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Does your crop have roots?

I have always enjoyed reading. While attending elementary school, I could tell you about most of the books in the surprisingly well-stocked library of the two-classroom schoolhouse I attended.

When I was nine years old, one book, in particular, caught my attention. It was a story about a young girl escaping the Soviet Union during the Communist regime with just the clothes on her back—and her baby doll. But what the guards didn't know was, hidden in the water of her doll's bottle were five little diamonds to be used for bartering in her travels.

As I read this, I thought about the time of trouble right before Jesus' Second Coming. Could this concept help me when I needed to possibly hide and escape? So, I took out my crafting material and designed and made my own doll—with a secret compartment. I could hide items of worth inside my doll by raising the bangs of her hair. I was now prepared!

Preparing

Since then, I have heard hundreds of sermons on the second coming of Jesus. It is thrilling,

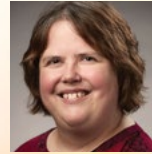
almost unbelievable, that one day I will be with my Savior! But before this happens, there is work to be done and a time to go through. There is a reason God has given us so much information concerning last-day events—He wants us to be prepared.

Take the three angels' messages, for instance. They contain judgment, sexual immorality, beasts, torment—scary stuff. Yet, Revelation 14:12 says, "Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus."¹ Where do boots-on-the-ground perseverance, obedience, and faith come from?

Knowing

Romans 10:14 states, "How then are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? How are they to believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?" We have all heard the old adage: knowledge is power. The crop in your pews needs knowledge first, but then those seeds *must* be well planted in their hearts. You know the parable of the seeds; take it to heart. You *must* be sure that the seed germinates with deep roots so that when the scary stuff (judgment, sexual

Sheryl Beck is
the editorial
specialist for
Ministry.



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immorality, etc.) aggressively confronts them, they know how to unfalteringly persevere, obey, and keep their faith in the One who says not to fear.

Doing

What are you doing about it? Psalm 119:11 provides practical advice: “I have treasured Your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against You.” How deep are the roots of your crop, gardener?

Different people learn in different ways, so you cannot use just one way to ensure that seed is buried deep. There are visual learners, auditory

learners, pen-to-paper learners, and kinesthetic (hands-on) learners. Put a team together and come up with at least one way per learning style to bury that seed deep within. For visual learners, a group that dissects sections of Scripture and maps or diagrams them out may be in order. For auditory learners, start a Scripture memorization club or share great Scripture songs that they can sing and memorize.² For pen-to-paper learners, an engaging book club with journaling or a poetry writing class may be key. For hands-on learners, start a drama group that enacts the topic of your sermon.

Although a little worse for the wear, I still have my secret-compartment doll, but my “Prepare” list is different. It now comprises making sure the roots of Bible study, prayer, Scripture memorization, and a close relationship with Jesus grow deeply in my heart. What is buried in your crop’s heart to help prepare your church for the last days?



My secret-compartment doll
with her bangs raised.



- 1 Scripture is from the New American Standard Bible.
- 2 For Scripture songs on CD or digital download, visit <http://www.trilogyscripturesongs.com>. To join a Scripture memorization club, visit <http://www.CapitolMemory.com>.

Do you feel that
your ministerial
efforts are
fruitless?

IN VAIN?

Ekkehardt Mueller, ThD, DMin, is an associate director (ret.) of the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

One night, a thief broke into the single-room apartment of French novelist Honore de Balzac. Trying to avoid waking Balzac, the intruder quietly picked the lock on the writer's desk. Suddenly the silence was broken by a sardonic laugh from the bed, where Balzac lay watching the thief.

"Why do you laugh?" asked the thief.

"I am laughing to think what risks you take to try to find money in a desk by night where the legal owner can never find any by day."¹ Futility!

Solomon summarized his insights into life by saying: "I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind" (Eccl. 1:14).²

Occasionally we may look back at what we have done so far in our life and ministry for the Lord—maybe even during this difficult time of the COVID-19 pandemic—and ask ourselves, "Was our work as a community of pastors, scholars, and theologians worthwhile and effective, or was it—at least in some respect—in vain?" What difference did our individual ministry make? I am not talking about our calling but about the results of our efforts. While we might report many good things, even miracles, we must acknowledge the other side of the coin:

1. On the church level, we deal with both numerical gains in church membership and enormous losses. Although we rejoice about those involved in ministry, at the same time, we feel concerned about those who are biblically illiterate and not fellowshiping with other believers. We confront congregations splitting into the kinds of fragments we observe in the political landscape, and it becomes constantly more difficult to communicate with each group. Conspiracy theories and strange teachings, including much time setting, make it more challenging to get people's attention.
2. On the personal level, we may have asked ourselves what our sermons, lectures, writings, and personal contacts with people could have possibly achieved. Men and women whom we pastored and counseled make wrong decisions. Only about 3 theology majors out of 12 of my graduating class in college retired from a lifetime ministry as pastors. Some not only abandoned the ministry but also left Christianity, even becoming agnostics or atheists. All too frequently, we have watched those whom we baptized drift away from the church, couples whom we married later divorce, and churches that we once pastored be forced to disband. We are disturbed not only by the numbers but also by the spiritual condition in which God's people find themselves.

It is possible to regard all of this as just a natural occurrence—people come and go, and they alone are responsible for their actions—but that would mean becoming indifferent and cold, ceasing to care with a pastoral heart.

Futility of the ministry

It seems that the apostles asked themselves similar questions about their ministry. John wrote: “I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth” (2 John 1:4). Very good! But he may also be implying that some church members have given up on what he calls “the truth” and that it saddened and hurt him.

Paul decided to consult with the other apostles “in order to make sure I was not running or had not run *in vain*” (Gal. 2:2; emphasis added). He admonished the Philippian believers to hold “fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored *in vain*” (Phil. 2:16, NKJV; emphasis added). To the Christians in Thessalonica, he declared, “For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be *in vain*” (1 Thess. 3:5; emphasis added). On the other hand, he was confident “that our coming to you was not *in vain*” (1 Thess. 2:1; emphasis added). And he even stated that the believers in Corinth must know “that your labor in the Lord is not *in vain*” (1 Cor. 15:58, NKJV; emphasis added).

The church in Corinth

While the church in Corinth struggled with all kinds of problems, including serious divisions, Paul still addressed its members as those sanctified by Christ (1 Cor. 1:2). His salutatory address shows his respect and willingness to help them as a brother aids fellow brothers and sisters. A special issue for the Christians in that city was the teaching of the resurrection. Was there a resurrection or not? In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul sets out to review the resurrection of Jesus, that of the believers, and what he calls “the end.” The term “in vain”—*kenos*—appears four times in the chapter. In addition, the apostle uses a synonym (*eikē*; v. 2). First, he states that by the grace of God, he has become what he is and that the grace of God toward him was *not in vain* (v. 10). After having provided evidence for Jesus’ resurrection, he addresses the Corinthian believers: “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is *in vain* and your faith is *in vain* (v. 14; emphasis added). He argues that Christ’s resurrection determines

not only their fate but also their life in this world and, by implication, our own fate and life in the here and now. Without the resurrection, everything is *in vain*. The futility of human life is quite a devastating concept.

But Paul does not linger with the negative perspective. Instead, he outlines the resurrection sequence, the manner of the resurrection, and the ultimate victory over death:

“I tell you this, brothers [and sisters]: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ . . .

“ . . . Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 50–57).

The outcome of the resurrection

Paul sums up his discourse by saying: “Therefore, my beloved brothers [and sisters], be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is *not in vain*” (v. 58; emphasis added). His statement consists of three parts: a twofold admonition and a promise.

