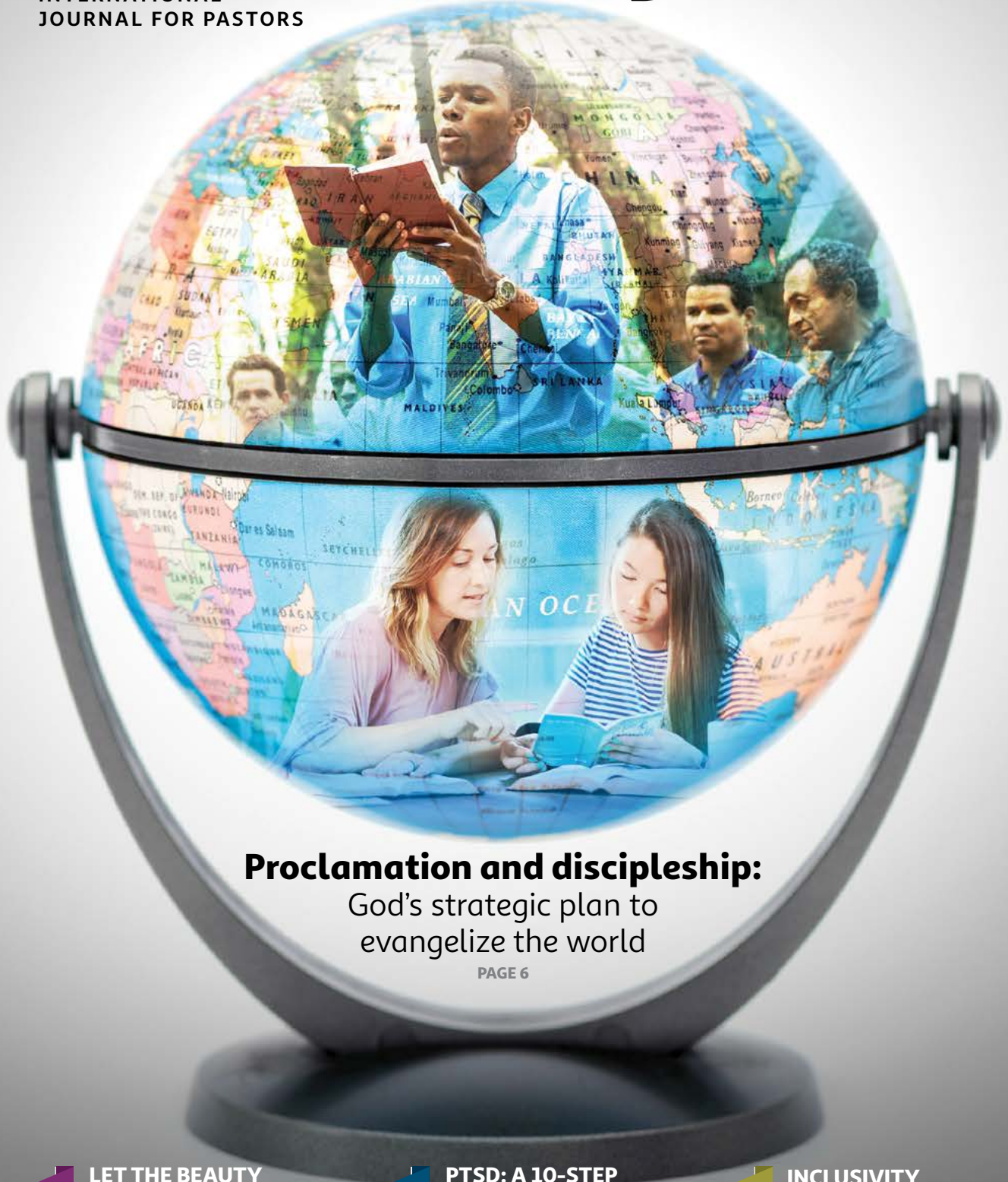


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Smile again

The world is opening up,” screamed the newspaper headlines. After 18 or so months of the pandemic, my wife and I welcomed the news with gratitude and relief. We could now visit Pattiejean’s mother in Bermuda, hospitalized for 10 months.

One visitor per day was allowed, but pastors and chaplains were additionally welcome, so I entered the hospital in this capacity. The nurse told me, “You can’t see Mrs. McMahon just yet, Pastor, as her daughter is with her. But let me have you meet with her.”

The nurse whisked me to the room. “Mrs. Brown,” she declared, “a pastor has come to visit your mother. He’ll come back later, but I wanted you to meet him—this is Pastor Brown.” Pattiejean received a brand-new introduction to her husband. It was a rare moment to smile.

We have tossed around the word *unprecedented* with frequency during this pandemic. However, centuries ago, with year-long lockdown restrictions lifted, Noah received a brand-new introduction to his world. It was a rare moment to smile.

As we look at ways to open our churches responsibly, we can take a few lessons from Noah’s lockdown.

1. Catastrophe: empathize rather than analyze. Four million dead from COVID-19. What a tragedy. Yet, like Noah, we remain people of hope and preachers of righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5). Jesus said that sin and suffering allow us to “see God work a miracle” (John 9:3, CEV). Flood time is not the time to debate God’s involvement, it is the time to help God’s children. Coronavirus testing, grocery giveaways, vaccination assistance . . . Perhaps God allowed this catastrophe so that you could be somebody’s miracle.

2. Glory: give thanks and an offering to God. Noah’s first act when the ark opened was to offer God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, acknowledging God’s rainbow of grace. Organize a joyful service of thanksgiving for God’s blessings thus far, including first-responders and involving songs of praise, prayers of thanks, offerings of gratitude, and a word from the Lord.¹—“In every thing give thanks” (1 Thess. 5:18, NKJV).

3. Hesitancy: acknowledge anticipation and apprehension. When the floodwaters abated, Noah sent out a raven, then a dove. When the dove returned the second time, it had a leaf in its mouth: it was safe to open up. You may find yourself going back and forth. Use a survey to



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assess your church's willingness and readiness to reopen—and be prepared to minister in a brand-new context.²

4. Apostasy: present truth to combat error.

The miracle of deliverance lingered with the descendants of Noah, but it didn't take long for apostasy to set in—enter the Tower of Babel. “As the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (Matt. 24:37). Pastors are seeing the hand of prophecy in current events.³ A Christocentric, historicist approach to prophecy will replace fanciful speculations with sensible interpretations.

5. Conspiracy: use digital platforms for God's glory.

“Others were unbelieving and rebellious, and even these did not believe alike in regard to the Flood. Some disbelieved in the existence of God, and in their own minds accounted for the Flood from natural causes.”⁴ Falsehoods have raged throughout the COVID-19 experience. We are in an infodemic. What can we do? Call in the cavalry—our young people! Let them use their digital creativity to combat falsehood with the truth of Jesus.⁵

6. Victory: stop wanting to go back to normal.

“So the LORD scattered them abroad from there [the Tower of Babel] over the face of all the

earth” (Gen 11:8). Now they could replenish the earth—as God had commissioned. From setbacks come springboards. Church buildings closed to the members. Church ministry opened to the world. The rainbow of grace shines again.

We cannot go back to what we had! We cannot espouse prepandemic ministry. Interaction must now replace spectatorship, and involvement must replace bystandership. Let's give our world a brand-new introduction to Jesus. Let's offer it a rare moment to smile.



1 Cf. Noah Washington, “Gathering in Gratitude.” YouTube video, 1:28:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yedZPH2JEhE>

2 Church Reopening Survey, <https://www.jotform.com/form-templates/church-reopening-survey>.

3 See Aaron Earls, “Vast Majority of Pastors See Signs of End Times in Current Events,” Lifeway Research, April 7, 2020, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2020/04/07/vast-majority-of-pastors-see-signs-of-end-times-in-current-events>.

4 Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1947) 72.

5 See Thom S. Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2020).



Proclamation and discipleship:

God's strategic plan to
evangelize the world



Christians consider it their God-given task to preach to a lost world. But how will this be accomplished? Matthew 24:14 and 28:19, 20 provide an answer. Often considered parallel, they actually envisage two different kinds of ministry. The former focuses on the global proclamation of the gospel; the latter, on an intense ministry of discipleship through baptism and teaching. Understanding these two complementary aspects of evangelism can lead to more focused and effective ministry.

Preaching to a lost world

“‘And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come’” (Matt. 24:14).¹

Matthew 24:14 envisages the global proclamation of the gospel before the end of the world. Four aspects of the text stand out.

First, the gospel will be preached in all the “world.” The Greek word *oikoumenē* denotes an inhabited place. Every inhabited village, town, megacity, or country needs to hear the gospel. To underline this universality, Jesus adds the phrase “to all the nations.” Nobody is to be left out.

