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The marvelous grace of insecurity: Getting to hopelessness

LEN HJALMARSON

Silence, darkness, and uncertainty are not occasions for despair but opportunities for discovery.

Pastoral families: The agony and mission of infertility and child loss

CLAUDINE ANDERSON-ATKINSON

Read how anguish and desperation does not have to become bitterness and resentment.

The concubine and the Levite? Really?

JEFF SCOGGINS

Learn how pastors can be agents of comforting hope or purveyors of sexual abuse.
The problems of autumn ministry

To stay or not to stay: that is the autumn question. To the promise of spring (approximately ages 20–35) and the pressure of summer (approximately ages 35–50), also add the problems of autumn (approximately ages 50–65), when ministry reaches a tipping point. Autumn means harvest, yet the expectation of fruit is sadly replaced by “nothing but leaves” (Matt. 21:19, AMP). Unresolved childhood issues are compounded by professional underachievement and managerial under-appreciation. We desperately want to make up lost ground—by any means necessary. Hence, we leave. In some places, autumn is called fall. Very apt. In the fall, the leaves are falling, and the fall means leaving.

Leaving in our professional lives

By now, I should be further than I am. I should have been recognized in the church, acknowledged in the academy, or promoted in the administration. Some leave ministry. Some leave church. Some leave life.

Without judging motives, when appreciation or compensation has been in short supply, we look elsewhere for it. At such times, the cry “Fill my cup, Lord” must be accompanied by “nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42, KJV). Decisions ought to be governed by His will, not my wants. It is not about feelings; it is about faith.

It is not about the heart; it is about the head. It is not about passion; it is about principle. It is not about emotion; it is about devotion. It is not about contentment; it is about commitment. It is not about happiness; it is about holiness. It is not about Hollywood; it is about the Holy Word. Jeremiah also struggled:

Sometimes I think, “I will make no mention of his message.
I will not speak as his messenger anymore.”
But then his message becomes like a fire locked up inside of me, burning in my heart and soul.
I grow weary of trying to hold it in;
I cannot contain it (Jer. 20:9, NET).

Base your decision-making on your calling, not your craving.

Leaving in our personal lives

As colleagues exit ministry, the words of Jesus echo in our heads: “Will you also go away?” (John 6:67, AMPC). Some experience mental burnout, others moral falls. “He went after her, as an ox goes to the slaughter. . . . He did not know it would cost his life” (Prov. 7:22, 23, NKJV). Falls happen across the seasons. Noted writer and pastor John Killinger tells of a senior pastor: “He
is known as the ‘bishop’ of his community. I asked him a few months ago to speak of the thoughts that run through his mind as he enters the last phase of his ministry. ‘Sex and love,’ he said. Sex and love. ‘I’ve had a devil of a time with sex these last few years,’ he said. ‘Wanta put my arm around every attractive woman I see. Put my arm around her—[hey,] I want to get into bed with her. I haven’t. But I’ve sure had the urge.’ 2

Autumn pastor, do not be complacent. It has happened to others. It can happen to you. Be circumspect in your singleness and exemplary in your marriage. Here is the counsel:

Drink water from your own cistern [of a pure marriage relationship]
And fresh running water from your own well . . .

Let your fountain (wife) be blessed [with the rewards of fidelity],
And rejoice in the wife of your youth
(Prov. 5:15–19, AMP).

To stay, or not to stay? For editor Harold Fey, Jeremiah convictions eclipse seasonal afflictions. ‘The more dedicated, intelligent and sensitive a minister is, the more he will be wearied by the tedium of the daily rounds, frustrated by his frequent inability to get things done, [and] harassed by the petulant, grumbling, meddlesome members of which every parish has its share. Every day he will die a little under the weight of his cross. He will be many times tempted to flee from such ordeals. But he remains on the job because he knows that the parish—not the bishopric, the professorship, the executive office or any other laudable ministerial post—is the arena where Christ’s battle for the world must be fought.’ 3

We who cried like Peter, “Lord, save me!” (Matt. 14:30), and we who lied like Peter, “I will never disown you,” let us now try like Peter: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You [alone] have the words of eternal life [you are our only hope]” (John 6:68, AMP). To stay or not to stay—have you settled it?

Thomas Rainer passionately declared that “the vast majority of pastors with whom our team communicates are saying they are considering quitting their churches. It is a trend I have not seen in my lifetime.” Rainer then shares the top six different reasons why they felt as they did:

1. I could resonate. A few persistent questions and a few disappointing days had turned into several months of discouragement. Something was squeezing my pastoral ministry air hose. Feeling disconnected, I began to think of other career options, and that turned into actually looking for other job possibilities.

2. With some ministry travel looming in the future, my immediate goal was just to get through those trips and then take a couple of days to look at possible next steps in education or employment. Then came the appointment above Chicago.

   My returning flight having pushed back from the gate, I was comfortably seated, a book out, ready to pass the time. After a short time, with no further movement of the plane, the cockpit announced that we would need to return to the gate for repairs. It eventually led to deplaning and being assigned a different gate and aircraft. Because of the change in size of the aircraft and some passengers being reassigned, I found myself upgraded to business class and seated in a bit of a cubicle, 2A.

   Sitting there, reading John Peckham’s *Theodicy of Love*, I began to reflect on what I encountered. The complexity and simplicity of the gospel and the love of God all began colliding in my mind and heart. It temporarily distracted me from the decision I would soon have to make. Hours later, as the captain announced the beginning of our descent, came the burden that someone(s) must lead our churches in knowing God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3) and compel them to go out to reach the world. Regardless of my personal feelings and struggles, I knew someone must do it. Tears came to my eyes as I sensed God speaking. In an instant, I found myself as Peter on the rough and stormy seas of ministry and (I don’t like to admit it) staring at the boat full of other pastors, leaders, church difficulties, and committees. And I had a lot to look back at.

   It was as if, while descending over sprawling Chicagoland, I was sinking. Right then, I felt compelled by the Unseen to act. Out of my mouth came the cry: “Jesus, please help me know how to do it.” Then, right on cue, and as if the pilots were participating in my moment with Jesus, the plane tilted, and the sun spilled its warmth and light into my dark, stormy cubicle.

   As with Peter when he walked on the water, Jesus immediately reached out His hands to me. In Spanish, one would call such an experience *al momento*—”to that very moment.” It did not make the future easy, but that moment made the future possible.

   Reflecting back, it seems that an angel pulled the plug of a sensor on the aircraft for my original flight, confusing the mechanics so much that the airline had to substitute another plane. Then, God opened up a spot for me that was free of distractions. While I thought I was just on a plane headed home, God had set it up as an appointment with Him out on the troubled sea.

   The miracle of eyes only on Jesus (we all want the walking part, but it was the eyes forward on the Master that brought it all about) did not make Peter’s future ministry easy, but it did render it possible. Peter still had daunting challenges with sharing the gospel, faced struggles and misunderstandings in the church, and finally suffered a martyr’s sacrifice. But the lesson he learned on the lake is foundational for all gospel ministry: The boat may have a lot to look at, but it will all sink. Instead, fix your gaze on Jesus.

   After the plane touched down on the runway, I grabbed my phone and emailed myself the following: “God needs his leaders, undershepherds, those willing to lead with their eyes fixed on Jesus while the storms shake the world. I will pastor or preach and care for as many as possible until Jesus comes. I do not know what to do or how to do it the best—but I will work on it until or unless Jesus tells me to do otherwise.”

