom.

Carried along by festive excitement, the procession finally reached the bride’s home. This arrival marked the end of the period of separation. Upon arrival, two things occurred: he received his bride unto himself, and her entourage joined his en route to his father’s house for the marriage proper. When they arrived there, it was customary for the bridegroom’s father to receive the bridal party and guests.

Normally, the marriage ceremony was a very simple exercise that included partaking of wine and hearing the pronouncement of blessings. Once those rituals were completed, the couple retired to the bridal chamber to consummate their marriage. After all this was accomplished, they began to live out the rest of their lives together.

The wedding analogy and the Second Coming

How can we use the lessons from the wedding analogy to better understand the events that are related to the ministry of Jesus, such as the Lord’s Supper, the Cross, the Ascension, and the Second Advent? At each of these ministry milestones, a point of equivalency emerges. Discovery of its right meaning depends much on a working understanding of the literary principle of analogy.

To the extent one recognizes our Lord’s appeals at similarities between His present relationship with His bride and betrothals, one will be able to determine the primary meaning of one of His eschatological promises recorded in John’s Gospel—a prime example of Jesus’ explicit use of betrothal language. Jesus promised:

“He who drinks of the water that I will give shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life” (John 4:14).”

Although the passage refers to the reality of the second coming of Jesus, the text contains analogical references to two literal betrothal obligations: “I go to prepare a place for you” and “I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:1–3).

The promise of the Second Coming in John 14 is made in the context of the ceremony in which Jesus established the new covenant with the church, seeking her acceptance by offering her representatives “the cup” (Matt. 26:27, 28; Luke 22:19, 20; see also 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:23–25). From what we have discussed thus far, and out of the cultural
nuances of the parable of the ten virgins, we may conclude the following:

1. Jesus told the parable of the ten virgins to teach His followers the need to be ready to meet Him at His second coming, just as a bride is waiting with great anticipation the arrival of her Bridegroom.
2. Jesus is the Bridegroom.
3. Jesus has given two betrothal obligations to His bride—His preparation of a house for her in His Father’s home and His return to receive her and take her home.
4. The betrothal obligations are covenantly sealed through Jesus’ broken body and shed blood, which the bride commemorates in her waiting period through participating in the Lord’s Supper. The Bridegroom has promised to fulfill the obligations at His return.
5. The church as the bride has accepted the betrothal covenant.
6. The betrothal covenant expects from the bride one obligation—waiting faithfully for the return of the bridegroom, with lamps trimmed and burning.
7. If the bride is faithful to her part of the betrothal obligations, there is no need to fear being lost at the second coming of Christ.

Should Christians who believe, affirm, anticipate, and proclaim the return of Jesus be anxious that they might not be found in His kingdom when He returns again?

The answer is plain, and Jesus Himself provided the answer in His parable of the ten virgins. Those who remain faithful to Christ as His bride have nothing to fear. They shall have the joyful reunion with Christ at the Second Coming and will be with Him forever and ever. \(\text{\textcopyright 2014, Pathway Press. All rights reserved.} \)

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1. In harmony with itself (Exod. 21:8, 9, 22:16; Lev. 19:20, Deut. 20:7, 22:23, 25, 27, 28), first-century betrothal was the two-party covenant-making ceremony that permanently gave a woman’s hand in marriage to a petitioning man.
3. For our purposes, the invisible church is born-again believers (“sheep”) in the fold, as well as those “which are not of this fold” (John 10:15)
4. See also Matthew 9:14, 15 (the antecedent of “the children of the bridechamber” is “thy disciples,” making Jesus the “bridegroom” in view).
5. All scripture is from the King James Version of the Bible.


The Truth About Grief is the most comprehensive history of the death and dying movement I have read. Ruth Davis Konigsberg interviewed leading people in the movement and participated in their support groups and training. Her book does not rely on hearsay.

Skepticism of the stages has been building steadily since the early 1970s. Richard Schulz and David Aderman, when at Duke University, looked into the existing research to see whether there was any support for the stages, which there was none (10).