Second, the focus of this global proclamation is “the gospel.” The Greek word *euaggelion* means “good news.”² It describes the good news that God has not left humanity to perish in sin but has provided salvation in His Son, Jesus Christ (e.g., Matt. 4:23; Mark 1:1; Acts 20:24; Rom. 1:1, 9). At the heart of the gospel is the Cross. But the gospel impacts the totality of human existence, in which case, every teaching of the Bible is part of the gospel because it aims to restore fallen humanity to the image and likeness of the Creator.

Third, the gospel will be “preached.” While the verb “to preach” has come to be identified with the act of delivering a sermon,³ the Greek word *kērussō* carries broader connotations. It can better be translated as “proclaim” (as it is in ESV, NRSV, and YLT).⁴ Moreover, the verb appears in passive form. The subject of the verb is not specified. In

other words, Jesus does not say who will make the proclamation.

Clearly, His church should be at the forefront of sharing the good news. However, God can, has, and will use other entities to complete the task. When science probes the intricacies of creation, an insight into the Creator’s character is manifested. Indeed, even “the stones” could cry out (Luke 19:40).

Fourth, the gospel will be proclaimed as “a witness.” Matthew 24:14 says nothing about repentance and conversion. These, too, are important. But the emphasis is on the proclamation rather than its result. For those who believe, the witness will lead to salvation;⁵ for those who disbelieve, the witness will be negative.⁶ The gospel must be proclaimed irrespective of response.

Noah preached deliverance from the Flood for 120 years, but nobody responded. Yet his proclamation had the approval of heaven. Peter calls Noah “a preacher of righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:5). Jonah, by contrast, was much less committed. Yet his proclamation led Nineveh to repentance (Jon. 3:5). Responses will vary, but the gospel must be proclaimed.

Summarizing, Matthew 24:14 envisages a global proclamation of the gospel in its fullness that will reach every inhabited area of the world and must be done irrespective of response.

Practical implications

For the first fourteen centuries of Christian history, the gospel was proclaimed by personal witness and public preaching. Both remain as important as ever.

Then printing entered the fray, greatly facilitating gospel proclamation. The first full-scale book to come off Gutenberg’s press was a Bible in 1455.⁷

Then came radio and television with the potential to reach millions of people. They have been extensively utilized and remain relevant. But they require technical expertise and abundant resources.



Recently the internet has surpassed all other media forms in terms of reach. The number of internet users grew from 16 million or 0.4 percent of the world's population in 1995 to 361 million (5.8 percent) in 2000, 1,971 million (28.8 percent) in 2010, and 5,053 million (64.2 percent) in 2020.⁸ Compared to other forms of communication, the internet requires less technical expertise and resources, making it an extremely cost-effective way of communication.

For example, in my country, Greece, with a population of 11 million, just three gospel-focused websites, run by a Seventh-day Adventist pastor and layperson, received 266,500 visits, 477,000 page views, and hundreds of requests for prayer, books, comments, or other info, in one year. A YouTube channel that has been active for a little over a year received 44,736 views in the last 365 days,⁹ with the number growing steadily. At no time in history have so many Greek speakers had contact with the gospel in such numbers on a daily basis. This is proclamation, pure and simple. The internet is God's gift to His church to facilitate the global proclamation of the gospel in these last days.

Talent, personnel, and resources should be used to maximize the use of all media, especially the internet, to ensure that every person within an entity's jurisdiction has the opportunity to hear the gospel. Not doing so is failure to live up to God's primary mission for us, as explained in Matthew 24:14.

Discipleship through teaching

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19, 20).

Matthew 28:19, 20 is often understood as parallel to Matthew 24:14.¹⁰ In reality, it paints a different goal and, therefore, ministry. While Matthew 24:14 focuses on proclamation, Matthew 28:19, 20 focuses on what should be done with those who respond to the proclamation. It outlines a process of disciple-making. The two texts are not parallel but complementary.

In Matthew 28:19, 20, Jesus commands the disciples to make other disciples. But what is a disciple? Is a church member the same as a disciple?

A church member is a person who has accepted Christ's salvation for his or her life and been baptized. A disciple is a person who has believed, been baptized, identified his or her spiritual gifts, and

uses them harmoniously for God's work without the need for constant prompting.¹¹

But how are disciples made? The answer is outlined in the three key verbs in Matthew 28:19, 20: the imperative *mathēteusate*, "make disciples"; and the two participles *baptizontes*, "baptizing," and *didaskontes*, "teaching." The imperative defines the mission; the two participles, the means. "What shall we do, Lord?" "Make disciples." "How shall we make disciples?" "By baptizing and teaching." A disciple is made through baptism and careful instruction.

Baptism is a specific act that takes place once. As such, the single long-term factor that determines whether a person becomes a disciple is teaching. Without focused teaching, there can be no discipleship. This is a profound truth that we should take seriously.

In a biblical sense, teaching is not limited to imparting information. Teaching, rather, involves life transformation through personal instruction, mentoring, and the modeling of a Christlike life. This is the teaching that produces disciples.

It is noteworthy that Jesus places "baptizing" before "teaching." This has led some to incorrectly assume that the practice of thoroughly preparing baptismal candidates is wrong; that individuals should be baptized as soon as they accept Jesus, leaving the work of instruction for a later time. Such an approach misses the point. If teaching is the single, ongoing factor determining discipleship, we need more of it, not less.

Prebaptismal instruction can be compared to courtship. Courtship is the time when a man and a woman get to know each other and their mutual expectations from marriage to gauge compatibility. Prebaptismal instruction prepares a person for a lifelong commitment to Christ and His church and, therefore, should be thorough.

In a husband-wife relationship, courtship represents a preparatory stage. The deeper process of knowing takes place after marriage and is a lifelong process. Similarly, prebaptismal instruction invites people to know who Jesus is so that they can make an intelligent decision to follow Him. The relationship, however, matures with time and involves lifelong learning.

If teaching should precede baptism, why does Jesus arrange the two verbs in the order they appear, baptizing-teaching, rather than the other way around? The answer lies in the encompassing words: "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (v. 20). The word "all" goes far beyond prebaptismal instruction.

Prebaptismal instruction focuses on Bible doctrines, but biblical instruction must go beyond that. Jesus provides an example. He did not spend three and a half years teaching the disciples Bible doctrines. As faithful Jews, this they knew already. The teaching of Jesus touched all aspects of faith—having a deeper relationship with God, overcoming temptation, praying, witnessing, Bible study. Indeed, the phrase “teaching them . . . all things that I have commanded you” includes everything in the Bible because everything was given for our edification. The teaching, therefore, that turns unbelievers to believers, and then to disciples, may begin with doctrine but expands to every aspect of Christian existence.

Thus understood, the chronological sequence baptizing-teaching is not a call for less teaching before baptism but for ongoing, lifelong teaching after baptism.

One more thought: Jesus did not state who would do the work of proclamation. By contrast, the command to make disciples was addressed to the disciples. Even the stones may help proclaim the gospel, but only a disciple can make another disciple.

Practical implications

Proclamation ministry, as described in Matthew 24:14, is best done by organizational entities that have resources and expertise. By contrast, discipleship is best done on a local level in the local church. As the gospel is proclaimed using different media and methods, people will respond. The local church is the best entity to which such people should be directed.

Therefore, every local church should be a discipleship center, a place where unbelievers can become believers and believers become disciples. In practice, this means the following:

Every nonbeliever who takes an interest in spiritual matters should be personally contacted by a local pastor or a lay leader.

Every nonbeliever with whom personal contact has been established should be offered Bible studies either in person or in a small group. Discipleship without Bible study is untenable and membership without mentorship is ineffectual. Mentorship should be offered as faith develops and grows to maturity.

Every local church should have an ongoing teaching ministry both for newcomers and members with a view to building discipleship. The Sabbath School is an excellent tool, but other activities outside of the worship hours should be explored.

A strong teaching ministry, based on the Bible and modeling Christian life, will build strength in the local church and help turn unbelievers into believers and believers into disciples.

Synthesis

Matthew 24:14 and 28:19, 20 outline the work of evangelizing the world. The former describes a global proclamation that is carried out irrespective of response and where every legitimate means should be utilized; the latter focuses more on the individual to build disciples. The two go hand in hand.

Proclamation alerts society to the claims of the gospel and will bring to the forefront those who have spiritual yearnings. Discipleship will discern such spiritually yearning individuals, develop them to be proficient disciples, and deploy them as effective witnesses for Jesus.

A harmonious blending of ministries covering both aspects of the evangelization spectrum is the optimum recipe for successfully working with God to share His love with a lost world.