   Jesus needs you. Our world, including our churches, still demands Peters, who, despite the storms, fix their eyes on Jesus and are willing to give their lives for the cause of heaven. Noted writer and pastor John Killinger maintains that “the fall of Peter in the story of walking on water is transhistorical.” By that he means it can—or will—happen to us. “As part of the developmental cycle of the minister’s life, it is most likely to happen during the difficult transition period from early to later middle age, when the minister is smack in the middle of reassessing his or her pilgrimage and deciding where it is likely to lead in the years that are left.”

   Was I alone? Maybe then, but not now. Daniel, Esther, and Joseph—all in foreign and difficult contexts—found their very lives at risk but dared to stand alone, trusting that God could use for
It’s hard.
It’s possible.
Suggestions for walking on the water through the ministry storm

1. Occasional retreats of solitude (36–48 hours), then consistent and substantive worship time with God every day (1+ hour). Years ago, in a local ministerial group, a Catholic priest explained how badly he felt that he had cursed at a woman who, during his last mass, had grabbed his hand to share something while he was busy doing something else. He said that he could not understand why he had snapped at her when he had taken the day before completely off to just watch TV. TV (or any screen) is not the blue and green (pastures and cool waters) described in Psalm 23. Turn it all off and grab your Bible and notebook.

2. Read deeply of and memorize the promises of God and read much, much less of news and social media. For a time, I worked with a local police department as their chaplain. Conducting street patrol tandem one night, the officer and I passed a couple of pedestrians, and because of the lateness of the hour, we wondered whether they were all right or what they might be up to. We doubled back. After making contact and then driving off, the police officer commented, “When you have been on the night shift for so long, you begin to assume the worst of everyone.” If your perspective of the world is through the headlines and media posts, that boat full of criticism and pessimism will give an alternate, even deadly, worldview. Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus while we walk through the storm means actually that. Ignore the rest of the boat and keep your eyes directed forward.

3. Share and speak optimism. The first two will lead to both the public and private grasp of hope. Joe Kidder, in his book The Big Four, points out that “a positive, healthy attitude based on hope and faith is the number one human ingredient in church growth.” The greatest gift leaders can give their people—hope. With hope, “the impossible actually starts to look possible. . . . Defeat starts to look like it could be turned to victory.” It won’t matter how complex or incredible a situation might be; it is and always will be true that “man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.”

1 Thomas Rainer, “Six Reasons Your Pastor Is About to Quit,” Church Answers, August 31, 2020, https://churchanswers.com/blog/six-reasons-your-pastor-is-about-to-quit/?fbclid=IwAR3RPtEep8kkC2xWmRY4cw60EUWwNzQfr5yPrg4Kmt1bOQ65V_A.k.EE.
2 Thomas Rainer's top six reasons why pastors are leaving ministry: “1. Pastors are weary from the pandemic.” “2. Pastors are greatly discouraged about the fighting taking place among the church members about the post-quarantine church.” “3. Pastors are discouraged about losing members and attendance.” “4. Pastors don’t know if their churches will be able to support ministries financially in the future.” “5. Criticisms against pastors have increased significantly.” “6. The workload for pastors has multiplied greatly.”
3 Matthew 14:30, 31.
5 Christ in the Seasons of Ministry, 64.
6 Christ in the Seasons of Ministry, 63, 64.
8 Joseph Kidder, The Big Four (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2011), 29.
PRIORITIES OF FAITH
January 10–20, 2024

“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

MICAH 6:8, ESV

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The value of a lament

Why has this happened to me? “Where is God?” “What’s the point?” Sometimes, life presents wave after wave of crises. Questions are many, and answers are few. One response is to recognize that events are seasonal: to be anticipated and expected. In other words, they are part of life—even ministerial life. Counselor David Ashburner states, “One point to emphasize is that these questions and feelings are normal and call us all to reexamine our lives, at least periodically. The aging process, life changes, and questions about our relation to ourselves, others, and God cannot be avoided: they are life itself.”

Denis and Lucy Guernsey, from Fuller Theological Seminary, affirm,

Life in the sense of bonding and attachment, death in the sense of despair and hopelessness, burial in the sense of grief, and resurrection in the sense of renewal and hope are normal in the course of a marriage. . . .

. . . There must be death and burial as well as life and resurrection. Real life demands it all.

Along with the predictability of despondency comes the possibility of efficacy. Setbacks may actually hold benefits. Says Ashburner, “This [questioning] is a normal part of life, and in the long run a good thing. Ministers often ask congregants to rethink their lives—well, now you have it!” Perhaps this is what is meant by the term lament.

“Lament,” or the act of lamenting, is a topic not often spoken about in the church today despite its prevalence in the Psalms. There is a dearth of understanding of why lamenting is a powerful part of our faith and what it can accomplish in our journey with God. Instead, popular Christianity pushes people to stay in a place of happiness or contentedness, even when trials overwhelm us and we need an outlet. Poor discipleship for the purposes of lamenting removes a powerful tool from the hands of people struggling to reconcile their belief in an active God with their experience of a life seemingly bereft of His presence.

Perhaps even more disturbing, laments are deemed as complaining to God or even as sinful expressions of faithlessness. Nothing could be further from the truth, as an examination of one of the lament psalms, Psalm 13, will show.

O LORD, how long will you forget me? Forever? How long will you look the other way? How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart every day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

Turn and answer me, O LORD my God! Restore the sparkle to my eyes, or I will die. Don't let my enemies gloat, saying, “We have defeated him!” Don’t let them rejoice at my downfall.

But I trust in your unfailing love. I will rejoice because you have rescued me. I will sing to the LORD because he is good to me (NLT).

Each lament has four elements: an address to God, a description of the complaint, a request for God's help, and an expression of trust in God. These elements can be very easily traced through Psalm 13. David opens by addressing God in verse one and moves directly into his complaint: he feels forgotten and in anguish because his enemies are having victory over him. Then, in verses 3 and 4, by asking for God to turn and answer his pleas by destroying his enemies, he requests God’s help. Verses 5 and 6 establish David’s trust in God’s goodness despite his circumstances not having changed.

Lament vs. complaint

Complaining to God usually stirs discomfort in today’s Christians. We ought not to complain to a God who has been so generous to us, the thought goes; therefore, it must be a sin to complain. As proof that this type of lament is at least flirting with sin, some point to verses in the Pauline epistles that say not to complain. But we
all complain to God about events not going our way, sometimes even in tragic ways. Like David, perhaps our lives, our livelihood, or our reputation are at stake, and God appears to do nothing. What are we to do in these circumstances if not to make our complaints known to God? In the right context, complaints to God are not sinful but—despite the circumstances—represent a defiant exclamation of faith in God.

By moving directly from the complaint to a request for God’s help, we are proving that, in dire situations, we know where our help comes from. We know that we cannot trust in money or human power (today’s chariots and horses) but only in the God who is always for us. Combine this immediate request to God for help with the equally immediate declaration of trust in God, and we can begin to see how lamenting serves a deep spiritual purpose. Nothing has changed in the circumstances between when the complaint is served up to God and when we preemptively thank Him for taking care of us. And yet everything has changed: we have reestablished our trust in God, despite our situation, and we have arrived at this place through the process of lament.

