

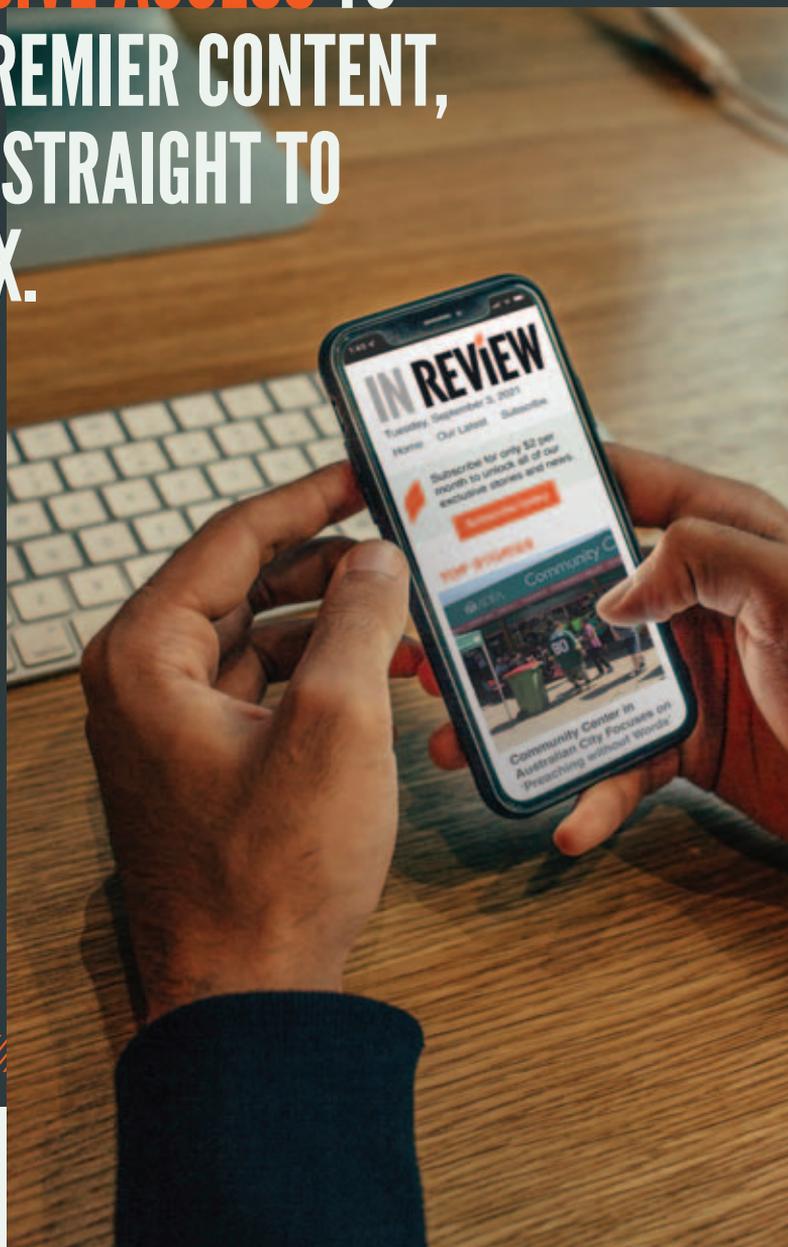
# ADVENTIST REVIEW

DECEMBER 2021: A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE FOR TIMES  
LIKE THESE + WHAT HAPPENED ON CHRISTMAS? +  
SANTA DRIVES A CADILLAC + MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH  
ADVENTIST THEOLOGY + VIOLENCE



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PHOTO BY RAY HENNESSY ON UNSPLASH

“The ‘good tidings of great joy’ shared with the shepherds at the first advent of Christ portraying the eternal gospel through His justifying and sanctifying righteousness come in the beginning of God’s Holy Word found in Genesis 3:15 and the end found in Revelation 14:6 pointing us to His second advent!”