- 1 Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the New King James Version.
- 2 Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon: Founded Upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1945), s.v. “εὐαγγέλιον.”
- 3 Merriam-Webster, s.v. “preach,” accessed March 5, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/preach>.
- 4 Liddell and Scott, *Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “κηρύσσω.”
- 5 Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary; The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 493.
- 6 Adolf von Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus: seine Sprache, sein Ziel, seine Selbstständigkeit: ein Kommentar zum ersten Evangelium* (Stuttgart, Germany: Calwer, 1963), 702.
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- 9 March 9, 2020 to March 8, 2021.
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- 11 Monte Sahlin, Velino Salazar, and James W. Zackrison, *How to Set Up and Run an Evangelization and Discipleship Cycle in Your Church* (Lincoln, NE: International Institute of Christian Ministries, 1990), 1–15.

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LET THE BEAUTY WE LOVE:

The preacher's art

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SCAN FOR AUDIO

Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American essayist and lecturer, was quoted as saying, “‘I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to go to church no more.’” Emerson complained that the preacher in question had never learned to convert life into truth. “‘There was not a hint in all the discourse that he had ever lived at all.’”¹

I have always been a writer. I had my first written work published when I was 21. Fast-forward about 30 years to the fall of 2010, when I became a full-time pastor. Suddenly I was speaking to large gatherings every week. I realized that there was a difference between words on paper and those given voice, but I *knew* it as technical knowledge. I had not had the opportunity to explore the distinction personally and regularly under the pressure of a listening congregation.

A different world

The Hebrew for “word” (*dabar*) means both “word” and “event.” The distance between page and voice is more than that between theory and practice—it is a different *world*. Walter Ong illustrates this when he comments that written words are residue: “When an often-told story is not actually being told, all that exists of it is the potential in certain human beings to tell it.”²

Writers have a certain orientation to the world: that of an observer and exegete. They develop a distinct cadence and style as they stand reflectively on the edge of experience, their own and that of others. Taking what was embodied, they translate it into poetic form with texture and cadence. In the process, they freeze reality with

words—their palette is language itself. James K. A. Smith talks about the writer’s vocation like this: “You will know you’re on your way to being a writer when you have a love/hate relationship with language: when you can be either thrilled or vexed by the cadence of a sentence or turn of phrase—when you can’t quite leave the paragraph on which you’re laboring because there’s a tic of timing that’s driving you mad. Or when you begin to consider the force of a sentence in terms of its ability to move rather than prove. In sum, you’ll know you’ve become a writer when you consider the sheer play of language to be a country to which you’d gladly emigrate.”³

Texture and subtleties

All writers have an intimate relationship with language and words. Depending on their worldview, they can use language to illuminate and explore. A Christian writer’s aim, such as a pastor’s, is to make the broken world whole, to reconnect it to the life of God. They enter the mystery of God and the world and invite their readers along on the adventure. Anne Lamott notes that writing and reading “deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul. . . . It’s like singing on a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You can’t stop the raging storm, but singing can change the hearts and spirits of the people who are together on that ship.”⁴

Such is the texture of the art, one with all the subtleties of music composition. As I began to explore the world of communication and language as a speaker, I started to reflect on the difference between the voice and the page. T. S. Eliot said the purpose of literature is to turn

blood into ink. Preaching calls us to transform ink back into blood. Embodiment is at the heart of the effort. I came to recognize this as I began to wrestle with language and metaphor in a new way. And I sensed the near hovering of the Spirit as I struggled and explored.

Learning from other preachers

About halfway through my first year as a preacher, I came across Clayton Schmit's article "Preaching Is Real Performance Art." He identified the tensions I was encountering. How much can I share personally before my story gets in the way? How can I not share personally if the gospel is about participation and incarnation? As I listened to other preachers, I began focusing on something new. I paid attention to how they used inflection and tone. I watched to see how their bodies either added to or detracted from the message. Especially, I waited for the poetic sensibility—how the metaphors added color and richness and how the beauty of a phrase evoked an image or feeling.

And I listened a lot for feeling. When feeling is authentic and rooted naturally in the story being told, it connects with the audience in a way that reproduces the world of the speaker. At their best, preachers re-enchant the world with their stories, reconnecting truth and beauty. Such moments are sacramental: a visible and invisible world meet, and the veil is lifted. Suddenly the Word is not only proclaimed but also *performed*. Schmit writes, "In literal terms, the word performance means to bring a message through (per) a form. It is a tool for expression, not a means of drawing attention to the performer. Our suspicions of performance are based on a caricature of the real thing, a performance pathology.

"Ultimately, if the preacher's words are to become the Word of life, they must be presented in a way that creates a world for listeners to inhabit. [This is more than] delivery. . . . To truly understand performance requires a theological understanding of human responsibility in the equation of incarnation."⁵

The preacher must "create a world for listeners to inhabit," and this requires incarnation: the embodiment of the Word. We are created as whole beings: flesh and intellect and affections. Performance requires that the whole person appears for the congregation, but not to draw attention to self—rather, at the service of the Word. Embodied emotion is critical: we know we are meeting the whole person when they present themselves to us emotionally.

Two of the most critical components of feeling in speech are pace and emphasis. Excessive speed makes emphasis difficult, damaging the integrity of the message and rendering embodiment impossible. Though such skills can be learned, yet that still is not the whole picture. The role of the Holy Spirit remains mysterious to me. Although we can invoke the Spirit, His work is His own. And like the wind, we do not know where He is going, yet we long to see the effect: the presence of the Spirit as Guide, hovering over the congregation, directing the preacher, sovereignly witnessing to the Word.

Integrity

Proclamation and performance belong together, much like Word and Spirit. The preacher's real platform is their own person and the life they have lived. The art of preaching requires embodiment, transforming words to life, storying the world so that others can enter in. The final goal is complex and even beyond our power: that our listeners might behold the beauty of God and His world and be changed. Let the beauty we love be what we do!

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened. Don't open the door to the study and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.⁶



- 1 Clayton Schmit, "Preaching Is Real Performance Art," *Christianity Today*, May 23, 2011, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2011/spring/preachingperformance.html>.
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- 3 James K. A. Smith, "Attention to Craft: Towards Being a 'Writer,'" *fors clavigera* (blog), March 16, 2011, <http://forsclavigera.blogspot.com/2011/03/>.
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- 5 Schmit, "Preaching."
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10 DAYS OF
PRAYER

Materials by
Evangelist Mark Finley

THE THREE ANGELS CALL TO PRAYER

January 5-15, 2022

“Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.”

REVELATION 14:6, ESV

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The uplifted Christ

One of the well-known passages in the New Testament is John 3:14, 15. Jesus was talking with Nicodemus about the process of salvation. He said, referring to Himself, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (NKJV). While it’s well-known, this text is poorly understood, and the result is a failure to understand what Jesus was trying to communicate.

Jesus was using an analogy from the Old Testament with which Nicodemus would have been familiar. The analogy is confusing when we fail to understand the nature of the original event and how it functioned as a type of Christ’s work for our salvation. Many wonder how a serpent could function as a type of Christ that would reveal the way of salvation. Nicodemus, no doubt, understood better than we do.

The Old Testament event

The original event involved a rebellion on the part of God’s people. From the discouraging report of the ten spies and the results (Num. 13:31; 14:10) to the attempt of the tribes to enter Canaan despite warnings that they would fail (vv. 40–45) to the rebellion by Korah and company (Num. 16:1–35) and the murmuring that ensued against Moses and Aaron (vv. 41–49), with God ending the controversy through the budding of Aaron’s rod (Num. 17:1–11), Israel continued to rebel against God.

After they made a vow to the Lord to destroy the Canaanite cities if He would deliver them into their hand, God helped Israel defeat the Canaanites and destroy their cities (Num. 21:1–3). But no sooner had they begun to move again than they became impatient with having to travel around Edom (v. 4; cf. Num. 20:14–21). Numbers 21:5 says that “they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!’”¹ They were referring, of course, to the manna, which typified Christ (John 6:32, 33). They despised it and its efficacy. They also denied that the water from the rock followed them in their journey, which also represented Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). They preferred the food and drink of Egypt to that which Heaven provided, and they wished to return to Egypt (Num. 11:4–6; 14:3, 4). They spoke as though God was not able to provide for their sustenance and protection in the wilderness.

After all He had done for them, God was very displeased. He sent poisonous snakes among them, which bit them, and many died (Num. 21:6). Then “the people came to Moses and said, ‘We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us’” (v. 7). So Moses prayed for the people. Then God said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live” (v. 8). So Moses

cast a bronze snake and mounted it on a pole. When anyone who had been bitten by a snake looked in faith at the bronze snake, that person was restored (v. 9).