Only by giving voice to our complaints to God do we release the faith to continue to trust in Him. This is very distinct from true complaining. For example, think of the Israelites in their desert wandering. Every time Moses turned around, the...
nation was complaining about not being in Egypt. They wanted meat to eat. They were thirsty. They were hungry. They were hot. The list goes on and on, and it exasperated Moses. There was no faith component being established by the Israelites in their complaints. There were no declarations of trust in the goodness of God. Instead, they were rebelling against the goodness of God despite all His provisions for them and His obvious presence in the pillar of cloud and fire. The Israelites wanted to separate themselves from God and return to slavery instead of experiencing the freedom God had for them in Canaan.

This contrast between Israel and the psalms of lament underscores one of the purposes behind laments—to praise God. It seems counterintuitive to say that a lament, which includes a complaint, is actually praise, but every lament psalm ends with a declaration of trust in the character and goodness of God. Laments call God to act on the basis of His character and His declared goodness toward us. While it is in the minor key of suffering, it is nevertheless anticipatory praise about the good deeds God is going to perform on our behalf.

The value of lament

In this way, lamenting is also a powerful antidote for fear. It is through lamenting that we remind ourselves that God is for us (see Romans 8:31). By lamenting, we can stir up our own faith because we are calling God to act in accordance with His nature, and this, by definition, forces us to consider His nature, which then draws us to the goodness and consistency of His character. This recognition of God's goodness and love makes fear dissipate because perfect love casts out fear. As we ruminate on the nature of God, we cannot help but be reminded that He is much larger than our problems.

And yet lamenting can do more: it is a pathway to greater intimacy with God. We know that God is listening to our prayers, which is the core of what a lament is: a prayer to God. As He listens to our prayers, we are able to draw near to Him. James says that if we draw near to God, He will draw near to us; this is the transaction happening in a lament. We are pouring our hearts out to God, hoping against hope for a changed life. In this process, we are drawing near to Him and giving Him an opportunity to return the favor. Oftentimes, laments do not change the circumstances but do greatly modify how we see things because God has drawn near and sheltered us in His cocoon of grace. Grace changes everything.

Lamenting also invites us to participate in the pain of life with others who might be going through something as hard as we are now. As we engage in reading the lament psalms, we may be connecting with the broader church at large, and we are giving ourselves permission to enter into others' pain. There is something redemptive about entering into another's pain. After all, Jesus was doing just that when He quoted Psalm 22 on the cross, entering into the pain of many of the Jewish martyrs of His day and, indeed, into the suffering of all humanity.

Lamenting not complaining

Mark Vroegop, lead pastor of College Park Church in Indianapolis and author of Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament, states, “Surveys abound on the number of pastors who are discouraged or depressed. The tenure of many pastors is short—too short. I’ve grieved as I read about three pastors who took their lives in the last two years. In order to stem the tide of weariness and burn-out, pastors should learn how to lament . . . Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust.”

So, lament is something entirely different than mere complaints. When we choose to lament, we are engaging in an ancient practice of recognizing who has the power to change our circumstances; we are also calling God to act on our behalf on the basis of His great love for us. We are encouraging ourselves and lifting ourselves up in faith based on God’s anticipated provision for us. We are choosing to draw near to God by sharing our innermost struggles with Him, trusting that He will be gentle with our pain. And we are entering into the pain of others by lamenting alongside them in their pain.

So, when you need to—and we all at some point need to—lament! It is part of what it means to walk with God.

3 Ashburner, “Midlife Crisis.”

Share your thoughts on this article by writing to ministrymagazine@gc.adventist.org.
Are you looking for the ideal church?

Have you ever asked, What does the ideal church look like? As a young pastor, I had an idea of the perfect church. I left seminary with a mental picture of such a church, and I even identified the church. I did not tell anyone, but secretly I hoped to become the pastor of that church. I began to think of all the things I could do with a church like that. I was coveting the largest and most influential church in the conference, but I was sent to the smallest church district in the conference. God has a way of teaching us humility.

As pastors and church leaders, we are continually fascinated by the thought of an ideal church—a model of religious worship, fellowship, and growth. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois exemplified a new vision for worship, drawing countless attendees with its novel worship and outreach methods. I visited the church with a group of young pastors, all enthusiastic to glean insights and adopt successful strategies. Meanwhile, the Yoido Full Gospel Church in South Korea emerged as another beacon of influence. Pastors and spiritual leaders from around the world flocked to South Korea, drawn by the church’s distinctive worship and the charisma of its lead pastor. Both examples undeniably pique our interest and inspire us.

But does the Bible offer guidance on the kind of churches God wishes us to establish? Church pioneer Ellen G. White states, “The first and second chapters of Colossians have been presented to me as an expression of what our churches in every part of the world should be.”

So, what are the qualities found in the Colossian church that have global significance? Here are 12 qualities that may be replicated worldwide:

1. **Have faith in Christ Jesus.** Believing and trusting in Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior. They had the faith of Jesus and faith in Jesus (Col. 1:4).
2. **Show love for all the saints.** Having a genuine love for all believers in the church—not just some of the saints but all the saints (v. 4).
3. **Store up hope in heaven.** Maintaining a heavenly perspective and ultimate hope in a glorious future (v. 5).
4. **Understand the grace of God.** Acknowledging and receiving God’s grace. Only those who understand God’s grace can offer it to others (v. 6).
5. **Bear fruit and grow.** Demonstrating spiritual growth and the fruit of the Spirit (vv. 6, 10).
6. **Prayerfully seek God’s will.** Constantly engaging in prayer. Pursuing knowledge and understanding of God’s will (v. 9).
7. **Live worthy of the Lord.** Striving to live lives pleasing to God (v. 10).
8. **Have endurance and patience.** Exercising spiritual endurance and patience (v. 11).
9. **Have joyful thankfulness.** Displaying gratitude to God with joy (v. 12).
10. **Recognize Christ’s supremacy.** Understanding and acknowledging Christ’s preeminence (vv. 15–18).
11. **Present God’s Word in fullness.** Witnessing, teaching, and preaching the complete Word of God (vv. 7, 25).
12. **Guard against deceit.** Being vigilant against persuasive arguments and deceit (Col. 2:4, 8).

Where did the Colossian church learn qualities such as love, patience, and gratitude? They learned it from their leader, Epaphras, a constant intercessor for the spiritual maturity of the Colossian church (see Colossians 1:7; 4:12; and Philemon 1:23).

If you are looking for the ideal church, you may have already found it. Just ask the Holy Spirit to give you the faith, love, and commitment of Epaphras, that we may also be called servants and faithful ministers of Christ Jesus.

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The marvelous grace of insecurity
Getting to hopelessness
It’s coming! Midlife crisis! I am among the older of the millennial generation, and here we are. I also happen to be a pastor. So, I am staring down the barrel of the looming midlife crisis along with the holy burden of caring for souls entrusted to my care. This could be a recipe for disaster.¹

Jared Sparks then asks, Why do so many middle-aged pastors have affairs? . . .