—Ted N C Wilson (see pp. 70-71)

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# TRENDING

## THE MOST SHARED STORIES ON ADVENTISTREVIEW.ORG LAST MONTH:

- 1 Reaffirming the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Response to COVID-19
- 2 Marxism or Capitalism? The Biblical Model Outdoes Both, Adventist Scholar Says
- 3 What Every Christian Should Know About Halloween
- 4 Adventists Pray for God to Open Doors to the Gospel in North Korea
- 5 Loma Linda Dean Appointed to CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization

## DECEMBER 23, 1899

Walter Black, a colporteur, and Pastor C.D.M. Williams went to Tucson, Arizona, looking for ways to spread the gospel. While knocking on doors, they met Marcial Serna, a Methodist Episcopal minister. Though he didn't buy any books, they felt enough of a spark of interest to return.



Sanchez Seventh-day Adventist Church, first Hispanic Adventist Church in North America

They asked Pastor Serna if he would help them learn Spanish. He readily agreed, and they decided to use the Bible for a textbook. Laying the English and Spanish Bibles side by side, they began. All went well until they hit Genesis 2. Serna was resistant to their explanation of the Sabbath.



Pastor Marcial Serna

Black was invited to a debate in front of Serna's congregation. Somewhat uncomfortable, Black prepared his notes. His presentation was first. When it was Serna's time for rebuttal, he simply said, "What this man has said is true."

Serna was eagerly led to the truth. He, in turn, led his congregation, and together, minus one individual, the entire congregation went from Methodist Episcopal to Seventh-day Adventist. Soon after, his second congregation also agreed. On December 23, 1899, the first Hispanic Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America was organized.

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BILL KNOTT

## Quietly Defiant

*Christ climbed down  
from His bare Tree  
this year  
and ran away to where  
there were no rootless  
Christmas trees  
hung with candycanes and  
breakable stars\**

**M**ore than 60 years ago Beat Generation poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti penned a jeremiad decrying the commercialism and secularity of the Christmas season. He deftly skewered everything from “gilded Christmas trees” to “Sears Roebuck creches” to a “fat hand-shaking stranger in a red flannel suit and a fake white beard [who] went around passing himself off as some sort of North Pole saint.”

This was radical stuff for 1958. Ferlinghetti clearly relished the opportunity to provoke a culture that functionally mocked the original narrative of Jesus’ birth while “bearing sacks of Humble Gifts from Saks Fifth Avenue for everybody’s imagined Christ child.”

Six decades later his once-controversial words seem touchingly quaint, for we have new and greater excesses to bemoan. Amazon vans circle endlessly through neighborhoods crammed with inflatable Clauses and wide-eyed reindeer. Christmas travelers, now freed from most travel restrictions, overwhelm the airport gates, and pay amazing sums to taste that “homemade pumpkin pie” about which we hear in endless

loops of holiday music. Talking-head economists worry aloud on all-news channels about declines in bricks-and-mortar Christmas sales, and the effect that online purchasing may have on the GDP. We almost yearn for yesterday’s excesses, which now seem simpler, quieter, less frenetic.

Which makes this the perfect moment for reinvention and renewal.

Instead of hoisting the white flag of surrender to the enormous industry of sight and sound and senselessness that Christmas has become, I propose five simple things we each may do to reclaim some piece—or peace—of all we’ve lost. Like all successful resistance movements, this one draws on things easily in reach for most of us. No trips to dying malls are necessary. No long hours are needed for comparison shopping on dueling websites. The numbers required can be counted on one hand.

*Read the Nativity story again—aloud (Luke 1:5-2:12).* Read it to family, yes, but first to yourself. Declutter your overheated, elvish imagination by hearing yourself repeat the narrative of Joseph and Mary, of sheep and shepherds, of angels chorusing and a wondrous Child asleep. The place you live will grow more stable.