Unraveling the meaning

Many have wondered about this seemingly strange situation. Snakes were the cause of the people's death, yet God had Moses prepare a representation of the snake to be held up before them. When they looked at it, they would be restored. There was no restorative power in the snake. Why did God use a snake on a pole to heal their deadly wounds? Surely they were not expected to worship the snake (cf. 2 Kings 18:4). Was the means of their impending death also supposed to represent their Savior somehow? The key to this apparent puzzle lies in the function of the pole.

Artists have usually portrayed the bronze snake made to look like a live snake wound around a pole or even a cross. This, however, is an unfortunate misrepresentation of the symbol. A careful study of the language of Scripture reveals that the pole was actually a sharpened stake, and the snake was portrayed as impaled on the end of the stake—dead. This was in harmony with the custom of the time. In Genesis 40:19, Joseph prophesied to the chief baker that in three days, “Pharaoh will lift off your head and impale your body on a pole.” Verse 22 says that the pharaoh “impaled the chief baker, just as Joseph had said to them.” The Hebrew word used in Numbers 21:8, frequently translated as “pole,” may refer to a beam, plank, pole, or stake.

The practice among the heathen nations was to shame a person's reputation by exposing the corpse in public. This was generally done by raising the corpse up high to be seen by all, often by impaling the body or the head on a tall stake or pole. The practice is seen in the edict of King Cyrus recorded in Ezra 6:11: “I decree that if anyone defies this edict, a beam is to be pulled from their house and they are to be impaled on it.” This is also what Haman's wife, Zeresh, had in mind for Mordecai: “Have a pole set up, reaching to a height of fifty cubits, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai impaled on it.” (Esther 5:14). The NAB renders it, “Have a stake set up, fifty cubits in height, and in the morning ask the king to have Mordecai impaled on it.” Haman ended up being impaled on his own 75-foot stake. This was common Persian practice (cf. Esther 2:23), just as it was practiced in Egypt and by the Israelites themselves

(Josh. 8:29). The Philistines fastened the bodies of Saul and his three sons up on the wall of Beth Shan to expose them to public humiliation until the men of Jabesh Gilead came and removed them (1 Sam. 31:10–12). This is what was meant by lifting them up to shame them.

In Deuteronomy 21:22, 23, God declares, “If anyone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole, you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse.” This public exposure and humiliation was not a practice that God approved of but, if it happened, the exposed person was under a curse and should not be left up overnight because that would defile the land (v. 23).

A parallelism?

We can see the parallels between the impaling of the snake on the stake and the nailing of Jesus on the cross, the Roman form of impaling on a stake. The cross was literally a *xylon*, a wooden beam (Acts 5:30; 10:39). It was no different from the stake in its purpose; only the cross was intended to prolong the agony of the criminals while the public gathered to abuse them. To increase their shame, the Romans exposed them naked.

The apostle Paul records in Galatians 3:13 that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.’” In His crucifixion, Christ became a curse for us by being exposed to shame in our place as a condemned sinner, although He was innocent. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This is the language of substitutionary atonement.

Returning to the story of the bronze snake on the stake, we see that the snake represented the cause of the peoples' death. From the very beginning, the snake represented Satan (Gen. 3:1–5, 15; Rom. 16:20; Rev. 12:9), a beautiful creature in its original creation, intelligent and talented, but using its cunning to deceive and destroy, becoming cast down to the earth and full of deadly poison (Gen. 3:14, 15; cf. Rev. 12:9). The poisonous snakes in the wilderness of Zin could have destroyed every person in the camp of Israel had God not intervened to provide a remedy. When the people realized that it was their sin that had brought about the plague of snakes and confessed their sin against the Lord and against Moses, Moses prayed for the people.

Then God told him to make a bronze snake and lift it up on a stake for all to see, and “anyone who is bitten can look at it and live” (Num. 21:8). They were not looking in faith at a representation of a live snake threatening to harm them. They were looking at a portrayal of a dead snake impaled on a stake and held up as a trophy for them to gaze at and exclaim, “The snake is dead!” The source of their misery and death was no longer a threat. It represented the end of sin and the death of Satan as a result of their confession of sin and turning away from it. By faith, they were pointed forward to the death of Jesus on the cross as putting an end to the penalty of sin and signaling the death knell for Satan.

At the time of the Fall, God placed a curse upon the serpent and promised a remedy for sinners: the Offspring of the woman would one day crush the head of the serpent, although His “heel” would be wounded in the process (Gen. 3:15). Paul told the Roman believers in Romans 16:20, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” At the cross, Satan became a defeated foe (John 12:31–33; 16:11; Rev. 12:10–12).

A snake representing Christ?

Hebrews 2:14, 15 says that Jesus came in human flesh “so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” However, according to Jesus’ own words in John 3:14, the snake on the stake represents the death of Jesus, not of Satan. In what sense does the snake represent Jesus?

The snake represented Jesus because it symbolized the sin and death that Satan brought into the world when he tempted our first parents to sin in the Garden of Eden. It also represented the cause of death in the camp of Israel when they rebelled against God in the wilderness. Jesus had to take that sin upon Himself, with its curse, and pay the ultimate penalty for our sin by dying the death of the sinner, being lifted up, impaled on the cross much like the bronze snake on the stake. All who look to Jesus in faith can see the death of the serpent and sin and, thus, the hope of our own eternal life.

Evidence and faith

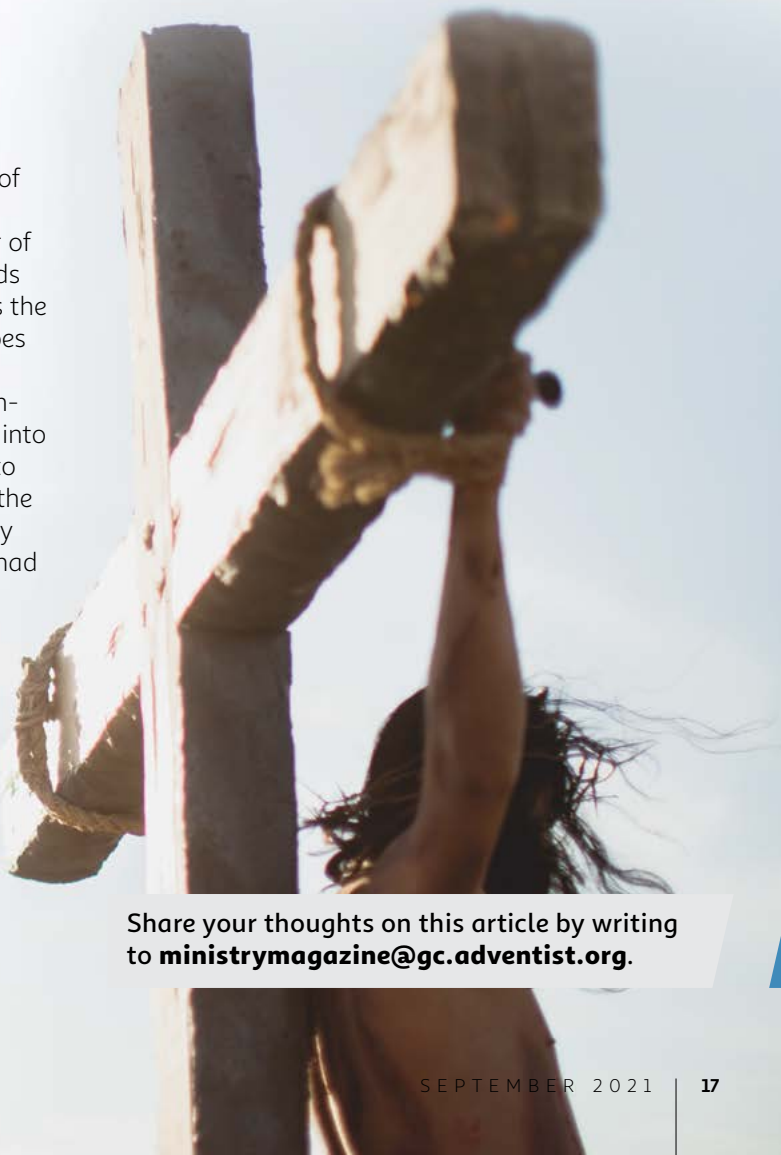
We are the rebellious people of God, despite all that God has done for us. Yet “God was in Christ reconciling [us] to Himself”

(2 Cor. 5:19, NKJV) by the sacrifice of His own Son, uplifted on the cross. Jesus said, referring to His own death, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32).

Commenting on this statement, author Ellen White observes, “All are drawn. Not one is left without conviction. Christ gives everyone evidence. But not all accept the evidence.”² It is our privilege to choose to be drawn by the uplifted Christ, impaled on a Roman stake for our sins, becoming sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus calls us to look by faith to Him uplifted on the cross just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent as a trophy that the power of sin has been broken.