First, Paul begins with the firmness and determination of the believers. They are not to give up their faith in the resurrection but must be solid as a rock. Paul here alludes to verses 1 and 2, in which he reminds the believers of the gospel—which they received, in which they now stand, and by which they are saved—to continue to hold fast to it. Otherwise—if they cease believing in Christ’s resurrection and their own—they will have believed *in vain* (*eikē*; vv. 1, 2). The concepts of stability and the danger of futility dominate 1 Corinthians 15.

Second, Paul moves from the domain of belief to that of ministry. Faith must advance into action. The work that God summons believers to abound in has to do with whatever builds up the church. It may even include toil, hardship, and “life-threatening peril”³ as Paul himself experienced (vv. 31, 32). Nevertheless, Paul calls upon believers to “excel” (v. 58, NRSV), “work enthusiastically” for

THE FEAR THAT OUR OUTREACH, PREACHING AND TEACHING, AND PASTORAL CARE COULD BE IN VAIN MAY FRUSTRATE US, BURDEN US TO THE BREAKING POINT, AND PARALYZE US IN OUR MINISTRY.

Him (NLT), be “fully devoted” to the work (NAB), and be productive in the Lord’s work.⁴

Third, Paul has here come to the conviction that—in spite of all problems—the work for the Lord is not in vain. Why? Because there exists a resurrection. This part connects to verses 10 and 14: God’s grace toward Paul was not in vain because he not only believed in Christ but also *labored* for Him. However, if there were no resurrection, all *preaching* would be in vain. Fortunately, that is not the case. There is no doubt about Christ’s resurrection and no question about the resurrection of His followers. Therefore, “what is done in the Lord is never done *in vain*.”⁵

Application

As we consider ourselves as believers, pastors, and theologians, what about our personal ministry? What about the effort we have put in, the disappointments that we may have experienced? The fear that our outreach, preaching and teaching, and pastoral care could be in vain may frustrate us, burden us to the breaking point, and paralyze us in our ministry. We may not see the results that we desire, and some of the positive results that we witnessed may begin crumbling at our fingertips. A good beginning does not always come to a good end. The success of our ministry cannot be easily measured here and now. Therefore, we need to hear the voice of Scripture again and again:

“Therefore [because of the guarantee of our resurrection], my beloved brothers [and sisters], be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (v. 58). Be of good courage!

Continue the good work to which you are called—both in your personal field of influence and within the wider community of believers.

I still remember a faithful elderly church member, the only Adventist in a town of about 12,000 inhabitants in Germany. Wanting to find someone interested in Bible studies, for years he went from door to door and talked to people, but without success. Then one day, he met a young couple with two children. They agreed to have Bible studies, but by now he was quite feeble and not able to continue. I stepped in and this faithful church member passed away. He didn’t know that the couple accepted Jesus as Savior. He didn’t see that the couple accepted Jesus as Lord and got baptized. Was his work in vain? Certainly not. Though for him it may have appeared to be a failure, the resurrection will tell a different story.

When I studied at Andrews University, I had to take counseling classes from Dr. Garth Thompson. He was also my dissertation adviser. One sentence of his especially stuck in my mind and influenced my entire ministry. He said something like this: “Because I believe in the resurrection of Jesus, I also believe that He can bring new life to any marriage, no matter how dead it may be.” I believe that too. Though he passed away soon after my doctoral defense, his ministry was not in vain.

Gordon Fee states that Paul’s “concluding paragraph exudes with confidence and triumph. . . . Our present existence in Christ, and our present labors, are not in vain. Standing beneath them is the sure word of Christ’s own triumph over death, which guarantees that we shall likewise conquer.”⁶ Christ’s resurrection makes our life meaningful and our work worthwhile.



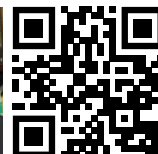
- 1 “The Thief,” Bible.org, <https://bible.org/illustration/thief>.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the English Standard Version.
- 3 David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 747.
- 4 Cf. 1 Cor. 15:58, MacDonald Idiomatic Translations, Bibleworks 8.
- 5 Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 224, 225.
- 6 Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 809.

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A book about *Jesus*



Denis Fortin, PhD, is a professor of historical theology and a former dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary of Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States. He also serves as the teaching pastor of One Place Fellowship at Andrews University.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

Since its appearance at the end of the first century even to this day, the book of Revelation has generated great interest and a multitude of interpretations. Why was this book written, how do we interpret it, and what does it say to us today?

A time of persecution

Revelation is written in the style of a letter addressed to a group of seven churches in Asia Minor in the first century AD (Rev. 1:4, 5). These Christians in Asia Minor, today western Turkey, were suffering persecution because they did not participate in Roman cults and other pagan social activities. The rumors and false reports circulated about them made their lives difficult and troubled.

These first-century believers, therefore, needed encouragement, and this encouragement came in the form of a complex letter whose intricate symbols and imagery have challenged readers for two thousand years. Yet, its major themes are easily understood and have provided hope to those facing persecution for their faith.¹

A promise of hope

Part of the purpose of the book of Revelation is to announce that the return of Christ will be very soon. Twice in the first few verses of chapter 1, John referred to the promise of Christ's return. "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of his prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near" (Rev. 1:3).² "Look, he is coming with the clouds; / and 'every eye will see him, / even those who pierced him'; / and all peoples on earth 'will mourn because of him'" (v. 7).

In light of this promise, Revelation is an invitation to remain strong and faithful to Jesus. Even if the future may appear gloomy and hostile, the book tells us that God in Christ will always be with His people.

Apocalyptic symbols

How, though, does one interpret the book's symbols and imagery? Revelation offers clues that can help us understand them.

First, John used a multitude of well-known Old Testament symbols, images, and allusions. For example, John twice referred to 144,000 faithful people of God. The number is highly symbolic, with references to the people of Israel in the wilderness during the Exodus. The number 144,000 is $12 \times 12 \times 1,000$. Twelve is the perfect number of God's covenant people. There were 12 sons of Jacob who formed the 12 tribes of Israel. There were 12 apostles who formed the new covenant people of the Messiah. The New Jerusalem has 12 pearly gates named after the 12 tribes of Israel and 12 foundations named after the 12 apostles. This group of 144,000 also sings the song of Moses, an allusion to Exodus 15, when God's people were rescued miraculously from the clutches of Pharaoh.

The book uses the symbols of locusts and trumpets, also allusions to the Exodus. Revelation refers to geographical places very familiar in the Old Testament: Sodom, Egypt, Mount Zion, Babylon, the river Euphrates, and Armageddon. It refers symbolically to Old Testament people as well, such as Jezebel, King David, the prophet Balaam, and the Moabite king Balak.

Revelation also has links to another apocalyptic book, Daniel. The first beast of Revelation 13 is a composite of the four beasts of Daniel 7; meanwhile, the image to the beast, also in chapter 13, echoes the story of the three Hebrews and the fiery furnace of Daniel 3.

What, then, is the purpose of these symbols? They were intended to build the reader's faith knowing that God's acts of salvation in the future will be very much like God's acts of salvation in the past. The powerful and faithful God who did marvelous acts for His people in the Old Testament is the God who is doing the same for

them now and is the God who gives His people the certainty of His promises concerning their future as well.

A Roman context

We must also keep in mind that the setting of the book is in Asia Minor at the time of the Roman Empire. The language and imagery were intended to make sense to the original readers.

Some references to Jesus are shaped in the form of a challenge to well-known pagan deities. The description of Jesus as holding the keys of death and Hades in Revelation 1:18 is an unmistakable reference to the goddess Hekate, a Greek deity who was thought to possess the keys to the gates of heaven and Hades. Clearly, Jesus is assuming the roles ascribed to pagan gods.