. . . Along with unmet ministry desires (not pastoring a mega-church) or unmet life goals, the midlife pastor gets depressed. This is an all-too-common reality! When depression lingers, burnout isn’t far behind.²

Midlife is a time of profound disorientation. For church leaders, “our relationships are what make us a body. Yet that glue itself is tested under the solvent of these unique conditions. How do leaders lead when we can’t gather? What can we do anyway? We are definitely not equipped to lead organizations under these conditions. We find ourselves having to adapt to these times while dealing with our own anxiety and with limited resources. Some of us may soon be out of work. We are in a time where we need a new beginning, but we are trapped in liminal space—a space between. We feel lost and not a little hopeless.”³

In the book The Critical Journey, authors Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich describe six stages of the journey of faith. Stages three to five are of particular interest because they describe the movement from a productive life to a place of confusion and from there to a new place of restful action. Our interest is in that transitional place between stages 4 and 5. They call it “the wall.”⁴

**Stages of faith**

Stage 3 is the “normal” productive life. It’s busy. There are multiple and complex demands with little time for reflection. Then something goes wrong, and we are launched into liminal space. The most notable description of stage four: “Things just aren’t working anymore,” and “There’s got to be more.” I don’t know how many pastors and leaders I have spoken with in the past 10 years who find themselves in this squeeze.

**Shipwreck**

Another way of framing the transition between stages 4 and 5 is the movement from a stable state of apparent orientation through disorientation to reorientation. When our internal maps suddenly become inadequate, the experience is one of profound disorientation. We are truly lost. But these transition experiences are not new. Our heroes of faith were familiar with uncertainty and with disorientation. According to the author of Hebrews, Abraham went out, “not knowing” (Heb. 11:8). Walter Brueggemann sees the movement toward uncertainty in the Psalms—the movement from orientation to disorientation.⁵

First are prayers of orientation. The words of Psalm 1 present the kind of black-and-white world most of us live in before the great questions rise to disturb our clay. In this simple world, the good guys are blessed, and the bad guys get what’s coming to them. This is the pre-9/11 world. Then comes the crash, and suddenly, we find more affinity with Lamentations. “I am the man who has seen affliction” (Lam. 3:1). Where are you, God? Our questions echo a sense of abandonment, a...
once-predictable world that has become unstable. We no longer know who God is. God has become like a hunter, like a bear lying in wait for its victim (cf. Lam. 3–5).

Our experience of sovereign presence has become something else, like sovereign absence.5 If we make it through this phase, eventually, we come out the far end with a different perspective. We are reoriented to God and God’s world.

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (Lam. 3:21–23, ESV).

Sharon Parks terms the experience “shipwreck,” those times when individuals experience something unexpected or disappointing. “These experiences often became the context in which big questions emerged in powerful ways.” She explains that technology has made life transitions harder than they used to be. Digital devices and social networking “can contribute to heightened productivity and a greater connection to the global community; yet [to an] increasing sense of loneliness and isolation that leads to many mental and physical health risks.”6

If we pass through the uncertainty, we can discover new purpose. Says Parks, “If we do survive shipwreck—if we wash up on a new shore, perceiving more adequately how life really is—there is gladness. It is gladness that pervades one’s whole being; there is a new sense of vitality, be it quiet or exuberant. Usually, however, there is more than relief in this gladness. There is transformation. We discover a new reality behind the loss.”7

“Shipwreck” experiences are a part of the much larger journey of developing a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. They can result in a richer, more personal faith and become the foundation of new exploration. In organizations, they result in renewed engagement and energy and opening new territory, or in what is termed “a competitive advantage.” Our personal sense of control was inadequate and unrealistic. We have surrendered to something larger than ourselves.

**Dark night**

In classical spirituality, we call this experience of hitting the wall by a different name: the dark night of the soul. The hope of the dark night is that we are like the caterpillar weaving a cocoon and will emerge transformed.

In the experience of the dark night, God seems distant and silent. But the silence is fraught with purpose. In this experience of abandonment, our soul is purged of self-motivation. The experience is one of soul-searching and of purification, the kind of desperate reflection we avoid when things are going well. And so, God engineers a way for us to slow down, perhaps even to stop. The pain gets our attention in a way that daily victory and constant activity do not.

In the Old Testament narrative, Israel is led into the desert because only in this way can she learn radical dependence on God. Daily, she is fed by God, given water by God, and delivered from her enemies by God. By day, she is led by the cloud, and by night, by the pillar of fire. God leads Israel into the desert to woo her. Exodus is a great romance. The Lord will allow no other lovers for Israel.

This is the great value of the desert; it purges us of distorted motives and wrong attachments. In the desert, we detach from things and from self in order to become attached to God and His kingdom. Only after forty years in the desert is Israel ready to enter the land of promise. But what mechanisms does God employ for this purpose?

The dark night is a gift to us: a gift intended to bring wakefulness and humility. When leaders and faith communities are in decline, they begin to ask new questions, deep questions, about motivation, about ends and means, and about control. The Lord engineers the journey so that our eyes are lifted above our own needs and the small kingdoms we build to the eternal kingdom He alone can build.

**Disorientation**

Disorientation arrives for the purpose of renewal. God puts to death what is earthly in us so that His life can fill us and so that, eventually,
we can renew our ministry and mission with the sole aim of pleasing our Master. We feel caught. The call is to enter a holding space—a place between. There is no going back and no going forward. It is neither movement from nor toward.

But neither is it empty space: it is God space, sacred space. In the paradoxical reality of spiritual life, at the still point, we discover the dance. We can freely embrace God's gift of liminality. You aren't lost; you are right here.

Can we learn to swim between two worlds? Can we learn to dwell in the space where we are not in control and we don't know the answers? Can we answer God's call to be where we are?

At 71, a renowned pastor reflected on his mid-life experience:

I am overflowing with thankfulness to the mercy and the power of God to hold on to me during those years. . . . When I look at them, I have to say, “Thank you, Father. If you had not been massively true to your promises to complete the good work that you began, I wouldn’t have made it. I sure didn’t have the fingers to grip this cliff.”

My encouragement to men is that you lay hold of Jesus Christ as Paul says in Philippians 3:12. Lay hold of him precisely because he has laid hold of you. . . .

Paul gets real clarity, and it's not complex. It's short. You can put in a sentence why he exists: to magnify Jesus Christ—whether strong or weak, whether living or dying—to finish our course in faith and love, not turning to the right, not turning to the left, not making shipwreck of our faith, our marriage, or our ministry. . . .

I promise you that if you stay faithful to your wife, God will re-enchant your marriage in ways you can't imagine. And the children? They are in his hands. You are not God. You are his emissary . . .

God is faithful. That's the bottom line.8

The way forward

When my children were young, they enjoyed all kinds of games. But we evolved one game I never really understood. When I was lounging around, they loved to come and sit on my lap. Sometimes, as a kind of hug, I would put my arms around them, grip their ankles, and hold them in a vice grip. They would squeal and struggle. But so long as they were small enough to sit on my lap, I was strong enough that they could not break free. They loved this game! But what was it really about?

Now, much later in my life, I understand the game. I realize that there was a security in their inability to move. They learned a kind of surrender to the strength of a father. That strength was reassuring to them—it told them they were safe under my care. They believed their dad could handle anything. Of course, it was an illusion, but their experience of my strength helped them build a foundation of trust that enabled them to begin to take risks in the world and grow their trust in God. The Welsh poet David Whyte writes,

Courage is the ability to cultivate a relationship with the unknown; to create a form of friendship with what lies around the corner over the horizon— with those things that have not yet fully come into being.9

We may feel trapped in this strange location, unable to move. But when we are ready, the Lord will teach us of our weakness and His strength (1 Cor. 1:2). Then, we can enter a new kind of stillness. And when we are ready again, He'll let go.