- 1 Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from Today's New International Version.
- 2 Ellen G. White, “Walk in the Light,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 13, 1900, 1.



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PTSD: A 10-step guide for ministry professionals

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a debilitating mental illness that shatters minds, destroys lives, and shakes faith to the core. I know—because I have encountered it. I understand the anguish—because I have experienced it. I am aware of what it takes to get better—because I have endured it.

As a ministry professional, you are uniquely qualified to meet the spiritual needs of people with PTSD. This guide can help you recognize the condition and know how best to show God's love in response, because it's never too soon or too late to find hope

1. About PTSD

PTSD can develop in some people who have experienced a terrifying or life-threatening event. After the trauma, most return to normal life within a few weeks or months. But others continue to have nightmares, vivid flashbacks reliving the trauma, an inability to focus, and a feeling of constant fear. They find themselves in a terrifying new world, unsure whether they can survive.

2. Trauma's role in PTSD

The sudden loss of a child, a school shooting, rape, sexual abuse, war, betrayal, a natural disaster, a deadly accident, or a deadly virus can leave those impacted hanging on to life by a thread. If such a reaction continues, the trauma often results in PTSD.

3. PTSD symptoms

Mental health practitioners diagnose PTSD by the presence and duration of 15–20 symptoms.¹ Such symptoms fall into four categories: reexperiencing (such as nightmares and unwanted upsetting memories), avoidance of trauma-related thoughts or situations, negativity (such as overly negative thoughts, exaggerated blame, and decreased interest in activities), and hypervigilance (such as risky or destructive behavior, aggression, and difficulty concentrating).

You may encounter people who have a diagnosis of PTSD but keep it private. And many

people suffer from the symptoms but have not been formally diagnosed. If you recognize the symptoms, you can be sure that the person needs your informed care.

4. Faith and PTSD

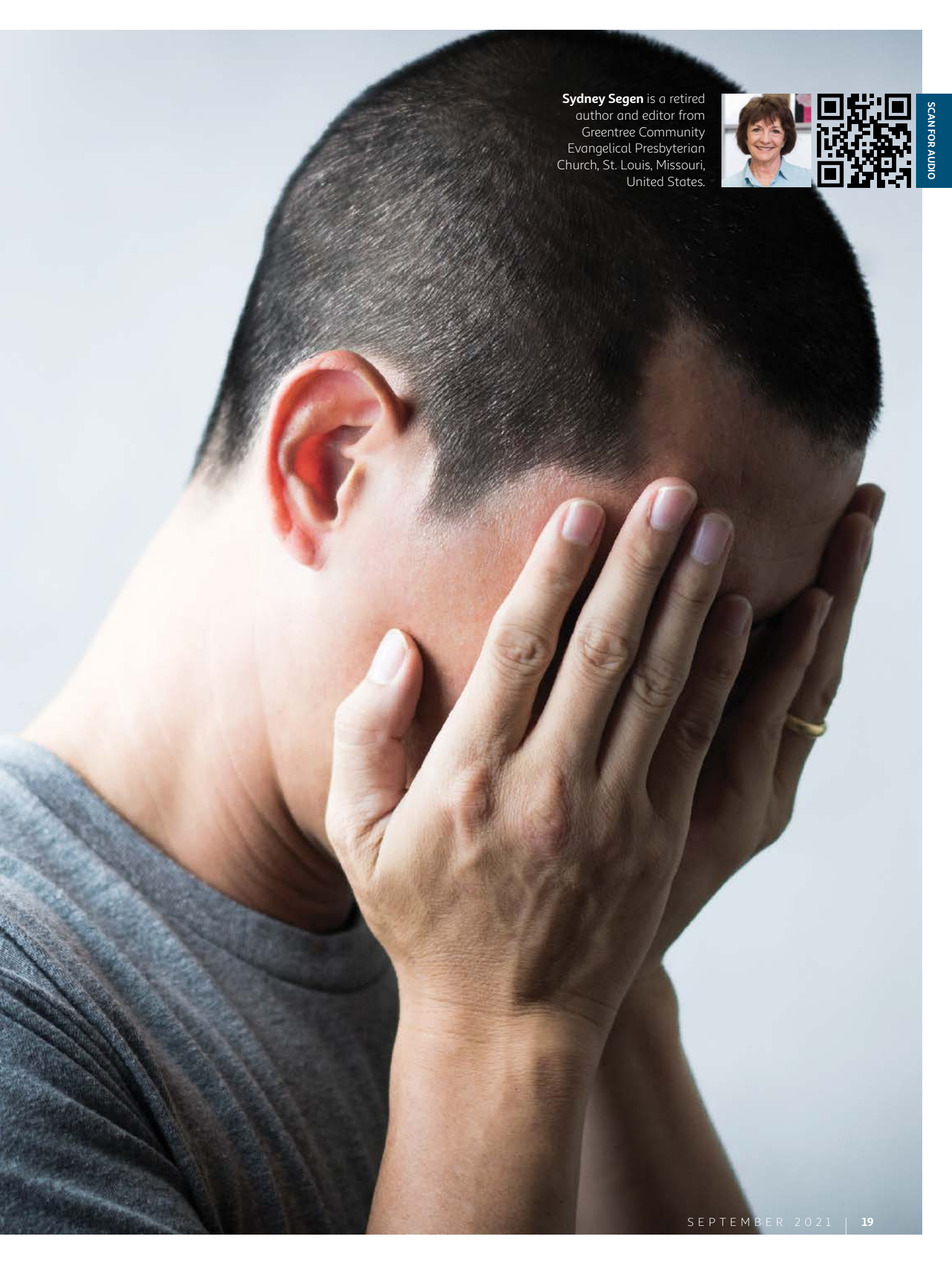
PTSD's vicious symptoms can strip away a victim's spiritual life. *Why did God let this happen?* they think. *I don't think He's real.* By modeling Christ's love and acceptance, you can help PTSD sufferers find their way back to God.

5. Help for PTSD

In my personal journey, I remember saying, "Only other people who have PTSD understand what I'm going through." Friends, though, who took time to learn about the condition aided me. The recommendations below offer ways you can help someone with PTSD.

Commit to care and support. People with PTSD must tell their story many, many times as they process it. That, unfortunately, can be exhausting to friends, family, and pastors. But if you can commit to supporting a PTSD victim through conversation, referrals for help, and ongoing prayer, you can make a world of difference. *Someone does care about me*, they can tell themselves. *Maybe I'm not worthless after all.*

Offer helpful resources. While PTSD is not 100 percent curable, its victims can minimize its effects through dedicated mental, emotional, and spiritual work—with the aid of professionals. While you, as a pastor, can assist with spiritual healing, your job



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is not to diagnose or treat the disorder. However, you can encourage those with PTSD to get counseling and ask psychiatrists about medication. When PTSD victims cannot afford treatment, perhaps you can aid with financial help from a benevolence fund or refer individuals to low-cost counseling services.

Be prepared to discuss God's role in this tragedy. Many suffering from PTSD give up on whatever faith they had in the past. "How could God let this happen?" they wonder. "Where is He now?" You might explain that even when we suffer, God is with us. When the trauma struck, God was there. He stays with us through our journey toward healing, even if we can't always feel His presence. People recovering from PTSD take a giant step when they realize that God *wants* them to turn to Him, hundreds of times a day if necessary, and to believe that He will bring good out of the situation.

Have patience with pain. Deep wounds, including abuse from childhood, take a long time to heal. The person you are helping will likely need months or even years to get control of PTSD. Please be patient and be prepared for tears. Author John Piper says, "Weep deeply over the life that you hoped would be. Grieve the losses. Feel the pain."² As the person heals, you will see fewer tears, hear the story less often, and begin to see signs of hope.

Offer specific types of spiritual encouragement and healing. As a minister, you can explain how God heals PTSD with:

- hope for future peace
- replacement of worries with prayer
- plans for good, not harm
- unconditional love
- forgiveness
- power and strength to heal

Quick reference guide on responding to a person with PTSD symptoms³

<p>Flashbacks</p> <p>The person may become either very quiet or very agitated.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ask: Are you having a flashback? Want to talk about it? What do you think triggered it? ➤ Remind them that the trauma happened in the past, but now they are here and safe with you. 	<p>Sad, depressed, isolating</p> <p>The person becomes unable to attend church or even leave home.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Encourage them to take up a hobby or enroll in an interesting class. ➤ Offer to meet regularly. ➤ Take them on outings. ➤ Explain that you are willing to just hang out and listen if that would be helpful. 	<p>Needs someone who understands</p> <p>The person may say, "People who don't have PTSD just don't understand."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Educate yourself on PTSD. ➤ Get to know what their body language indicates. ➤ Remember what they said in past conversations. ➤ Validate their feelings and actions.
<p>Distrusting, afraid</p> <p>The person suddenly stops sharing with you and often seems to be frightened.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Be someone they can count on. ➤ When you are on an outing, let them choose where they want to sit. ➤ Avoid loud, possibly triggering settings for your meetings. ➤ Do things that help them feel safe. 	<p>Despondent</p> <p>The person has lost all hope, and you have run out of ways to encourage them.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Try to find out what has made them feel so down. ➤ Listen and converse to see if this helps them feel better. ➤ If they mention not wanting to live, get professional help right away. 	<p>Difficult to deal with</p> <p>The person is argumentative, tries to provoke you, criticizes your ideas, or refuses to talk at all.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ If you do not seem to be getting anywhere with them, suggest you both take a break. ➤ Make sure that you do not get burned out trying to help them. ➤ Take time to do something fun or enriching for yourself and encourage them to take self-care breaks too.