The description of the New Jerusalem at the end of the book is reminiscent of Roman plans for an ideal and safe city.

In Revelation 6, the first four seals depict four riders on horses going out to conquer and cause evil. This was a familiar image for first-century Romans, whose coins depicted the emperor riding on a horse.

Jewish and Christian readers would have understood these symbols, coming from the Old Testament and from the Greek and Roman world of the first century, as teaching them that their faith transcends their immediate context and that they can have hope amid trial and tribulation.

The perfect number

Another key point in a study of the book of Revelation is its literary structure. The number seven plays a very prominent role.

For example, Revelation is a succession of seven symbolic scenes, each introduced by a reference to the ancient Hebrew sanctuary services.

The Hebrew sanctuary was a reflection of God's abiding place in heaven. The sanctuary was built in three sections: an exterior courtyard with an altar for burnt offerings and a tent divided into two parts. The first part of the tent was the Holy Place with three pieces of furniture: a seven-branched candlestick, or menorah; a table for bread; and an altar of incense. The second part was the Most Holy Place, which guarded the ark of the covenant with the Ten Commandments. These pieces of furniture symbolized various aspects of the priest's intercession on behalf of God's people and Jesus' intercession for us. Most of these symbols are present in Revelation and introduce seven different sections of the book:

1. The first section (chapters 1–3) with the letters to the seven churches (chapters 2, 3) is introduced by a vision of Jesus walking among seven candlesticks (chapter 1)—a visual reference to the seven-branched menorah in the Hebrew sanctuary.
2. This is followed by a vision of the heavenly throne room (chapters 4, 5) and the opening of the seven seals (chapters 6, 7).
3. The next section is the vision of the seven trumpets (chapters 8–11), which is introduced by a vision of an angel offering incense at the altar.
4. The fourth section is introduced with a vision of the Most Holy Place and its ark of the covenant (Rev. 11:19) and is followed by the conflict between the woman and the dragon, the beasts from the sea and the earth, and the three angels' messages (chapters 12–14).
5. The fifth section is introduced with a vision of the heavenly temple, out of which come seven angels with the seven last plagues of God's wrath (chapters 15–18).
6. The sixth section begins with a scene of rejoicing and praising in heaven (chapter 19), followed by the coming of Christ on a white horse and the end of the great conflict between good and evil (chapters 19, 20).
7. The seventh and last section begins with a vision of a new heaven and introduces the new earth and the New Jerusalem (chapters 21, 22).

Each of these sections begins with a sanctuary scene or heavenly scene that marks the development of some historical and symbolic representation of God's response to the problem of evil. The scenes also move from the Holy Place to the Most Holy Place to finally encircle the entire celestial host of angels and God's new throne in the New Jerusalem.

These scenes keep our focus on heaven as the center of all divine activities. In fact, the entire book of Revelation is presented from the vantage point of heaven itself. We note that all divine actions on earth are preceded by scenes of divine actions in the heavenly temple.

What, however, does all this amazing imagery mean?

A revelation of Jesus

The first words of the book make it clear: This book is about Jesus. "The revelation from [or of] Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place" (Rev. 1:1).

The expression used here means that the book is from Jesus or about Jesus or both. A special revelation of Christ is the center of the book of Revelation.

It has become customary in many studies of the book of Revelation to attempt to decode all the symbols and find their clear application in biblical history, church history, or current world events. It is not unusual to read about interpretations that focus on the role of Islam in end-time prophecies. Others limit their interpretations to schemes from earlier periods of history and focus on the Roman Empire and how it fulfilled these symbols. Others see the fulfillment of these symbols in conflicts between the medieval church and political powers that it often clashed with.

Yet, these schemes are often missing a major point of what this book is about. This is a revelation from Jesus and about Jesus—about His role in these events and the consummation of history and how the problem of evil will be resolved. Before this book tells us symbolically what future events will be, it tells us what Jesus has done for His people's salvation in the past and what He will do in the future as well.

In chapter 1, Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of all things and of the plan of redemption. In the letters to the seven churches (chapters 2 and 3), Jesus reminds them that He is with them and promises rewards to the overcomer. Each reward is an aspect of the redemption Jesus is more than willing to give to those who are faithful. Chapter 4 details Jesus' throne in heaven and in chapter 5, Jesus is the Lamb who was slain and is worthy to "receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise" (Rev. 5:12).

In chapter 6, Jesus opens the seals of the book of the last events of earth's history and in chapter 7, Jesus assembles before the throne of God a large multitude of all those who will be saved because they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The outlook in chapters 8 to 11 looks very grim while God's judgments are poured on the earth, but this devastation ends with a proclamation of the kingdom of the Messiah. In chapter 12, the woman gives birth to a child, Jesus, and His presence defeats the dragon. In chapter 13, while the two beasts attempt to enforce the worship of their image, those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life are safe. In chapter 14, the Lamb stands on Mount Zion with the

144,000 redeemed and declares the threefold message that prepares them to stand there. In chapter 15, the redeemed are singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb.

In chapters 16 to 18, during the seven last plagues and the destruction of Babylon, war is waged against the Lamb and His people, but the Lamb will triumph because He is King of kings and Lord of lords. In chapter 19, a great multitude shouts praises to God as He invites all the redeemed to come to the wedding supper of the Lamb. Jesus is the Faithful and True Witness riding on a white horse, and, with the armies of heaven, He comes to earth to wage one last battle against God's enemies. In chapter 20, the redeemed reign with Christ for a thousand years. In chapter 21, the Lamb brings the New Jerusalem down from heaven on a restored new earth.

Finally, in chapter 22, a river of life flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And Jesus presents Himself: "Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

"Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates of the city. . . .

"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star" (Rev. 22:12–16).

This book is about Jesus, the Lamb of God slain for the redemption of His people. It is a book about hope and God's faithfulness. So the invitation is given to all readers today: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17). Heed the invitation—come!



1 An excellent volume is Ranko Stefanovic, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press,), 1–49. Another noteworthy commentary is Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 3–41.

2 Scripture is from the New International Version.

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DON'T BE AFRAID TO CRY

I could not have imagined that I would have seen one virus shut down the globe, from remote villages to gigantic cities, from country to country, and from continent to continent. Nor could I have envisaged one small bug halting commerce; wrecking stock markets; closing churches, synagogues, and mosques, entertainment halls and ballparks, schools and universities; and ushering in social distancing. One small virus has brought cities and nations, pastors and priests, and potentates and policymakers to their knees, indeed, “‘causing people to faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world’ ” (Luke 21:26, CEB).

During this pandemic, many people have gone to the hospital and never returned. Many have been cruelly robbed of the precious privilege of holding their loved ones’ hands one last time and saying goodbye. As physical distancing has been implemented and those infected have been isolated, the pain and suffering of so many have been exacerbated.

For those who have lost someone to this tragedy, I speak to you from a shepherd’s heart. Times like these remind us that there is indeed a Higher Power who offers words of compassion for our hard questions.

Hard questions

Has this pandemic become our educator, and are we willing to learn from it?

Is one virus showing us our need for God?

Should we be scared that this virus has mutated into virulent forms that could destroy us?

Could this situation invite us to see that Somebody bigger than you and me is in charge?

Is this miniature form of life telling us to take our eyes off kings, queens, popes, priests, presidents, celebrities, rulers, accomplishments, stock markets, and possessions and fix them on the Eternal?

Could one small microorganism be inviting us to “hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccl. 12:13, KJV)?