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2 Sparks, with minor editorial revisions to capitalization and punctuation.
3 Adapted from Len Hjalmarson, Broken Futures: Churches and Leaders Lost in Transition (Skyforest, CA: Urban Loft, 2018), 31.

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Pastoral families: The agony and mission of infertility and child loss

Infertility affects 186 million individuals globally, or 8–12 percent of reproductive-aged couples. It is defined as the inability to achieve a pregnancy after one or more years of unprotected intercourse. It may also refer to a woman’s inability to carry a pregnancy to full term. Lifestyle and environmental factors, such as smoking and obesity, increase infertility risk and pregnancy complications.

While 15 percent of infertile couples have “unexplained infertility,” approximately 85 percent of couples’ conception difficulties can be linked to ovulatory dysfunction, tubal disease, and male factor infertility. In fact, males are responsible for 20–30 percent of infertility individually and are co-responsible for half of all infertility cases.

Infertility is ubiquitous, affecting couples in every community and congregation, suggesting that infertility is a reality that pastoral families must navigate. Too many pastoral couples suffer in silence or are invalidated in their communities. Elizabeth Hagan states, “As a Christian pastor who battled infertility for eight years before making peace with a child-free life and then being surprised by an adoption opportunity last year, I often wondered: If I wasn’t the pastor, would I come to church during this difficult time? The answer on many occasions was no.”

Biblical perspective

The Bible acknowledges the anguish and desperation of Rachel, who retorted, “Give me children, or else I die!” (Gen. 30:1), and the sorrow of Hannah, who “was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the Lord and wept in anguish” (1 Sam. 110). The Bible also recounts the psychological toll of infertility in Proverbs 30:15, 16, when it says,

There are three things that are never satisfied,
Four never say, “Enough!”:
The grave,
The barren womb,
The earth that is not satisfied with water—
And the fire never says, “Enough!”

Often, the involuntarily childless pastoral couple wrestles with bitterness and resentment, along with confusion and thoughts of apparent “unfairness.” These feelings may be intensified as
the couple notes the Bible’s characterization of fertility as one of the blessings for the obedient (Deut. 28:4–11) and infertility as a curse from God (v. 18; Num. 5:11–28; Lev. 20:20, 21). Pastoral couples may value reassurance that infertility is rarely connected with personal sins.

Pastoral pain
The psychological distress of infertility is significant and comparable to that experienced by persons living with cancer or heart disease. It often contributes to relationship distress, stress, depression, and anxiety. Moreover, individuals who are
involuntary childless also grapple with feelings of isolation because they frequently struggle in silence. Approximately 56 percent of women and 32 percent of men with an infertility diagnosis experience significant depressive symptoms, and 76 percent of women and 61 percent of men report elevated anxiety. It is associated with lowered self-esteem, relationship conflicts, and divorce.

Dealing with infertility in their personal lives can be particularly difficult for pastoral couples because of the comprehensiveness of the ministry call and congregational and community expectations. Pastors, according to 1 Timothy chapters 3 and 4, are required to have an experiential knowledge of and devotion to Jesus Christ and the Holy Bible; be consistently invested; be dutiful in pastoral administration, care, and nurturance; and serve as ambassadors of the church to the community. Pastoral couples experience relationship stressors, such as infertility, similar to their non-clergy peers. However, others expect pastors to provide temporal, moral, and spiritual leadership but not to express feelings of anger, frustration, or sorrow.

This unrealistically high expectation of pastors and their families to maintain calm and composure in every situation can be internalized and contribute to clergy identity difficulties, increased clergy family problems, loneliness, and life and vocational dissatisfaction.

The church and community celebrate children and parenthood, and the emotional turmoil of infertility among congregants and spiritual leaders is frequently overlooked. Pastors are a key emotional resource for families. They are required to perform dedication ceremonies and counsel couples who are preparing for the arrival of a child, grieving over the loss of a child, or struggling with infertility, even while they grapple with their own unwanted childlessness.

Although the agony and emptiness of permanent infertility may resurface at different points of the life cycle, a ministry and church culture that empathically acknowledges and nurtures those in the grips of the journey can be transformative.

Pastoral care

Couples may benefit from support as they navigate the grief that accompanies child loss and long-term or permanent infertility and decide whether or not to seek out and act on medical recommendations. However, the decision of to whom, when, and how the pastoral couple discloses their infertility and child loss experiences is very personal. Some will publicly share, while others may choose to keep the details of their infertility and child loss journeys private.

The danger of exacerbating the emotional turmoil of infertility or child loss and the resulting unwanted childlessness can be paralyzing and mute well-meaning efforts to provide encouragement and support. Established data confirms that interpersonal support has invaluable emotional and spiritual benefits for couples coping with unwanted childlessness and child loss. It is, however, important that individuals witnessing potential infertility difficulties listen with compassion and patience and resist the impulse to provide unsolicited advice.

It is critical to be mindful of inquiries about a couple’s family planning decisions since these prompts can be hurtful and triggering for those struggling with infertility. The counsel of Colossians 3:12 to “put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering” is particularly pertinent given that some social events that pastoral couples are expected to attend and participate in, particularly those involving pregnant women or babies, may be difficult for some pastoral couples.

Available help

Couples who are curious about the physical nature of their difficulties may value a consultation, follow-up evaluations, and treatment with a gynecologist, urologist, and reproductive endocrinologist. Pastoral couples can participate in individual and couple psychotherapy with trained mental health providers to process feelings associated with unwanted childlessness and loss and explore coping resources. They can identify suitably trained therapists/psychologists and medical providers through their local conferences, national professional associations, or social or professional networks. Although couples with infertility and child loss may benefit from mental and physical health services at any stage of their journey, couples are encouraged to initiate treatment if they are experiencing chronic and debilitating feelings of depression and anxiety or feel overwhelmed to the point that their feelings interfere with their ability to attend to their daily living tasks and important relationships. Couples may want to seek mental health services when they need support exploring their options and available resources.

Most pastoral couples can benefit from a range of self-help and professional resources.
along with the support of family and friends. Books such as Toni Weschler’s *Taking Charge of Your Fertility: The Definitive Guide to Natural Birth Control, Pregnancy Achievement, and Reproductive Health* and Jody Day’s *Living the Life Unexpected: How to Find Hope, Meaning and a Fulfilling Future Without Children* are two of the many books that can offer information about the emotional and physical aspects of infertility. There are several Facebook and Instagram infertility support groups and other faith-based options that can reduce feelings of isolation and provide opportunities to pastoral couples to learn and share with others experiencing infertility, such as Hannah’s Prayer; Sarah’s Laughter; Christian Women; TTC, Pregnancy & Infertility; Resolve; The Bump; Hearts of Hope; Waiting for Baby Bird Ministries; and Babycenter.com.

**Fervent love**

The responsibility for creating emotional safety in our churches for couples grappling with infertility and child loss is shared. The church can be strengthened by health advocacy campaigns that focus on issues around infertility and child loss. This can be done by conducting Infertility Awareness weeks or days that include expert discussions on fertility needs and challenges, Walks or Runs of Hope events, gathering and providing local mental and physical health resources for infertility and child loss, and incorporating validating language and messages in our sermons and other programming to confront and eradicate misconceptions about infertility and child loss.

The agony of infertility can also serve as an impetus for mission and ministry within congregations and the wider community. Some pastoral couples on the healing journey may, of their own volition and in their own time, choose to establish ministries that spring from their experiences. They may have powerful insights because of their trajectory that allow for churches and communities that are emotionally safe and nurturing to families and individuals with histories of loss and infertility. It is, however, important that these couples arrive at this decision without the premature urging of others.