Konigsberg refers to the research of George Bonanno of Columbia University Teachers College in which he overturned the Kubler-Ross theory upon which we have relied for 40 years.* Konigsberg reviews that history and concludes the five stages of grief to be a myth in view of the most recent research.

I was a part of the death and dying movement in the 1970s. Along with others, I used Kubler-Ross’s stages of grief, but not for long. In my first support group, a woman angrily said, “Mister, don’t you go putting us grieving people in a psychological box. We all have lost in a unique way, and we will all grieve in a unique way.”

I quickly learned that the stages are a myth. They are not based on the foundation of sound scientific and practical evidence. I would recommend that all pastors study Konigsberg’s book. Parishioners will benefit from her insights.

—Reviewed by Larry Yeagley, a retired pastor, chaplain, and author residing in Gentry, Arkansas, United States.

How Global Youth Day impacted young people in Europe

St. Albans, United Kingdom—The Trans-European Division (TED) hosted two of the 22 worldwide live transmissions as part of Global Youth Day (GYD) on Saturday, March 15, 2014, from Vik, Norway (near Oslo), and Newbold College, England. These transmissions were hosted by young people at both venues.

Global Youth Day was the result of inspiration by Gilbert Cangy, General Conference youth director. He wanted to get the eight million Adventist young people throughout the world active; get them out of their usual routines of just listening to sermons and onto the streets to do acts of kindness and service in their local communities and to “be the sermon.”

Individual projects widely varied. In the Netherlands, they used a nationally known saying, “carrying the egg,” as a means of people sharing their stresses and writing something appropriate on a real egg. In many other cities across Europe, waffles and fruit with Bible texts and other literature were distributed; some youth involved themselves in making the community a better place by picking up litter. Other acts of kindness included visiting a children’s home, giving blood, exchanging cigarettes for fruit, singing at residences for the elderly, feeding the homeless, praying for people, and giving away free hugs.

Globally the effects of GYD have been very impressive. One member of the public in London commented, “You are just great. God bless you all.” The youth that volunteered also gave positive feedback. “It’s a different way to reach out in ministry—perfect, actually, and it needs to continue.” All across the countries young people took part in the day’s events, and reports of these activities are still coming in.

Participating as part of the Oslo program, TED youth director Paul Tompkins saw the action firsthand and said, “It was great to see so many young people excited and motivated to share their faith in a practical way and...
to participate in an event that linked youth throughout the world." According to estimates, 58,000 computers worldwide were logged on during the Nordic hour alone.

The impact of Global Youth Day has been huge, and next year this will be repeated on Saturday, March 21—which will also mark the commencement of the international week of prayer. [tedNEWS]

Black vegetarians at lower risk for heart disease

Loma Linda, California, United States—Among more than 26,000 black Seventh-day Adventists, those who are vegetarians, are at lower risk for heart disease compared with their meat-eating counterparts, according to the results of a new Loma Linda University health study.

The study, available online in the journal Public Health Nutrition, compared the cardiovascular risk factors between black vegetarians and non-vegetarians who are part of the ongoing Loma Linda University Adventist Health Study-2 (AHS-2).*

AHS-2, funded by the United States National Institutes of Health (NIH), is a long-running study of members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church throughout North America. The study focuses on nutrition, lifestyle, and health outcomes. Researchers said Seventh-day Adventists are a unique study subject because they have a wide variety of dietary habits but in general have a very low percentage of alcohol consumption or cigarette smoking—nondietary factors that may otherwise impact the study.

The new results show a hierarchy of benefits received by black participants in the study based on their eating habits: vegans (those who completely abstain from meat and meat products) and lacto-ovo vegetarians (those who consume eggs and dairy) were the least at risk for cardiovascular disease, followed by semivegetarians (those who infrequently eat meat), pesco-vegetarians (those who eat fish), and lastly, nonvegetarians.

The study results show that, compared with their nonvegetarian counterparts, black vegetarian Adventists were at less risk for hypertension, diabetes, high blood pressure, high total cholesterol, and high blood-LDL cholesterol. The study was a cross-sectional analysis of the data and does not conclusively establish cause. In the future, the study involving black subjects also plans to look directly at heart disease experience rather than just risk factors for heart disease.