At such a time as this, our duty is to cry out with hearts holding on to faith, “ ‘Blessing and honor and glory and power / Be to Him who sits on the throne, / And to the Lamb, forever and ever!’ ” (Rev. 5:13, NKJV).

How can we hold to such a faith during these times of crisis? The author of Hebrews guides us to where our attention should be. “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

“For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls” (Heb. 12:1–3, NKJV).

Set in the form of a literary device called a chiasm, this Scripture’s most important feature occurs in the middle.¹ Here, the central point is “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.” This fixation on Jesus is not an option; it is an imperative. And if there was ever a time when this imperative was needed, it is now.

Compassionate words

My wife and I used to spend holidays with a relative who had young children. We had fun times together, and all would be fine until it was time for us to leave. Rather than face the parting, the children would go to hide. They hated parting. The knights of King Arthur’s Round Table had the same problem. When the time came for



Bertram L. Melbourne, PhD, is a professor of biblical language and literature at the Howard University School of Divinity, Washington, DC, United States.



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there to hold a hand or say goodbye. I could tell you I know how you feel because I could not be there to see my grandmother take her last breath. I was 750 miles from where my father was when he died, too far to touch him one last time. I was 1,450 miles away when my mother died, and we did not say our last farewell.

Your loss is real. Your empty chair is tangible. Your grief is genuine; your sorrow, profound. And for sure, your memories are genuine. Let them buoy you up and keep you going.

Jesus knows

I bring you some good news. God understands and feels your loss. God lost His only Son to death. It grieved God so much that He looked away from the Cross, causing His Son to cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34, KJV). Jesus also knows exactly how you feel and is empathizing with you. How can we be so sure? Because of the story of Lazarus.

Jesus was miles away when Lazarus passed. When He arrived, Martha blamed Him for not being there. She went so far as to suggest that Jesus' absence was a principal contributing factor to her brother's death (John 11:21). Jesus was so filled with anguish and compassion that He wept—yes, God wept (Luke 19:41, 42; John 11:35).

Don't be afraid to cry. Why?

King Arthur to depart, they begged him to stay and even offered to go with him. He told them these immortal words: "The old order changeth, yielding place to new, / And God fulfils himself in many ways."²

I am sorry for your loss. I am sorry if your loved one passed and you were not able to be

- › When you cry, you are following Jesus' example.
- › Tears are the language of the heart.
- › Tears are catharsis for the soul.
- › Tears release pent-up emotions.
- › Tears are not a foreign vernacular or a strange dialect to God.
- › Tears are a God-designed technique to grant relief.
- › Tears are an escape mechanism; they turn us away from the cause of our anguish and inward to our own bodily sensations.
- › Crying is healthy, natural, therapeutic, and curative.

Death reigns now, but soon death itself will die. First Corinthians 15:26 assures us that it will be the last enemy to be destroyed. Yet, be assured that no one will mourn for it. It will have no hope of a resurrection, *but your loved one does* if they had accepted Jesus as personal Savior and Lord.

Go ahead and cry now, for one day soon, you will not cry but laugh, jump for joy, shout, and praise when you see your loved one again.

Healing power

What lessons will we learn from this pandemic, its devastation and pain? What will be our takeaways? It is up to each of us to decide. Let us "not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13, NIV). Let us be people of hope. The blood of Jesus is our immunization against the life-draining effects of sin. This blood has lost none of its power—power to heal, power to comfort, and power to resurrect. It is available to you, and it is free. Do you have it? Indeed, if there ever seemed a time to accept it, would it not be now?



- 1 Bertram L. Melbourne, "An Examination of the Historical-Jesus Motif in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 26, no. 3 (1988): 281–297.
- 2 *The Passing of Arthur* 1:407, as quoted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 535.

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RESOURCES

Andrews Bible Commentary: Light. Depth. Truth.

vol. 1, edited by Ángel Manuel

Rodriguez. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2020.

The first volume of the *Andrews Bible Commentary*, covering the books of the Old Testament, was published in 2020. The second volume with the New Testament books is to follow soon. Under the capable and competent leadership of the general editor Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, some 60 Seventh-day Adventist scholars have written commentaries on the biblical books and authored informative introductions and helpful general articles as well as valuable essays on various subjects. The *Andrews Bible Commentary* accompanies the *Andrews Study Bible*, which first appeared in 2008 and has received wide support. In contrast to the *Andrews Study Bible*, which already contained thousands of study notes, the *Andrews Bible Commentary* provides a more in-depth commentary and additional information that goes significantly beyond the study notes of the *Andrews Study Bible*.

In the growing landscape of biblical commentaries covering various approaches and offering different emphases, the *Andrews Bible Commentary* unfolds and explores the potential impact that hope has on the thinking and life of human beings. In doing so, it provides a unique theological and genuinely Adventist contribution. Indeed, in several essays, one can find this emphasis on hope in enlightening discussions that help the reader gain a better understanding of God's character and His dealings with human beings.

Frank M. Hasel, PhD, is an associate director of the Biblical Research Institute, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.



One of the greatest strengths of the *Andrews Bible Commentary* is its readability. It is written in a style that makes the theological content easily accessible and understandable. It can be profitably used not only by biblical scholars and pastors but also by people who may have little formal theological training. The discussions in the articles and commentaries are generally up to date, reflect a good knowledge of the issues involved, and provide a fair and helpful overview of different positions. Pastors and church members will benefit from this commentary.

Throughout the entire commentary, there are additional instructive essays that offer helpful information. Some essays provide quite extensive explorations of significant issues, such as the laying on of hands (243–245), the theology of the Day of Atonement (264–267), the Sabbath in Deuteronomy (323–328), the extermination of the Canaanites (330–332), the imprecatory passages in the Psalms (733–735), the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah (885–889), the union of church and state (1033, 1034), and the cleansing of the sanctuary and judgment in Daniel (1043–1046). These additional essays often provide excellent answers to some difficult questions.

Rather than using a verse-by-verse approach, the *Andrews Bible Commentary* focuses on larger segments of the biblical narrative and features instructive introductions to the Pentateuch, the historical books, poetry and wisdom literature,

and the prophetic books. It also provides several important general articles:

“Hope and the Advent of God,” “Revelation and Inspiration of the Bible,” “Formation of the Biblical Canon,” “Biblical Interpretation,” “Interpreting Biblical Apocalyptic Prophecies,” “Faith and Science,” “Archeology and the Bible,” “Old Testament Timeline,” and “A Chronology Following the Internal

Timeline of the Bible.” These general articles provide a balanced and informative overview of particular issues and respond to typical inquiries concerning various theological topics. These additional essays often bring forth the beauty and hope of the biblical message, especially as it pertains to the Sabbath and the sanctuary.

The greatest strength of the *Andrews Bible Commentary* is, at the same time, its greatest weakness. The readability is achieved at the expense of a lack of references to sources and other literature. There are no footnotes or bibliography. Often, the reader is left with only a general but fair and balanced description of issues and questions. References to significant primary sources would have enhanced the usefulness of the commentary.

One difficulty that may appear minor is the specificity in the date of Creation that is provided (116). While the Seventh-day Adventist Church believes in a short-term Creation, its official publications have refrained from offering a specific date because of the complexities involved. This detail aside, the *Andrews Bible Commentary* is faithful to the meaning of the biblical text, affirms the historical reliability of the biblical account, endorses the unity of Scripture, is faith-affirming, and gives a balanced and fair interpretation of issues. It is a resource that pastors and informed church members of all faith backgrounds will find invaluable. 📖

Leading like Mordecai:

Four leadership values
from the book of Esther

LaKeisha Williams, PhD, is an educator and pastor's spouse, residing in Huntsville, Alabama, United States.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

I will never forget the year in upper elementary school that we students were able to use highlighter pens. That particular summer, I greatly anticipated shopping for school supplies with my parents. As I paced the aisles, carefully selecting the most appropriate items for a successful school year, my heart leaped when I reached the highlighter section. Without hesitation, I snatched up a four-pack of pens with different neon colors—yellow, green, orange, and pink—to add to my collection.