Permanently infertile pastoral couples can lead satisfying and fulfilled lives and ministries as they rediscover meaning, worth, and purpose and gradually adapt to life without their own biological children. This journey often includes discovering work and hobbies and may include engaging with and investing in other relationships with children of relatives and friends. These efforts will go far in including and nurturing those who feel marginalized by their histories of long-term or permanent infertility and child loss and fulfill the admonition of 1 Peter 4:8 to ‘have fervent love for one another, for ‘love will cover a multitude of sins.’ ”

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7 Scripture is from the New King James Version.

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The concubine and the Levite? Really?*

Pastors in positions of power are vulnerable to being purveyors of abuse. This is true irrespective of Christian conviction or pleasing personality. Counselors Mabel and Colin Dunbar acknowledge, “Many abusers are actually quite charming and pleasant to people outside of the family . . . [they] are often unable to envision him as a violent abuser.”

Access and accountability are key ingredients to abuse. Pastoral counselor John Trusty states, “The pastoral role by its very nature gives the pastor access to people’s lives in a very intimate way.” The account of the Levite and the concubine demonstrates that when accountability is low, abuse will be high, and when authority meets opportunity, the results can be devastating.

Devastating consequences

Who, reading the Old Testament, has not wondered at times why God kept some of those gruesome stories in there? Of all the gruesome ones, that of the Levite and his concubine in Judges 19 has to be a top contender. What possible redeeming value can we get from this sordid account that appears in the Word of God?

The story begins with the statement that, in those days, Israel had no king (Judges 19:1). Then the Levite story, and the book of Judges as a whole, ends by stating that, in those days, Israel had no king—having rejected God as their king—and that “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25, ESV).

The fact that this gruesome and disgusting story of the Levite and his concubine is
bookended by these statements points to the idea that, without God as their king, each one then doing what was right in his own eyes is the entire reason that the story happened in the first place.

Scholars point out that the classic phases of abuse—honeymoon, tension-building, and explosive—are all identified in this narrative. What, if any, are the lessons for pastors?

The narrative

A young Levite, who by family connections was supposed to be a minister of God, took a concubine, a kind of secondary wife. It was a legal situation in which the secondary wife did not have all the privileges of a primary wife but was, nonetheless, a legal wife, which usually meant that she had obligations to her husband and her husband to her.

The Levite took his new wife to his residence in Ephraim, but she acted unfaithfully and fled home to Bethlehem. The Levite must have had some decency. Judges 19:3 says that he went after her and spoke tenderly to her in order to bring her back.

The story is, so far, palatable (as palatable as concubinage can be to us). In spite of her unfaithfulness, he was kind and wanted her back, inconveniencing himself when he certainly did not have to. A concubine was easily divorced, but he chose not to. Her father evidently liked his son-in-law and convinced him to stay for several extra days. Finally, the Levite decided he must go, even though it had grown late in the day.

The three of them—the Levite, his wife, and a servant—traveled as far as Jerusalem (“Jebus” at the time). The Levite’s servant tried to convince his master to stop there for the night, but the Levite wanted to avoid staying in a city that did not belong to Israel. Instead, he preferred to travel as far as Gibeah in Benjamin. So, the Levite overruled his servant, and they arrived in Gibeah late in the day.

Because inns were uncommon, the standard practice was for travelers to wait in the town square. Cultural hospitality codes were such that the people of the town would invite travelers to lodge at home for the night. Unfortunately, no one offered the travelers a place, an indication of how uncommonly degraded the inhabitants of Gibeah had become. For the travelers, the hour grew so late that they had nearly resigned themselves to sleeping in the town square.

Finally, though, an old man returned from the fields, saw the travelers, and invited them home, insisting that they dare not sleep in the square for reasons that soon become apparent. The Levite, his concubine, and his servant went home with their host. But then some Gibeonite men surrounded the house, hammering on the door, demanding that the Levite be brought out to them so that they “may know him” (v. 22, ESV).

Whatever positive ideas readers may have granted the Levite and the hospitable old man disappear at this point. The old man went out and begged the mob not to do this wicked thing to the Levite, his guest. Rather, he offered them his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine instead. But the men refused, insisting they wanted the Levite himself. In response, the Levite pushed his concubine out to them, and the mob accepted her. Then her husband, the servant, and the old man went to sleep while the Levite’s wife was raped all night. The next morning, when the Levite went to leave, he found her dead on the doorstep.

And, if that were not all bad enough, the Levite carved up his concubine’s body and sent it as a gruesome message throughout Israel. The outraged men of Israel gathered in righteous indignation in order to punish the tribe of Benjamin, which was defending its perverted men.

So, again, the question remains: why was this gruesome and disgusting story preserved in the Word of God?

Enter Hosea

One reason can be found in Hosea 9, where God warned Israel that they were getting close to the end of His forbearance. Eventually, He would allow them to have their way, and He would withdraw His presence, allowing the forces of evil to conquer...
them. Why would He do this? Hosea 9:9 says it was because they had sunk so deeply in their corruption that it was like the days of Gibeah.

Of the 48 times the name Gibeah is used in the Old Testament, half are found in the story of the Levite and his concubine, making it the most natural allusion for Hosea’s warning to Israel. The additional information in Hosea 10:9, about war overtaking the evil doers in Gibeah, confirms the allusion.

Although it happened about 400 years before Hosea’s time, the story of the Levite and his concubine was later used by God to illustrate the depths to which Israel had fallen. When Hosea proclaimed to Israel that they were as corrupt as Gibeah, evidently, God knew Israel would recognize the allusion. After all, who could forget such a dreadful story?

In a paraphrase of Hosea 10:9, God was essentially saying to Israel, Do you remember the story of what happened in Gibeah, how terrible that was? That is your condition today. That is how awful you have been from that day until this. And remember the result? Remember what happened to the tribe of Benjamin, how it was nearly annihilated? That is where you are headed. That is what will happen to you soon if you do not change your ways!

Relevance

Although God’s message through Hosea was applicable to this ancient people, it remained relevant through biblical history and even to the end of time. Here is Hosea 10:8:

The high places of wickedness will be destroyed—
it is the sin of Israel.
Thorns and thistles will grow up
and cover their altars.
Then they will say to the mountains, “Cover us!”
and to the hills, “Fall on us!” (NIV).

That last sentence is commonly recognized. Hundreds of years later, Jesus repeated Hosea’s words. In Luke 23:28–30, as He was marched to Calvary, Jesus said to the women weeping for Him: “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then

“ ‘they will say to the mountains, “Fall on us!”
And to the hills, “Cover us!” ’ ”

Quoting Hosea, Jesus referred to what would happen to Jerusalem about 40 years later, when the Romans would destroy the city and scatter Israel. Just as Hosea himself warned Israel about the judgment that would befall them if they refused to remain faithful to their covenant relationship with God, so in His day, Jesus used Hosea’s words to convey the same message, bringing along, by extension, the story of the Levite and his concubine.

Returning to Hosea 10:8, 9,

Then they will say to the mountains, “Cover us!”
and to the hills, “Fall on us!”

“Since the days of Gibeah, you have sinned, O Israel,
and there you have remained” (NIV; emphasis added).