6. Warning signs of suicide

People who go through trauma have often lost loved ones, jobs, marriages, homes, and/or their own self-worth. If PTSD follows the trauma, its sufferers can sink even deeper into despair. They may eventually decide that the world would be better off without them. So how is a pastor to know if a person is considering suicide? The American Association of Suicidology has created a mnemonic device for warning signs: IS PATH WARM?⁴

- I** Ideation (dwelling on the idea of suicide; formulating a plan for suicide)
- S** Substance abuse
- P** Purposelessness
- A** Anxiety
- T** Trapped
- H** Hopelessness
- W** Withdrawal
- A** Anger
- R** Recklessness
- M** Mood changes

If you see such signs, be very direct and inquire, "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" Should the response be anything but a strong no, ask, "Do you have a plan for how you would kill yourself?" When the answer is yes, tell them, "I care so much about you that I want you to be safe and seek the help you need. It's time to get that support now." If they will ride with you to a psychiatric hospital or other facilities, take them directly there. Do not leave them alone. Should they refuse help, call 911 or your city's police emergency line and ask for aid anyway.

7. Gentle ministry

PTSD leaves deep wounds that call for an accepting, loving response from you. For example:

Ask. Gently ask PTSD sufferers how they feel about God or their faith, and listen without interruption or judgment. Your patience and care will help them work through the shock and begin to build their faith again. It might take quite a long time, so do not be discouraged by slow progress.

Listen. As mentioned, PTSD victims need to tell their stories repeatedly. Once is not enough for healing. Eventually, though, they will begin to relate their stories without crying. That is when you can celebrate all the long, hard work of recovery.

Notice. Do some research and be aware of the symptoms of PTSD. When you suspect PTSD, carefully inquire, "How long have you felt this way?" Ask, "What happened to you in the past?"

Wait. With PTSD, you may have to avoid traditional ways of ministering at first. If someone has lost faith and is furious with God, Bible verses and Christian platitudes (e.g., "God's got this") can just make things worse. Jesus addressed people's physical and emotional pain right along with their spiritual emptiness. So first develop a caring relationship with those shattered by PTSD. Soon they will be ready for the verses and insights you want to share.

8. Protecting your own mental health

People with PTSD can demand hours of your time and drain you emotionally. You will need to set healthy boundaries and assemble a PTSD team to help. But you do not need a complicated training program: Use this article as a first step. Then encourage trainees to find out more about PTSD.

9. Prayer and hope

You may be the only professional who can offer the sufferer consistent, heartfelt prayer in your conversations, with their loved ones, when you are alone, and possibly in a confidential group. Your prayers call on God's strength to take control of a victim's PTSD—a huge step toward healing.

10. The victory

In closing, you might be wondering if all this work is worth it. It was definitely the case for PTSD "victor" Elise Andrews. "Always have something to hope for, and have faith because you will overcome," she says. "I did." You and other ministry professionals have direct heavenly connections that can bring peace to people with PTSD.



1 "PTSD Basics," PTSD: National Center for PTSD, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/ptsd_basics.asp.

2 John Piper, "Embrace the Life God Has Given You," *Desiring God*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/embrace-the-life-god-has-given-you>.

3 Sydney Segen, *Hope After Trauma and PTSD: Making Sense of the Pain* (St. Louis, MO: Sydney Segen, 2018), 176.

4 Cheryl Dennison, "Suicide Prevention in Genesee County," *MyCity Magazine*, June 27, 2018, <http://www.mycitymag.com/suicide-prevention-in-genesee-county/>. See also American Association of Suicidology, <http://www.suicidology.org/resources/warning-signs>.

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Inclusivity strengthens engagement

Brought up in a Christian home, Moses regularly attended Sabbath School and church with his parents. As he grew into a teenager, the influence of his unchurched friends began to increase. Feeling that church was being forced upon him, he began losing interest in volunteering for its ministries. Moreover, the church seemed to him hypocritical and disingenuous, not valuing people as he thought they should. Its members and leaders appeared judgmental and often scolded him about how he dressed. Overlooked by everyone, he drifted away from the church for four years.

But then his schoolmate, David, noticed his absence. One day he met Moses at a mall. As both spoke about the good times they had once had in church, David invited Moses to come back, but Moses told him how he now felt. A few weeks passed. David occasionally called Moses and encouraged him to return. Then one Saturday, Moses and his friends planned to go surfing but decided to stop by the church just briefly beforehand. The whole group walked into the church in their surfing gear, and—to their surprise—the pastor welcomed them. The members warmly greeted them. They began attending sporadically,



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and every time they did, they felt included as part of the congregation.

The pastor went a step further. Hearing that Moses and his friends were interested in basketball, he arranged games at the church gym every Tuesday after the small-group prayer meeting. They came to the prayer meeting, then played basketball afterward. They began to feel the church was their own. The sense of belonging helped them more fully engage with the membership. Today, Moses is married to a wonderful, godly woman, blessed with two sons, and the whole family is deeply involved with the church.

Sense of belonging: A basic human need

Human beings live within a framework of relationships in which we seek inclusion and a sense of belonging.¹ The need to belong is among the strongest of human motivations.² Desiring social connections, we will exert considerable energy to develop and sustain them, and anything that adversely affects such relationships can be harmful.³

Mark Leary states that those who have supportive and sustained relationships with others are more likely to thrive than those who live alone. Belonging to a group frequently leads



PAULASIR ABRAHAM

to positive experiences and emotions but being excluded typically produces negative responses, such as sadness, loneliness, jealousy, anger, shame, and anxiety.⁴

Types of exclusions

Exclusion can be either individually or group related. Two prime forms of individual exclusion are ostracization and stigmatization. Ostracized individuals become sad and angry and report a lower sense of belonging, self-esteem, and control.⁵ On the other hand, stigmatization makes a person feel tainted and insignificant.⁶

Individual exclusion includes the reality of the proverbial glass ceiling that limits promotion, curtails influence, and restricts involvement. Professional attainments and educational achievements may be viewed as threatening rather than enriching, and competing rather than complementing. Individual exclusion is denying you a seat at the table while craving your gifts in designing it.

Group exclusion creates a sense of being marginalized. Rejection and social exclusion are almost the same as ostracism. In group exclusion, you may individually be made to feel welcome while you question the underrepresentation of persons like you in decision-making roles of the organization. It is the paradox of being welcomed but not accepted. When someone does not feel fully accepted, it threatens how they see their place in the group.⁷ It can cause them to withdraw.

Group memberships are vital because they meet the human need to belong and feel secure. While groups are supposed to provide shelter, support, and a collective sense of self for their members,⁸ they can exclude some participants because of what they consider differences from the rest.⁹

Exclusion in churches

Generally, we do not consider churches as places of ostracization, stigmatization, or marginalization. But some may feel excluded or unaccepted because of their race, marital status, economic situation, or other reasons. They may feel that clergy also tend to respect some members and ignore or reject others at times. Such excluded individuals do not feel as if they belong and, as a result, they pull back both psychologically and physically.

Some believe diversity contributes to exclusion. But that may not necessarily be true. Diversity is

a common feature in most religious organizations today. According to the Pew Research Center, Seventh-day Adventists form the most diverse religious group in the United States.¹⁰ In itself, diversity is not negative. It can lead to creativity and enhance group performance.¹¹ But it is not beneficial without inclusivity. If diversity is used to create more inclusiveness within an organization, it will make the organization more successful.¹²

When people are not welcomed or accepted, they may react in different ways. They may withdraw physically from church relationships. One member commented that, even though she was physically absent, she still supported the church through tithing. People may also withdraw by affiliating with others similarly excluded. Should they feel their exclusion is unjust and undeserved, they retreat psychologically and bond with others. Thus, it is imperative that acceptance and inclusivity be a fundamental part of the fabric of church life.