You can imagine my excitement on the first day of school when our teacher told us to take out our math notebooks. He neatly wrote several headings on the board, including the word “OBJECTIVE” at the top right corner under the date. After we completed our daily practice of notetaking, he told us that we could use a highlighter pen to emphasize the objective for the day. That was arguably my favorite part of the class as I decided which color to select. I remember trying each color during the first few weeks of school, but eventually, one color stood out as best. The neon yellow was like surrounding the words with flashing lights that bellowed, “Over here! Over here!” Such is the case with Esther 10.

The highlight moment

The concluding statements in the chapter mark yellow highlighter all over the main idea of the story. It is easy to get stuck on King Ahasuerus's dealings with Vashti that led to Esther's appointment or Haman's sick efforts to take down his enemy only to have his plans to flip back onto himself. Perhaps, you stopped at the timeless “for such a time as this” monologue Mordecai gave to Esther as she vacillated in indecision on how to use her sudden, unexpected authority to help her people. But, in case you missed it, Esther 10 provides us with all we need to know.

“For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and *great* among the Jews, and *accepted* of the multitude of his brethren, *seeking the wealth of his people*, and *speaking peace to all his seed*” (Esther 10:3, KJV; emphasis added).

Suddenly, in the last verse of the story, Mordecai, an apparently minor character in the book, emerges as the hero.

Through its short description of Mordecai's leadership style, the passage provides four leadership values for the contemporary leader. They represent a moral imperative for God's leader. First, true greatness comes only from the one True and Living God. Second, favor is a sign of great leadership. Third, great leaders seek good for those they serve. Finally, great leaders pursue peace.

Leadership value 1: Greatness comes from God

The book of Esther presents a variety of leadership styles. On one end of the spectrum, we have a leader who has obtained everything by himself—or so he thinks. Ahasuerus has fought hard to attain a prominent place. Unfortunately, his self-confidence is weak, and he constantly looks over his shoulder to see whether someone is trying to trick him. As a result, he is quick to eliminate anyone who challenges his authority, and his followers (for example, Haman) behave similarly.

However, Esther 10 describes Mordecai as a recipient of greatness given by the king. Throughout the book, we find a man humbly serving at the palace gates (Esther 2:19). The phrase “sitting at the gates” indicates that he had a significant position in the royal administration. The name Mordecai, in fact, means “little man.” Although he never asks God for greatness, Mordecai exhibits diligence, boldness, and purpose, whatever his role (Esther 2:11; 3:2;

4:14). In this humble attitude, greatness finds him (Esther 9:4).

The final chapter of Esther suggests that alternate options exist for great leadership. When given by God, greatness in leadership comes with an assurance that position is not about self but about the One who uniquely placed the individual to serve in that capacity. It allows the leader to rely on God's power to exalt in His own time. The journey of such leaders honored by God will build character that will enable them to withstand difficulty.

At a time when aspiring leaders compete for power at the expense of moral behavior, it is a relief to know that only God gives lasting greatness in leadership. It is also no surprise that God provides greatness to the Mordecais of the world (James 4:10; 1 Pet. 5:6).

Leadership value 2: Great leaders are favored by others

"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Gal. 6:7, NIV). The principle of sowing and reaping is a familiar concept for those caught up in the throes of leadership. Many leadership theories—for example, those of transactional, transformational, and servant leadership—suggest that give-and-take is a necessity in a quality leadership-member exchange. If you, as a leader, wish to know how you are faring, look at your followers. What is the fruit of your service?

For Ahasuerus, his followers were sneaky and selfish. His leadership fostered an environment in which everyone scrambled over each other in their drive to be the greatest. They constantly glanced over their shoulders to make sure that no one scammed them.

In contrast, Mordecai's leadership did not have to demand respect. Rather, he gained it by giving it first. Mordecai did not operate above those around him. He was no respecter of persons (Esther 3:5; Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11). Mordecai was very involved with and cared deeply for his people (Esther 8:15–17; 4:1). Not haughty or puffed up, he took his current position as a serious responsibility from God and encouraged others to do the same (Esther 4:14). People recognized and discussed it. As a result of how he conducted himself and God's public exaltation of his status, Mordecai became famous (Esther 9:4).

So it is with contemporary leadership. God's call to leadership requires faithfulness and genuine care and concern in even the little things.

When given by God, greatness in leadership comes with an assurance that position is not about self but about the One who uniquely placed the individual to serve in that capacity.

In due time, the Lord will not only exalt such a leader but also cause that leader to be deeply and personally accepted by others. When leadership operates in humility and greatness, it receives sincere favor.

Leadership value 3: Great leaders seek good for those they serve

We cannot overstate the importance of leaders pursuing good for their followers. However, such a concept is difficult to grasp when sometimes what *is* good does not *feel* good. One of the most striking incidents in the book of Esther is the conversation that Mordecai has with her concerning her duty to speak with the king about the impact of the recent ruling on her people.

Mordecai sought good to the extent that he assured Esther that if she did not act quickly, she and her family would be lost, and God would

bring deliverance for the Jews through someone else. Such a pronouncement was a direct blow to himself. Esther was the closest of kin—if she perished, so would he!

A leader's responsibility is to do what is best by maximizing benefit to all whom he or she has contact with, to care for others even at the price of self-sacrifice. Even amid moral conundrums, successful contemporary leaders consider the overall benefit and impact to their communities when making decisions. Their perspective focuses on lasting benefits for all. The reality that great leadership seeks good for others does not ignore the imperfect context in which most leaders operate. Seeking good requires godly wisdom to know what is best in a particular situation.

God's example of leadership also shows us that He desires pure good that is deeply internalized and manifests itself in joy and excitement. When following this example, contemporary leaders recognize the roles of goodwill and pleasure for their followers. While life sometimes includes negative consequences, that is never God's original intent (Genesis 50:20). Unfortunately, the world is not perfect, but that fact should not prevent a leader from making a concerted and intentional effort to lift the heavy-laden heart as much as possible. God wants His creation to experience the good things of life. Mordecai sought the same for his followers and thus provides a third leadership value for today's leaders.

Leadership value 4: Great leaders pursue peace

By its very nature, leadership involves encountering turbulent turbulent times. The most effective change and lasting growth will involve tension and conflict. However, the delicate balance that a leader seeks has peace as its goal even though the experience of leadership is never always peaceful. But in the end, peace becomes a welcome retreat. Wise leaders know that peace for their followers will increase loyalty and effectiveness.

Mordecai's leadership style contrasts directly with those of others in the story, namely Ahasuerus; Haman; and, yes, even Esther herself. In the case of Ahasuerus, we find a leader quick to anger. People continually seek to appease him. Haman is an example of a self-centered leader who wants power and greatness so badly that he is willing to destroy an entire nation. Even Esther provides an example of a leader who is hesitant to fully grasp the power and purpose of

her position. In each of these instances, the leader either forfeits or nearly misses an opportunity to bring peace to his or her nation.

Mordecai's leadership example represents a personal concern for peace in the lives of his followers. Contemporary leaders seek not only good for their followers but also peace. But that requires continual study into the affairs of the people they serve. It demands regular positive and authentic communication. Such positive interaction creates an environment that enables their followers to work efficiently.