Jesus alluded to the entire situation that Hosea addressed, in which Israel was still as depraved as the men of Gibeah that night. And, not accidentally, Jesus spoke these words just after the chief priests around Him had cried out to Pilate, “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15, NIV).

Israel still had no king, and they remained as wicked as the men of Gibeah. Their wickedness looked different at that point in time, but it was just as horrifying to God as what happened in Gibeah. But the sad saga continues, even to the end.

Alluding to Hosea, Revelation 6:15–17 points to a time future to us and includes the phrase “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne” (v. 16, NIV). This use demonstrates that the story will remain relevant until the Second Advent, serving as a benchmark illustration of the depths to which humanity has fallen. The condition of the world has not improved since the story of the Levite and his concubine. Humanity is just as depraved now as it was then, and often for the same reason, too: God is not acknowledged as king, so everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

Time to speak

The story’s tragedy lies in the abuse and the apathy. Pastoral misconduct occurs in both perpetration and passivity. Redemption comes when clergy acknowledge that their God-given position of responsibility requires them to alleviate pain, not elevate it. A perceived need for sexual fulfillment should never become a depraved need for abusive gratification.
The narrative ends with the plea, “Everyone who saw it said, ‘Such a horrible crime has not been committed in all the time since Israel left Egypt. Think about it! What are we going to do? Who’s going to speak up?’” (Judges 19:30, TLB). Professor Elaine Heath, author of *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, maintains that godly pastors will know what to do.

“The clergy will mediate the presence of Christ to her and will companion her in her healing journey, offering protection from the destructive ideology of the ‘men of Gibeah.’ . . . In their teaching and preaching the clergy will empower the woman to ‘rightly interpret the word of truth’ concerning her value and dignity as a person made in the image of God . . . They will help her to regain self-esteem and will provide her with healthy, biblical images of God.”

**Time to be**

Yes, we are shocked, disgusted, even angered by this story. We are supposed to be. It was included to show just how fallen humanity is and that the idea of each person functioning as his or her own moral compass is a fallacy. Clergy counselor G. Lloyd Rediger states, “The reality is that clergy are sex offenders. We must move beyond shock if we are to handle cases of clergy sexual malfeasance with justice and caring.”

From Jeremiah’s words about humanity’s moral state (Jer. 17:9) to Paul’s (Rom. 3), Scripture is painfully clear about human corruption. And what about our modern world makes us think that it is any different or that humans today, doing what is right in their own eyes, will act any more morally than did those in Judges 19?

Anyone not having God as King, as Law-Giver, is in danger of being just as corrupt and evil as those in this story, which, however gruesome and disgusting, powerfully reminds us of our need for God, for His sanctifying power (1 Cor. 6:11) and saving grace (Eph. 2:8).

* With the author’s permission, we have connected the Levite’s detestable behavior with abuse throughout the article. Editors.

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5. Block, 168.

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**When he reached home, he took a knife and cut up his concubine, limb by limb, into twelve parts and sent them into all areas of Israel” (Judges 19:29). Abuse against a girl cuts her into twelve pieces.**

1. Her mind is destroyed.
2. Her body is destroyed.
3. Her character is destroyed.
4. Her reputation is destroyed.
5. Her dreams are destroyed.
6. Her hopes are destroyed.
7. Her future is destroyed.
8. Her plans for a steady job are destroyed.
9. Her plans for attracting the right kind of man are destroyed.
10. Her plans to be a loving wife are destroyed.
11. Her plans to be a consistent and caring mother are destroyed.
12. Her perception of God as a loving father is destroyed.

Terrible as it is, the story must be told—to the twelve tribes. Religious people must recognize that some of the most terrible accounts of abuse are deeds occurring in religious communities.

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Pastors across Canada meet to be restored and empowered
ALBERTA, CANADA

The gentle hum of summer life was altered at Burman University, Alberta, Canada, during the first weekend of July as hundreds gathered on the campus. It began weeks and months out as the organizing team started preparing for the soon arrival of 300 pastors from across Canada, with the visitors totaling 500 people, including families, presenters, and exhibitors for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Canada (SDACC) Ministerial Summit.

Attendees were encouraged by Paul Lewellyn, SDACC president, challenging us to keep striking our bows in faith, and Elizabeth Talbot, Jesus 101 speaker/director, reminding us that Jesus wins, the other guy loses, so we need to pick who we will stand with. Ivan Williams, Ministerial Association director of the North American Division (NAD), left us with the final charge and prayed for all the ministers in Canada.

Every presenter and workshop facilitator brought something special, giving us practical tools for ministry and reminding us that what we do matters. Jeffrey Brown, associate ministerial secretary of the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference, took pastors through the mountains and valleys of ministry, helping them identify their life stage, or “season.” The fun and delight of the exhibitors’ hall filled Burman’s new library with energy. A highlight for me was gathering with fellow female pastors to shared a meal, put faces to names, exchange hugs, pray together, and leave as friends.

Pastor Jordane Smith shared, “The SDACC Ministerial Summit was refreshing, educational, and empowering! The worship was inspiring, the workshops were leading-edge, but the community was the aspect that truly made our gathering a summit.”

I will hold close to my heart the feeling of being surrounded by so many who understand the calling of pastoral ministry and are committed to following the way of Jesus. Until we meet again, may we all have the courage to continue. [Massiel Davila-Ferrer, chaplain, Burman University/Jeffrey Brown, Ministry.]

Pastor wins medals at World Transplant Games
VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

A Seventh-day Adventist pastor won two bronze medals at the 2023 World Transplant Games. Fraser Catton, from Victoria, Australia, was among 150 athletes in Team Australia competing in the games, held in Perth, Western Australia. He won medals in the men’s singles and doubles tennis.

“It was pretty special to represent Australia and come away with something to show for it,” Catton said. “The atmosphere was certainly competitive but also very encouraging and supportive. At the end of the day, everyone was there to push themselves and celebrate organ donation.”

Competing at the games for the first time was an incredible experience for the Burwood Adventist Community Church pastor.

Having lived with kidney disease most of his life, Catton underwent a kidney transplant in early 2022. Being given a new chance at life is something for which the father of three will forever be grateful.

“We read about being given a new heart of flesh,” he shared. “My understanding of that has
deepened considerably. While I didn’t receive a heart, I did receive something equally as life giving in a functioning kidney. And the process was long, at times painful, slow, and required me to rely, sometimes completely, on other people. There was actually very little I could contribute to the process apart from accepting it and living a new normal. But that new normal is beautiful!

“There were many people who supported this journey. My wife and girls, parents and extended family, my church family and friends, and my donor and their family. They all deserve gold medals!”

Needless to say, Catton is a keen advocate for organ donation.

“I know that this is a sensitive subject for some. However, I would encourage people to consider their final gift. If we believe we are called to make disciples, and that requires hearing and responding to Jesus, then people deserve that chance. Your donated organ could allow someone the extra years of life to have a chance to hear about Jesus. That’s worth signing up for.” [Tracey Bridcutt]

For more than a year now, Pastor Edgar Mongua has led the “Give Them Something to Eat” initiative and social assistance programs in public squares and prisons in Ocumare del Tuy and Yare, Miranda, in eastern Venezuela.

The “Give Them Something to Eat” event, which takes place specifically in the Uveritos de la Pica and Guillermo Garcia neighborhoods in Yare, includes distributing 30 to 60 arepas one day a week to children, single mothers, and seniors.