The need: Sense of oneness

An example of diversity within a group would be the Southern Asian Seventh-day Adventist Church, organized as a place for South Asian immigrants and people of other nations to worship and sustain their identity. Southern Asians themselves are diverse, for they comprise several languages and cultures. Such variety can create both inclusion and exclusion—inclusion in forming groups of different types and exclusion of those who seemingly do not “fit” into the groups. But even though the people are different, the church works hard to make sure that we are one, the body of Christ.

Paul gives a description of the church as one body in 1 Corinthians 12:12–27: “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. . . . For in fact the body is not one member but many. . . .

“But now, indeed, there are many members, yet one body. . . . But God composed the body . . . that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another” (NKJV).

Abraham van de Beek observes that “The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not three Gods. They are one and only God, and the unity of this one God is visible in the world in the unity of the one church.”¹³ The church is one body of Christ with many members who all have their own

characteristics. Therefore, members should not exclude one another but rather enjoy the diversity and consider all as part of one body.¹⁴

Having a sense of oneness in a church is critical. One of the primary causes of people joining is the influence of family and friends.¹⁵ One of the reasons people remain is to maintain their ties to family and friends.¹⁶ A recent survey found that many reported that they attended church or decided to worship in a particular congregation because of friends and family members.¹⁷ On the other hand, others pointed to family disputes as a cause for irregular attendance and eventual withdrawal. Thus, while family ties and church friends are both positive forces in church participation, family disputes and strained relationships with friends can lead people to drift away. We must bring the sense of oneness to a level at which all feel included irrespective of whether family and friends also attend.

People join churches in search of community.¹⁸ To endow a congregation with a sense of community in its fullest sense requires bringing its various groups together in an inclusive network or web that will strengthen member involvement.

I present three components of a biblical framework for the concept of inclusivity and oneness.

A biblical framework

1. “*Friend of tax collectors and sinners*” (Matt. 11:19, NKJV). The Gospels present eight occasions of Jesus associating with sinners and tax collectors. While the religious leaders despised the sinners as guilty of transgressing the law and tax collectors for their unethical behavior, Jesus mingled with them. He went to parties with them (Mark 2:15) and to their homes (Luke 19:1–10). Jesus included in God’s kingdom those excluded by the society of His time.

2. “*Neither Jew nor Greek*” (Gal. 3:28, NKJV). In Christ, people from all kindreds, nations, and tongues, and diverse hierarchical, sociological, and cultural groups comprise God’s kingdom. Paul’s theology maintained that while distinctiveness was to be preserved, in Christ, concepts of supremacy and walls of superiority regarding race, ethnicity, tribe, caste, class, gender, ability, age, or religion, would come tumbling down. May that be so in our congregations.

3. “*All things in common*” (Acts 2:44, NKJV). The early Christian church was a network of worship, fellowship, and socialization. A sense of belonging filled them. This web of spiritual socialization is

an exemplary model of inclusion for the church today.

This should be the vision of every church entity. In employment, worship, fellowship, prayer, praising, and promotion, we ought to emulate the early church’s inclusivity. For too long, many have felt used and abused, employed but not embraced, needed but not wanted. With inclusivity, personnel engagement will be strengthened, people will be valued, and the Moseses may return.



- 1 Dominic Abrams, Michael A. Hogg, and José M. Marques, eds., *The Social Psychology of Inclusion and Exclusion* (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2005), 1.
- 2 Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (June 1995): 497–529.
- 3 Abrams, Hogg, and Marques, *Inclusion and Exclusion*, 64.
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Share your thoughts on this article by writing to ministrymagazine@gc.adventist.org.



Critical oxygen production for India's second wave

COVERD-19 is hitting India particularly hard. The aggressive second wave of the pandemic has overwhelmed hospitals that are unable to arrange an adequate oxygen supply for the mounting case numbers.

Agencies are reaching out to expand the number of ICU beds across hospitals, oxygen support services, medical equipment and PPE kits, vaccination services, supply and availability of medicines, and enhanced testing facilities and to overcome the shortage of healthcare providers.

ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency) India is coordinating with the local government to enhance their capacity to respond to the critical and immediate needs of treating and managing COVID-19 patients at their hospitals.

"The COVID-19 outbreak has pushed the health systems to a breaking point. Hospitals are

operating near or beyond capacity," said Weston Davis, ADRA country director in India. "We are grateful to be able to provide the new oxygen plant which will now assist in saving more lives. This plant will ensure that the hospitals will depend much less on outside suppliers.

"Please continue to pray and help to expand and mobilize humanitarian relief to combat the urgent situation." You may support the India COVID-19 Second Wave Appeal at <http://bit.ly/adra-india>.



Contemporary Theological Challenges Bible conference

ZAGREB, CROATIA

The Adriatic Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (AUC) organized a Bible conference titled "Contemporary Theological Challenges," which took place April 16–18, 2021.

Every evening, a biblical message was presented that referred to the time in which we live today. Using the advantages of today's technology, hundreds of church members and church leaders, mainly from Albania, Slovenia, and Croatia, attended the lectures with great interest.

In a series of seven studies, three lecturers—pastors and professors **Daniel Ranisavljević** (France), **Igor Lorencin** (Friedensau, Germany), and **Ante Jerončić** (Berrien Springs, USA)—focused on the challenges facing the corporate church and individual believers at this time. They explained God's age-old plan of salvation and what it means to accept Jesus Christ as the Lord of our personal lives and community actions.

They concluded that key to a Christian's stability in an unstable world is listening to God through His Word and His created works, waiting on the Lord through personal and united prayer, and uniting together for ministry to the church and community. [Drago Mojzeš, *tedNEWS*]



M. Lee is a historian and teacher in the United States.



God, a train wreck, and the unexpected

It seemed like an ordinary summer evening as we headed home to get ready for school the next day.

Our car had been having mechanical problems, but we had used someone's truck to jump-start it and were on our way. We were only five miles from home when, as our car sat momentarily on the train tracks waiting for the car ahead to move, it stalled. We sat silently for a moment and then, in the most surreal way possible, we saw lights flashing. We looked over our shoulders, a freight train was headed straight toward us.

There was absolutely no time to even try to get out of the car. We were hit by a train going nearly 40 miles (64 kilometers) per hour. The train dragged our car down the tracks. I passed out.

When I awoke, a stranger was holding me on the pavement with a blanket. I saw emergency responders opening the car with a very large hydraulic rescue tool. EMTs strapped me onto a spinal board and took me in an ambulance to the hospital.

Incredibly, God saved our lives that day. I did not go back to middle school for some time—but praise God, I did go back.

Never the same again

Our lives were never the same again. Logistical and practical changes took place in the wake of the accident: insurance, wrecked cars, injuries, and more. In addition to all these, the seeming randomness of our accident took on a very purposeful and clear role in my life. Our plan had been to drive home as we had hundreds of times before. Instead, our lives changed in a moment.

If you have ever experienced a similar event—accident, grief, pain, loss—you know that there is nothing planned, logical, or reasonable about it. When I despaired in college about my career path, I sensed the reassurance that God had a purpose for my life by saving it those many years ago. When I struggled with depression as an adult, I did not despair completely because I remembered how God had miraculously shown His hand. Whenever I cross train tracks now, I think of that

day. Those memories continue to silently remind me of God's continued will for my life.

“Unplanned” events

Scripture tells us of many “unplanned” events: God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Ruth stumbling across Boaz's field, Nehemiah's conversation with the Achaemenid king on an otherwise ordinary day, Gabriel's visit to Mary, Paul's vision on the road to Damascus. Yet each of these unexpected events changed the course of sacred history.

If you have ever experienced a similar event—accident, grief, pain, loss—you know that there is nothing planned, logical, or reasonable about it.

Each day, many providential, seemingly random, out of the ordinary, troublesome, and even tragic and very painful events take place in our ministries and personal lives. Whether they are His work or the enemy's, God speaks and works not only through what we expect but also through the unplanned. Romans 8:28 promises, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (TNIV).

Perhaps you have been faced with the unexpected. Join me in praying to understand God's work in these moments—and in trying to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:29, NKJV).



LETTERS

Affection

I used to get a physical copy of your magazine and loved it and want to read it again. I'm always very blessed by your magazine.

—Rev. Robert McElderry, Pells, Iowa, United States

Transition

I am and have been a subscriber to your *Ministry* and appreciate it very much. In your May 2021 issue, you had a great Practical Pointers column, "Church Worship Services Amid COVID-19" (Larry Thompson, James Cobb, Henry Sanders, Jr., Glenn Davis). I am near 90 years old and will be retiring soon after 53-plus years as pastor of one church. Being in transition, your above article has a lot of important information for our church and its future new pastor, whoever he or she might be.

In a future business meeting, I will be sharing several things that will be given to all members. I would trust that you would grant me permission to include a copy of the above-mentioned article. It would be so helpful. Thank you so much in advance for your permission. God bless you!