A source for leadership guidance

My yellow pen dried out within a month or two. But the highlighted daily math objectives continued to shine brightly through to the end of the year. Every once in a while, my teacher gave us a test over a chapter or unit. He always encouraged us to review our highlighted sections to make sure we had the main points seared into our memories. I remember turning the pages of my notes one at a time and reading each brightly colored phrase aloud. Sure enough, as long as I studied, I successfully passed each quiz or test. Looking back, I see that my teacher understood what he was doing all along. He knew what was on the test and what I needed to know to pass.

I believe that our Great Teacher has the same in mind for His students. He has highlighted passages all throughout Scripture. Esther 10 is just one of many passages for today's leaders highlighted by God to encourage us to reflect on the leadership values of an unexpected hero, Mordecai. Mordecai's story demonstrates that God-ordained leadership receives greatness. It reveals the reciprocal value of gracefulness and favor when interacting with others. Last it emphasizes the importance of seeking the goodwill and peaceful welfare of others.

Leaders who struggle to have an assurance of their impact need to take the time to consider Mordecai's story recorded in the book of Esther. Pause and step away from the questionable leadership examples found in the world around us and turn your attention to a lasting guide in God's Word. God has a yellow highlighter pen moving throughout the inspired pages. As you discover those valuable treasures, you will prepare yourself to be successful for such a time as this. 📖

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Writing

for public ministry



Gene G. Bradbury,
MDiv, MA in Theopoetics
and Writing, is a retired
pastor residing in
Sequim, Washington,
United States.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

The hallway has rooms on both sides, each door with an author's name on it. The carpet is worn from the trips that I have made knocking on doors. The visits began in childhood, but as time passed, my visits became more intentional.

In early adulthood, I found the doors of Hermann Hesse, Willa Cather, Wendell Berry, Virginia Woolf, John Steinbeck, and a thousand more. During my college years, I visited the pre-Socratic philosophers, then Plato and Augustine. Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Nietzsche followed. At every stage, I read—religiously, intentionally, and intrinsically.

When someone asks me, “What must I do to become a writer?” I answer, “Read, read, read.” Can any professional excel in what they do without reading? Carl Rogers, psychologist and writer, thinks not: “I’d rather have someone who reads widely and deeply in literature or physics, than to have someone who has always majored in psychology in order to become a therapist.”¹

This is equally true for the parish pastor or church professional. Exegeses, counseling, and spiritual direction are necessary disciplines, but deep reading seasons these vocations.

Reading is essential to ministry and requires time. We often hear how important it is to take time for solitude, prayer, and meditation. True enough. But it is reading that has influenced my ministry more than have all the others. The visits to authors inform my thinking, teaching, preaching, and daily conversations in a variety of ways.

Writing

Reading brings with it inspiration. Authors' insights inform sermons and teaching material. Pastoral ministry becomes flavorful, seasoned

with stories and experiences. When a presenter has salt in herself, even a passing conversation becomes more interesting.

I recently thumbed through a stack of old sermons to find one where I did not use a story or example from my reading. I found none. Sermons may be didactic on occasion, but the best sermons engage listeners and stimulate thinking. Stories, parables, and personal experiences open the ears and minds of listeners. Reading supplies that. I may preach from a given text, but my sermons are filled with examples that worshipers identify with. Reading becomes the mother of invention. A sermon based on factual material is rarely remembered. But one with a story provides a hook on which to hang one's thoughts.

Dark horses—email, Facebook, text messages, Twitter—prance alongside us each day, demanding our attention. They are not bad horses in themselves. But too often, they set the pace. We use smartphones and numerous electronic devices to make life easier and our time more efficient. Dark horses are fast, but the pace they set is often a blur.

Pastors need to be up to date when it comes to technology. But today, the need is to let go of the electronic pacifier and listen to the soft wings of the Spirit. Without time for thoughtfulness and silence, how deep can we get? If we pace ourselves by soundbites and texting, how long will it be before we lose the capacity for patient reflection and thoughtful writing? In the words of T. S. Eliot: “Where shall the word be found, Where will the word / Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence.”²

There are times when leaders in the church must slow down and pay attention to the white horses of thoughtfulness, silence, and patient

Is it possible to write in a way that invites the nonreligious to hear the message? Can a pastor or church professional write in a way that provides a more universal truth?

writing. When we do, our sermons, classes, and conversations will engage the people we serve.

Left and right brains

Author Lewis Carroll is of particular interest to those who preach weekly sermons. Preaching requires that the speaker address people who favor both the left and right hemispheres of the brain. How many left-brain, or analytic, listeners tune out when I begin to tell stories or read poetry? How many others' eyes glaze over if I become overly didactic and rely on facts and statistics? A balance is needed.

I have learned that as a minister, I can, as the apostle Paul suggests, try to be "all things to all people." I can do careful, scholarly research to address those who look for information in my sermons. At the same time, I can bring the magical world of parables, metaphors, stories, and art to the ears of those who listen with the right brain.

Both of the worlds of scholarship and storytelling begin in my study. My study is a small room lined with bookshelves. But on the walls are prints by the artist J. Blake Burgess, who painted scenes from the wonderful stories of Willa Cather. In the study, scholarship and storytelling come together. Though I am primarily a right-brained person, thinking in story and parable, the books open on my desk are often more exegetical, ancient history and psychology. Spending time away from sound bites and fast-paced answers allows me to step away and listen to the voices necessary to be a good pastor and thoughtful writer.

Public ministry

There are times in public ministry when you are overt concerning your profession. There may be other times when you are covert, perhaps for the sake of appealing to a nonbeliever. Many people will not pick up a book or magazine that is termed religious. Is it possible to write in a way that invites the nonreligious to hear the message? Can a pastor or church professional write in a way that provides a more universal truth? As a

pastor, I may wear a clerical collar or a badge that reads, "Chaplain"—I may also wear shorts and a T-shirt and still be the same person.

I went to meet a family at the hospital. I wore a suitcoat with nothing to identify me as a clergyman; but there is something more defining than your outer garb. I walked into the waiting room to find the family. A woman sitting opposite the doorway said, "You're a pastor, aren't you?"

I quickly looked at my coat and shoes to see if there was an identifying tag or badge that gave me away. There was not. I wondered how she knew. Perhaps sometimes it just shows.

A gentleness of spirit may also come through in our writing, one that does not turn people away. I sometimes write anonymously. The truth I wish to convey will come through whether I identify myself or not. Indeed, it may reach a larger audience if I do not. At times, it is best to remember the instructions of an old pastor who said, "The preacher is one who so holds up the Word of God that his (or her) fingertips cannot be seen." The preacher is a voice that strives to remain invisible so the message may be heard. The writer may point to the reality that is there but then move out of the way.

Indeed, the carpet is worn from the ceaseless trips that I make to the doors of these writers. The books that I read have become part of my newsletters, personal correspondence, devotional writing, children's stories, face-to-face talks, and sermons. Whether the preparation is for public ministry or private consultation, it has the same purpose: writing is incarnational. Through it, words are made flesh.



1 Marilyn McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 133.

2 McEntyre, 133.

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The Holy Spirit does not quarantine

During this past year, pastors and lay leaders around the world have had to adjust to the new realities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The ways we conduct Sabbath School and divine hour services have been affected. Many churches at different times went completely online, something unimaginable a year ago.

In the midst of this new landscape, one area with the most challenges has been outreach. All of this has been true for my church too.