Patti Herring, an associate professor at the Loma Linda University School of Public Health, and one of the study’s coinvestigators, said, “Some findings for black Adventists are promising, and we are anxious to compare black Adventist health with the general population of blacks. In so doing, we suspect that black Adventists’ health will prove better in many regards than those in the general population, particularly for the vegetarians.”

“There’s a growing body of evidence that vegetarian diets lower the risk for cardiovascular diseases and other diseases,” she said, noting that AHS-2 is one of the few that has such a large number of black participants, which is significant because they generally have some of the poorest health outcomes among minority populations.

Periodic findings of the ongoing AHS-2 study have been previously reported by major international news agencies. Last year, The Journal of the American Medical Association reported AHS-2 findings that vegetarians experienced 12 percent fewer deaths over a six-year period of research. [ANN]

* The abstract can be found at journals.cambridge.org/action/DisplayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=9205599&fileType=RA&fileId=S1368980014000263. The complete article is available for a fee.
The Good Shepherd*

Christ, the great example for all ministers, likens Himself to a shepherd. . . . “I am the good shepherd, and know My sheep, and am known of Mine. As the Father knoweth Me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down My life for the sheep” (John 10:14, 15). . . .

In the parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd goes out to search for one sheep,—the very least that can be numbered. Discovering that one of his sheep is missing, he does not look carelessly upon the flock that is safely housed, and say, I have ninety and nine, and it will cost me too much trouble to go in search of the straying one. Let him come back, and I will open the door of the sheepfold and let him in. No; no sooner does the sheep go astray than the shepherd is filled with grief and anxiety. Leaving the ninety and nine in the fold, he goes in search of the straying one. However dark and tempestuous the night, however perilous and uncertain the way, however long and tedious the search, he does not falter until the lost is found. . . .

The great Shepherd has under-shepherds, to whom He delegates the care of His sheep and lambs. The first work that Christ entrusted to Peter, on restoring him to the ministry, was to feed the lambs. (See John 21:15). . . .

The question that Christ put to Peter was significant. He mentioned only one condition of discipleship and service. “Lovest thou Me?” He said. This is the essential qualification. Though Peter might possess every other, without the love of Christ he could not be a faithful shepherd over the Lord’s flock. Knowledge, benevolence, eloquence, gratitude, and zeal are all aids in the good work; but without the love of Jesus in the heart, the work of the Christian minister will prove a failure.

The lesson which Christ taught him by the Sea of Galilee, Peter carried with him throughout his life. . . .

The shepherd that has strayed from the fold is the most helpless of all creatures. It must be sought for; for it cannot find its way back. So with the soul that has wandered away from God; he is as helpless as the lost sheep; and unless divine love comes to his rescue, he can never find his way to God. Then with what compassion, what sorrow, what persistence, should the under-shepherd seek for lost souls! How willingly should he endure self-denial, hardship, privation!

There is need of shepherds who, under the direction of the Chief Shepherd, will seek for the lost and straying. This means the bearing of physical discomfort and the sacrifice of ease. It means a tender solicitude for the erring, a divine compassion and forbearance. It means an ear that can listen with sympathy to heart-breaking recitals of wrong, of degradation, of despair and misery.

The spirit of the true shepherd is one of self-forgetfulness. He loses sight of self in order that he may work the works of God. By the preaching of the word and by personal ministry in the homes of the people, he learns their needs, their sorrows, their trials; and, co-operating with the great Burden-bearer, he shares their afflictions, comforts their distresses, relieves their soul-hunger, and wins their hearts to God. In this work the minister is attended by heavenly angels. . . .

In our work, individual effort will accomplish much more than can be estimated. It is for the want of this that souls are perishing. One soul is of infinite value; Calvary speaks its worth. One soul won to Christ, will be instrumental in winning others, and there will be an ever-increasing result of blessing and salvation.

* These are excerpts from Ellen G. White, Gospel Workers (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1915), 181–184.
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