—J. Douglas Walls, pastor, Columbus, Ohio, United States

Subscription

A pastor friend of mine passes his sub on to me but I would like to have a sub of my own. This is a quality magazine and I greatly enjoy the articles.

—Larry G. Johnson, pastor, Rock Springs, Wyoming, United States



RESOURCES

Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.

by Brené Brown, New York, NY:
Random House, 2018

D*are to Lead* is rich with leadership gold. The following list of one-liners gives a sample of the precious insights that dare us to lead:

"Clear is kind, unclear is unkind" (44).

"We can't both serve people and try to control their feelings" (69).

"Whenever perfectionism is driving us, shame is riding shotgun" (79).

Convicted yet? Applying any of these concepts to leadership requires something of the leader: *courage*.

The author, Brené Brown, brings to the leadership community 20 years of professional research in the areas of courage, shame, vulnerability, and empathy. Brown's research has found that courage is a collection of four skill sets that she summarizes as "rumbling with vulnerability," "living into our values," "braving trust," and "learning to rise." Her research supports an additional, very encouraging conclusion that these skill sets can be taught, observed, and measured (11). Those who dare to lead with the courage skill set of will see improved organizational health and positive culture change in the teams they lead.

All leaders experience difficult conversations and conflict. Brown has provided a helpful term for such moments: *rumbling*. Rumbling is not optional for leaders, but leaders have many options for how to do it.

Ryan Rogers is the pastor of the Palmer Seventh-day Adventist Church in Palmer, Alaska, United States.



Brown suggests that leaders should do it with vulnerability. Rumbling with vulnerability embraces the humility of *not being right* for the reward of *getting it right*. The leader who is unwilling to lean into hard conversations with vulnerability will lead armored, disconnected, and weighed down with shame. And this is the culture they will set for the teams they lead.

Brown leads her readers through steps of brave leadership that include identifying values (187, 188) and behaving in line with those values (190–193). She focuses on an area where every leader is challenged to practice value-based behaviors: giving and receiving feedback. Leaders cannot avoid communicating and receiving difficult feedback. Leadership will benefit from being brave enough to give and receive feedback in a way that is in line with personal values.

Brown offers leaders a helpful perspective on trust and practical ways to build it and a gift to help them brave trust in the form of a practical tool called the BRAVING Inventory (225). She explores how many of our limitations are rooted in fear of failure. Then she offers an alternative mindset. Instead of being afraid to fall, we should get skilled at rising back up from a fall. If leaders can build this into their culture and teach people to rise, they will not be so afraid to fall. And they will try things that their fear never allowed them to try.

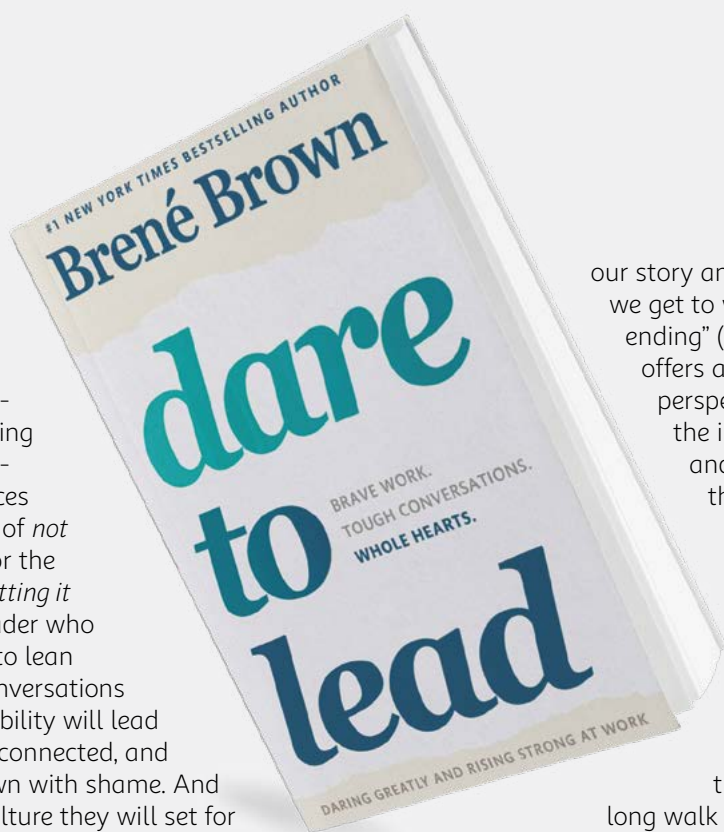
Brown casts the vision that “when we have the encouragement to walk into

our story and own it, we get to write the ending” (240). She offers a grounding perspective on the inadequacy and superiority that threatens leadership. She reveals a most helpful truth when she says, “People think it’s a long walk from ‘I’m

not enough’ to ‘I’m better than them,’ but it’s actually just standing still. In the exact same place. In fear” (52). Realizations like this display the great need for brave leadership.

I have to get really picky to identify ways that the value of this book could have been enhanced. The organization of the contents could have been improved for better flow. The writing style takes an intentional tone of vulnerability, which includes crude language that weakens the professional image of the content. For me, this tone distracts from the message. For some, it may strengthen the appeal to vulnerability.

I was just midway through the book when I tucked it under my arm and carried it with me into my church board meeting. The content had already become a supportive resource for my leadership. The research is credible. The conclusions are relevant. The communication is intensely practical and thoroughly actionable (4). And the closing appeal is a worthy dare to any leader: “Choose courage over comfort. Choose whole hearts over armor. And choose the great adventure of being brave and afraid. At the exact same time” (272). ❧





**Wellington
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DMin**, is editor
of *Ministério*
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São Paulo, Brazil.



To be intellectual giants

Pastoring communities whose members are increasingly demanding, cultured, and aware of contemporary trends has become quite challenging. The ease of access to the internet popularized information, making it common to both large and small cities. As a result, pastors are being challenged to raise their level of knowledge and the ability to articulate their ideas. Sermons need to be intelligent yet original, profound yet accessible, newsy yet accurate.

The concern with having pastors well prepared intellectually is not new. Years ago, church leader Ellen White wrote: “Our ministers will have to render to God an account for the rusting of the talents He has given to improve by exercise. They might have done tenfold more work intelligently, had they cared to become intellectual giants. Their whole experience in their high calling is cheapened because they are content to remain where they are. Their efforts to acquire knowledge will not in the least hinder their spiritual growth if they will study with right motives and proper aims.”¹

The demands of the church can often prevent pastors from spending time in intellectual preparation.

The demands of the church can often prevent pastors from spending time in intellectual preparation. Therefore, we need to be intentional in our search for useful knowledge as we strive to enhance our ability to better serve the Lord. To that end, I would like to share five tips for effectively developing our intellect.

Time. Time for intellectual growth should be part of the daily pastoral agenda. The recommendation has been that pastors dedicate their mornings to read, study, and grow intellectually and spiritually. Pastors should regularly set aside between two to three hours a day for systematic study. Whether working as a district pastor or as an editor, it has always been important for my ministry to set aside a few hours for personal

study. Working for the church has taught me that we need to be masters of our schedules and set the pace of our activities if we are to develop a balanced and integral ministry.

Content. You can define content from two perspectives: exploring one discipline at a time or maintaining thematic variety throughout the week. For example, you can research for a month (or more) on a particular subject or study an area of theology each day. For some time, I used the following weekly plan: news (Monday), biblical theology (Tuesday), historical theology (Wednesday), systematic theology (Thursday), and a review of themes to be presented on the weekend (Friday). While I was involved in my graduate programs, the study plan naturally followed the demands of the academic curriculum.

Information. Stay informed about the most important and recent publications in your area of interest or in theology as a whole. Follow the social media of leading Christian publishers. Subscribe to theological periodicals. Visit Christian libraries and bookstores. Browse the syllabi of theological seminaries. Access good theological discussion sites.

Technique. Each person has a preferred learning technique. For example, some like to underline material, others cannot grasp content without taking notes. Some do very well with mind maps, and then there are those who learn through brainstorming. If you still do not know which method is most effective for you, try to identify it through reliable testing.

Production. Aim to produce materials that grow out of your personal study, such as sermons, seminars, articles, blogs, Bible studies, small group guides, and books. This production honors God, solidifies your knowledge, and blesses the church.

“The times demand an intelligent, educated ministry.”² May we be as the leaders in Issachar: “They kept up-to-date in their understanding of the times and knew what Israel should do.”³



1 Ellen G. White, *Pastoral Ministry* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference Ministerial Association, 1995), 48.

2 White, 43.

3 1 Chron. 12:32, International Standard Version.

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