I was sitting on a plane about a year ago (when flying was fun), heading to a wedding in the Loma Linda, California, area, when the news reported that the airport where I was about to land had just confirmed a case of COVID-19. Panic came over me.

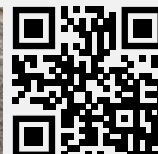
Over the course of the next several weeks, I realized that this pandemic was not going away for a long time. It felt like a tsunami was on its way. The majority of our church functions involved personal contact. But that quickly changed. A strange virtual communication app such as Zoom became so common and understood that it has transformed into an action word like “Facebook me,” “I just tweeted it,” “google it.” Now we say, “Let’s Zoom!”

God’s opportunities

While the constraints imposed by the pandemic felt restricting to our ministry, our limitations were God’s opportunities. We serve a God who is never caught by surprise and has His eye on His church, His bride. As the Bible says: “The LORD will guide you always; / he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land / and will strengthen your frame. / You will be like a well-watered garden, / like a spring whose waters never fail” (Isaiah 58:11, NIV).

As local church leaders, we decided to go to our knees and humble ourselves. We did not know what to do but pray earnestly and seek God’s wisdom. We first started to pray for 40 days together via conference call, praying for the Lord to lead us to people who were earnestly seeking Him. We enjoyed that experience together so much that we started a weekly prayer time apart from the normal

Moise Ratsara serves as the pastor of the Kalamazoo Seventh-day Adventist Church, Kalamazoo, Michigan, United States.



prayer meeting. A few months later, we joined the 10 Days of Prayer organized by the Revival and Reformation initiative of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And God moved upon us. Through that process, we realized that the Holy Spirit is not quarantined and that God was preparing us to meet the people who really were seeking Him.

Our church secretary texted me one morning and said to contact a lady who had called the church. I called, and what happened next was a direct answer to our prayers. Due to the pandemic, their church had gone virtual, and she and her family were trying to find supplemental spiritual programs. After channel surfing, she came across an Adventist program on prophecy and discovered the Sabbath truth. They were hooked. Searching for a Sabbath-keeping church, she called a dozen churches, one of them being ours. After our conversation, she meticulously looked at our church website, including our doctrines, and started returning tithe. The husband started searching for work that did not conflict with the Sabbath, and they are now actively enjoying Bible studies and attending church. But this is only one of the many stories of people who have sought us out instead of our seeking them over the course of the months we have been praying as a church family.

We now have three times more Bible studies and solid interests than we did prior to the pandemic. All the glory goes to God. We cannot boast but earnestly praise the Lord. I am convinced more than ever that a church that prays together stays together and, by God’s grace, grows together, even when physically distanced from each other.

“The greatest victories to the church of Christ or to the individual Christian are not those that are gained by talent or education, by wealth or the favor of men. They are those victories that are gained in the audience chamber with God, when earnest, agonizing faith lays hold upon the mighty arm of power.”¹ God moves among us even in a pandemic. He is never caught by surprise.



1 Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1970), 69.



North American Division stands with Asian-American community

COLUMBIA, MARYLAND, UNITED STATES

The leadership of the North American Division (NAD) is condemning recent acts of violence and hate against the Asian-American community. A statement released in March by the NAD president, secretary, and treasurer called for members to unite in support of their Asian brothers and sisters as they face undeserved animosity.

"As leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, we denounce the recent acts of violence and hatred against our brothers and sisters in the Asian-American community. God calls us to love all His children, no matter our differences. Our diversity makes us stronger as a people, and the variety of cultures making up our territory are a direct reflection of His creative power. We need to celebrate our differences and embrace the uniqueness of each and every person.

"We call on all our members to stand up and support the Asian-American communities where they live. Be vocal in your appreciation of our Asian brothers and sisters in their time of need. Create a safe space for them by listening to

their experiences and showing Christ-like compassion," the statement continued.

The NAD officers have a passionate connection to Asia.

NAD president **G. Alexander Bryant** served as a student volunteer in Japan, describing his year there as "an incredible opportunity to learn to appreciate the richness of the Japanese culture and people." NAD secretary **Kyoshin Ahn** served as president of the Korean Churches Association in North America and is the first Korean American elected to serve as NAD executive secretary.

NAD treasurer and chief financial officer **Randy Robinson** is married to **Denise Halenz**, whose family is steeped in mission. Denise's parents, **Dr. Donald and Elaine Halenz**, worked for decades as teachers and missionaries in Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines.

Bryant shared, "As Seventh-day Adventists, we represent almost every people group in the world. Our diversity empowers us to strongly speak in support of all communities. Jesus encouraged us with these words, 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another' " (John 13:34, NKJV).

The NAD officers want the Asian-American community to "know we stand with them and beside them during this season where they are being unfairly targeted." [North American Division Communication/*Ministry*]

Adventist international event for the Deaf and Deaf-Blind connects hundreds

BERN, SWITZERLAND

Organized by Adventist Deaf Ministries International (ADMI) of the Inter-European Division (EUD) of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the second Adventist International Congress for the Deaf and Deaf-Blind connected hundreds of Possibilities Ministries leaders and members on March 12 and 13, 2021.

According to ADMI director and EUD communication director **Corrado Cozzi**, the informal exchanges on Zoom were the most important part of the event, which was otherwise marked by well-thought-out presentations. "Many people stayed until ninety minutes after the end of the daily program to talk!" he added.

Special guests and speakers included **Jitka Moravkova**, a deaf theology student from the Czech Republic; **Henry Maina Kamau**, a deaf pastor from Kenya; and **Douglas Domingo da Silva**, a deaf pastor from Brazil. The three of them shared spiritual messages focused on

how they can overcome any obstacle with the invaluable assistance of Jesus.

Other guests included international mime **Carlos Martínez**, Adventist Church Possibilities Ministries director **Larry Evans**, and Adventist Church Deaf Ministries associate coordinator **Jeff Jordan**.

Even though the program was mainly presented in English, it was translated into seven other languages and a variety of sign languages. Participants were invited to look for the interpreter showing a specific flag for their language. Additional activities included an interactive segment in which participants could share a specific contribution of their own.

The event was coordinated by **Geoffrey Zobries**, director of the Adventist German Association of the Deaf and Deaf-Blind. Being



Photo: Inter-European Division News

deaf himself, Zobries had a unique understanding of what topics would best be received and the congress successfully overcame the challenges of an online event to offer tools and encouragement to participants across several continents. [Andreas Mazza, Inter-European Division, and *Adventist Review*]

Adventists attend religious liberty event with Portugal's president

PORTO, PORTUGAL

António Amorim, president of the Adventist Portuguese Union of Churches in Portugal, attended a special meeting with other religious leaders in the Municipal Chamber of Porto on March 9, 2021.

During the event, Portugal's president, **Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa**, said he acknowledged and valued the contribution of religious communities to the social fabric of Portugal.

Seventeen religious communities active in Portugal attended the ceremony, including representatives from Christian denominations and the Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim faiths. The ceremony was part of a program marking the beginning of Rebelo de Sousa's second term as president.

"Thanks to all those who make a reality of one of the fundamental freedoms enshrined in our

constitution: religious freedom," Rebelo de Sousa said in his address to religious leaders. "Pluralism characterizes a free, open, and democratic society."

De Sousa also said that "Portugal has a great debt to religious confessions in the areas of education, health, social benevolence, and crisis management, including our fight against the



António Amorim, president of the Adventist Portuguese Union of Churches (left) with Portugal president, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa

Photo: Portuguese Union Conference




pandemic.” And, he added, “in the last painful and exhausting year, our unrelenting struggle would be different were it not for your contribution to crucial areas of national life.” According to de Sousa, churches were at the forefront of assistance to the underserved and underprivileged.