Likewise, 5 to 10 food bags are distributed among low-income families. Leaders also organize other activities to benefit the community, including haircuts, free consultations with a dentist, and blood pressure check-ups.

Volunteers also distribute clothing, shoes, and hot meals to those who need them.

“We also organize games and sports activities for children, the youth, and teens,” Mongua said.
“On Friday afternoons, these kids and young people meet with us to listen to a message from God’s Word.”

A group of Adventist volunteers also visit a public square in Ocumare del Tuy every Friday morning to meet the physical and spiritual needs of those who are there.

“We sing, we pray, we study the Bible with a group of approximately sixty people (most of them senior citizens), and then we share a tasty breakfast with them,” Mongua shared. “We also organize health and social assistance special days, which again, include offering free haircuts and dental services.”

The initiative has resulted in many new regular visitors to local congregations. Among those who were assisted included 20 who had studied the Bible and requested to be baptized.

The outreach has also moved from public places to benefit those who are detained or in prison. Every Tuesday morning, Adventist volunteers offer physical and spiritual support at the Ocumare del Tuy police station. The church’s initiatives have benefited prisoners and police agents.

“Every Tuesday is a different experience. We have seen how the Lord has touched and transformed hearts,” said Wilma, Pastor Mongua’s wife. She added that so far, 12 people have been baptized as a direct result of this prison ministry initiative.

Thanks to the support of local church boards and the funds provided by kind church members, the various ministries led by Pastor Mongua distribute 680 breakfasts, 240 hot lunches, and 12 food bags with seven basic food items every month.

According to Mongua, close to 15,000 people have already benefited from their initiatives in the last 12 months. [Inter-American Division News]
Preaching to a Divided Nation: A Seven-Step Model for Promoting Reconciliation and Unity


Preaching to a Divided Nation is an excellent resource that provides not only valuable insights into the many polarizations and divisions that confront society but also a theological template that preachers can use to aid them in fostering healing and reconciliation in their congregations. Kim and Hoffman provide preachers with a seven-step model that serves as best practices for the faithful biblical proclamation of Jesus’ love and healing in “a world divided across ethnic, class, sex, and political lines” (1).

The theological step is the first in the model, which underscores the need for preachers to understand and proclaim the arc of Scripture, best viewed through the reconciling narrative of the Creator, first creation, alienation, reconciliation, and final creation. This theological understanding should also include a comprehensive knowledge of sin and the four isms—ethnocentrism, classism, sexism, and partisan polarization. In promoting reconciliation and unity through preaching, the four great equalizers—the imago Dei, human sinfulness, the vast atoning love of Jesus Christ, and the final judgment—must be at the heart of the message.

Step 2 focuses on the contextual aspect and implores homileticians to develop their cultural, emotional/relational, and historical intelligences. In developing historical intelligence, preachers are strongly encouraged to be familiar with the works of ethnic minorities, who provide a perspective that differs from the dominant culture’s account of history. The authors remind readers that “preaching to a divided nation necessitates a level of open-mindedness to interact with those with whom we may disagree and not shy away from difficult conversations” (38). The third stage, the personal step, challenges preachers to engage in the homiletical renewal process, which aids in homiletical maturity. Through this renewal process, preachers will “speak with humility, vulnerability, and holiness, ... be willing to examine [their] hearts, face [their] prejudices, and allow the Holy Scriptures and the presence of God and others to expose [their] blind spots, so [they] can confess [their] sin to God and safe friends or accountability partners” (41).

Step 4 focuses on the positional aspect of the model. Preachers are reminded they are conduits of the truth and that the Holy Spirit brings about genuine transformation and unity in a divided church and world. Chapter 5 outlines a methodological template for effective preaching in a polarized society. This preaching framework should focus on the shared doctrines, identity, mission, experiences, and virtue formation. Time should also be dedicated to listening with empathy and lament.

For step 6, the practical steps document pre-sermon, mid-sermon, and post-sermon best practices for gospel-centered preaching focused on divisive topics. The final chapter zeroes in on the categorical step, which lists critical biblical themes and texts “that will pack the greatest homiletical punch” at the different isms. The book concludes with a call to action, sample sermons, and other resources for homileticians to exercise holy boldness in confronting the divisive issues in our nation.

In sum, Preaching to a Divided Nation is a timely resource that equips pastors and teachers to effect change through their pulpit ministry, which can lead to widespread transformation and reconciliation. It is not coincidental that Outreach Magazine selected this volume as the 2023 Resource of the Year for Leadership.
One morning, I awoke well before sunrise, rushed out the door, and was at my seven o’clock Rotary meeting on time. By eight-thirty, I was involved in discussing fundraising techniques at the office. By nine o’clock, I had switched to a counseling appointment then finished the morning by fielding numerous phone calls, answering emails, sending memos, and working through a family health crisis with a parishioner. After eating a quick brown-bag lunch with my head elder at the office, I was off to visit an overwrought husband who wanted some spiritual counsel. I dropped by the hospital for two visits and then rushed home to prepare a quick and quiet supper for my wife. Just as I was about to light the romantic candles, she called and stated that she had her own crises at work, so I ate alone.

I returned to the church in the evening for more meetings then went home again to try to get some last-minute conversations in from the calls on the answering machine that needed to be returned. Sermon preparation time was pushed to another day. I kissed my neglected wife good night and fell asleep, wondering what I had accomplished.

The way life was meant to be

In the rush and chaos of our lives, how do we sort out the important from the urgent? Do you ever get the feeling some things of infinite value are getting neglected just because of the way we do life? Is this reality, the way life was meant to be lived for a pastor? When David sang that beautiful song in Psalm 37:3, “Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness” (NKJV), did it have to be at a dead run? When he wrote that, he was probably leaning against a tree, watching sheep graze and composing on his lyre. That sounds more like the life he was singing about.

Let me give you a glimpse into another morning last fall—a different day, a different setting.

The chill of autumn was in the air as I stepped outside, and the low clouds told of an approaching weather front. I gathered a load of wood from the stack not far from the corner of the cabin and filled the wood box. Then, I built a fire against the chill. I laid the kindling in the cold gray ashes of yesterday’s fire. Yesterday’s flame carried no lingering warmth for me in the present and certainly not the future, so I started again to rebuild my flame of warmth.

Eventually, the small fire crackled and spit, and the cabin filled with the sweet, pungent odor of burning wood. Soon, a clean, fresh warmth was seeping through the cabin, dispelling the chill of dawn.

No divine act of intervention, no Savior of my soul is going to do what I must do myself. I am solely responsible for the act of reaching out for the heart of God.

Solely responsible

Building a new fire is an act of pure magic that I never cease to marvel at. As I built this physical fire, I realized the significance of rekindling my own inner flame. I am the keeper of my own flame of spirituality. No one is going to step to the forefront to plan my priorities, to arrange my life and my schedule. No divine act of intervention, no Savior of my soul is going to do what I must do myself. I am solely responsible for the act of reaching out for the heart of God. He waits with infinite patience for those moments when I rekindle the flame and stretch forth my hand to touch His.

Today, amid the urgent, I will be the keeper of my own flame.
INSPIRATION

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You send students to Southern, we’ll send them to the world!

Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:5, NIV). Every year, hundreds of Southern Adventist University students seize that command as they go on mission trips, serve as student missionaries, and lead out in local community outreach. More than 33,000 people have been baptized through the efforts of our Evangelism Resource Center alone.

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