He also called on churches to engage in “constructive dialogue and unity of purpose, doing everything they can to stand for freedom, tolerance, mutual understanding, at a time when dividing and labeling seems so attractive.”

Adventist leaders in Portugal said they believe that the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s inclusion is a recognition of the denomination’s commitment to the defense and promotion of religious freedom. It is a principle that includes the right to believe according to one’s conscience

and to change, abandon, or share one’s beliefs. It also supports interreligious dialogue based on respect for differences and public expressions of faith.

“After receiving the visit of the president three years ago, this invitation is also a sign of our commitment to being witnesses of our faith,” Adventist leaders said. “Also, it stresses our resolve to share solidarity and hope.”

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a long and fruitful tradition of commitment to religious freedom, good relationships with authorities, and dialogue with other faith communities. Adventists understand that religious liberty and public affairs are relevant to its mission and contribution to society. [Portuguese Union Conference, and *Adventist Review*] 

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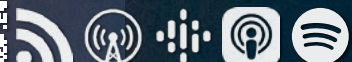
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She was right

The article “Psalms, Hymns, and Songs From the Spirit: Paul’s Formula for Congregational Worship” (Adriana Perera, January 2021) is excellent and elevating. Besides its overall appeal, there are a couple of areas that deserve further elucidation and development.

I fully concur with Perera’s assertion that “God created music,” believing the Creator to be the divine Originator of everything good within the creation. However, the God of origination is also the God of discovery (Gen. 2:19). Therefore, it may be a useful exercise to muse upon precisely how God may have led His human creatures to discover and express their musical abilities.

In regard to the fairly accurate assertion that Paul wrote “hundreds of verses” on Christ and the gospel but wrote “only two verses concerning music in worship,” the following twofold observation may be made. First, in 1 Corinthians 14, addressing, *inter alia*, languages in worship, Paul, in verses 7 and 8, makes some context-neutral references to “flute” and “harp” [NKJV] and a militant reference to “trumpet.” In verse 26 of chapter 14, Paul makes a worshipful reference to “psalm” [NKJV].

Second, as an accomplished theologian rather than a qualified musician, Paul rightly refers interested readers to where they may acquire more musical expertise:

in the biblical book of Psalms, which constitutes a sound, spiritually constrained foundation; in hymns, which are worshipfully or liturgically restrained; and in “spiritual songs,” which maintain elevated themes and styles.

Voice culture, mainly speaking and singing, by exercising the pulmonary and cardiovascular systems of the body, also strengthens the respiratory system against respiratory infections, inclusive of COVID-19.

Playing musical instruments, inclusive of wind instruments, also exercises the lungs and the heart, as well as arms, legs, fingers, and feet.

Thus, the well-handled subject of Perera’s article imparts benefits both in worship and everyday living.

—John Tumpkin, pastor, Cape Conference, South Africa

She was wrong

While endeavoring to build common ground concerning our musical differences, I believe Adriana Perera (January, 2021) has built her case on a wrong premise. Yes, as she wrote, “God created music.” However, not all music comes from God. He who once “led the heavenly choir” certainly has labored to pervert it. Given the alluring, transportive nature of music, it’s doubtful that pagan hymn tunes, “used in ritual sacrifices,” which included “wine

and drunkenness,” would be something Paul would invite new Christians to embrace. Rather, Paul cautioned, “It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything to cause your brother to stumble” (Rom. 14:21; 1 Cor. 8:10). This warning against eating a single piece of meat offered to an idol would unquestionably extend to using hymn tunes sung to pagan gods.

Early hymn writers understood this principle. Fanny Crosby shared, “Sometimes I need to reject the music proposed for my songs because the musicians misunderstand that the Fanny Crosby who once wrote for the people in the saloons has merely changed the lyrics. Oh my no. The church must never sing its songs to the melodies of the world.”¹ We have been taught that “music forms a part of God’s worship in the courts above, and we should endeavor, in our songs of praise, to approach as nearly as possible to the harmony of the heavenly choirs.”²

—Dave Moench, pastor, Mitchell Fellowship, Mitchell, South Dakota, United States



- 1 “Fanny Crosby Quotes and Sayings—Page 1,” Inspiring Quotes, accessed May 26, 2021, <https://www.inspiringquotes.us/author/1316-fanny-crosby>.
- 2 Ellen G. White, *Christian Education* (Battle Creek, MI: International Tract Society, 1894), 62, 63.





Practices to help you become an effective pastor

Being “pastor-teachers” (Eph. 4:11, VOICE) is not all about having dynamic personalities, great oral skills, or large congregations. It’s about an observable set of skills and abilities. I have encountered five practices that can promote leadership development in pastor-teachers.

1. Model the way

The business meeting was becoming quite intense. The topic at hand was church projects with accompanying funding concerns. Two sides were claiming to be right—I knew I had to act. I listened closely and maintained respect for both sides of the discussion. Then I attempted to synergize both parties toward a solution on which both parties could agree.

I recognized that it was not enough simply to teach or preach about effective conflict resolution or healthy interpersonal relations. I had to set an example for others to follow in appearance, thinking, verbal communication, actions, beliefs, and faith. Scripture uplifts Paul as an example for us: “Follow me as I follow Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1, MEV).

2. Inspire a vision

During one church meeting, I discussed our vision to build a bigger church sanctuary and dining facility. I explained why we needed them for future generations and to play a larger role in the community. At first, there was a murmur of unbelief in such a big project. I was not dismissive of the doubts. I allowed individuals time and space to express themselves, while remaining positive and upbeat. Over time, people came to accept, embrace, and share the vision. Now, after much hard work and sacrifice, both buildings stand to the glory of God.

Identify and discuss what is most important to others—core values and beliefs—to inspire and create a shared vision. Inspire others to get excited about possibilities for the future.

3. Challenge the process

Be prepared to challenge the way people are used to doing things. That does not translate into stubbornness, it means “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15, NKJV). Look for ways to improve things

when faced with tremendous obstacles. Don’t be afraid to take risks or even to make mistakes. Treat failures as learning opportunities to move forward.

Paul faced unprecedented challenges as he sought to build a nascent church. He never lost sight of his goal because he saw it as God’s goal for him. “I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, / That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:47, NKJV).

4. Enable others

I had a very shy and timid brother at church who rarely spoke and did not want to be a part of the worship service. Instead of giving him a big challenge, I just asked him to help with the collection. He is now leading song and prayer service with ease and will, on occasion, participate in Bible class teaching.

Actively involve others, building Spirit-filled teams and congregations by fostering collaboration. Respecting a person’s gifts is what sustains extraordinary efforts. Strive to create an atmosphere of trust and human dignity while recognizing that gifts are not only to be affirmed, but they are also to be developed.

5. Encourage the heart

Be the “glue” that bridges the gaps between differing opinions and helps each side respect the other. To keep hope and determination alive, recognize contributions that each individual makes and tries to accomplish. Encourage and motivate people to feel like heroes. Barnabas was called the son of encouragement. He helped bridge the gaps between the Greek and Jewish cultures. Even when there was a sharp disagreement between Paul and John Mark, Barnabas encouraged them both. Getting to know the members and relating to things they are passionately connected to will always bring about better results.

Whether you are a pastor, chaplain, evangelist, teacher, deacon, or deaconess, develop your leadership abilities. If you pray and ask God for guidance and wisdom, He will give you that ability to lead, using your Holy Spirit-ordained gifts for His plan and purpose.

Geary Smith, MEd, from the Church of Christ, is a teacher in the Mexia Independent School District, serving Mexia and Tehuacana in Texas, United States.



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