*Make a meal from fresh ingredients.* Eat it slowly, alone or with others, savoring the goodness of God-given food. For one day—even just one meal—focus on what’s tangible, the sense-enliv-

ening experience of fashioning what you will eat. Whether rich or savory, it will be sweeter than honey in the honeycomb.

*Hold a child*—one of yours, or one of anybody’s—long enough to feel the quiet rhythm of contentment, and find again that place where you can re-learn trust. The door to Jesus’ kingdom always opens to the place where children rest, and trust, and play.

*Sing a carol that you love*, perhaps one long forgotten or unheard beneath the din that now fills each December. Note all the rhymes and imagery, choosing to sing it alone, with others, or at church—but only when your heart is full.

*Pray for the people God has given you.* These may be family, friends, or persons that still-stirring Spirit has pressed upon your thought. Bring up their names, their joys, their struggles, and their needs before “the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17, NRSV). Your prayers are still the greatest gifts you give them.

We need not charge the barricades, nor thump the pulpit, nor howl at waste to reclaim Christmas from the culture of excess. The best resistance has quiet, joyful rhythms, where we refuse big numbers and big noise. The pitchfork of this revolution might be a dinner fork, a hymnal, a grandchild, or an hour in prayer.

I wish you joy. 🍀

\*Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “Christ Climbed Down,” *A Coney Island of the Mind* (New York: New Directions, 1958).

“I am challenged now to dig deeper and find my contribution to creating spaces for and modeling civilized, caring dialogue.” **LYNELLE WELDON**, BERRIEN SPRINGS, MICHIGAN

## COVERING THE ANGLES

I want to especially thank you for the October *Adventist Review*. These well-chosen, wide varieties of articles written by experts in their fields, covered every angle of concern about the COVID vaccines. Thank you for this information we can trust and use in making wise decisions. The *Review* has been a valued magazine in our home since we were first married, but we feel it has become even more relevant as the years have gone by. Please keep up the good work.

**Ella Fisher**

*Siloam Springs, Arkansas*



## VACCINATION VIEWS

Your October issue of *Adventist Review* provided a much-needed antidote to the anti-vaccination attitudes spreading in some regions of our fellowship. Jiří Moskala’s excellent examination of biblical principles regarding health and the treatment of disease (“Is Vaccination Biblical?”) leaves no excuse to claim a religious exemption from vaccination. Richard Sloop (“So Many Vaccine Concerns!”), after giving a thorough review of the current status of COVID vaccines, confesses, “Could it be that God has revealed these ‘discoveries’ to our world for our benefit? This is what I believe.” I do not doubt that such forthright support for

vaccination will produce much pushback. I pray that those who desire to maintain personal freedom and refuse what “God has revealed” will come to see the selfishness of that position.

**Edwin A. Karlow**

*Tillamook, Oregon*

Jiří Moskala’s article “Is Vaccination Biblical?” asks an easy question yet uses six pages to answer. Very, very few Adventists would argue that the Bible forbids vaccinations or that the COVID vaccines are the “mark of the beast.” The far more important questions are, “Should governments force people to take a vaccine without informed consent?” And what penalties are

morally acceptable for those who choose to refuse vaccination? Loss of employment (New York), fines (Indonesia), use of restaurants (NYC), freedom to travel (multiple countries)? Should parents who refuse to have their children receive the COVID vaccine be charged with child abuse? Some have suggested refusing all medical services to the unvaccinated. Vaccine mandates certainly are not the mark, but they seem to share the same spirit.

**Mark Mirek**

*Bradford, Ohio*

## NATURE RECOGNIZES CHRIST

In light of two articles in the September edition, G. T. Javor and his creationist-oriented message and John McVay’s “Mockery, Exaltation, and Reading the News” brought this quote to mind about nature recognizing the crucified Christ: “The heavenly hosts had known Him, and had sung His praise over the plains of Bethlehem. The sea had known His voice, and had obeyed His command. Disease and death had recognized His authority, and had yielded to Him their prey. The sun had known Him, and at the sight of His dying anguish, had hidden its face of light. The rocks had known Him, and had shivered into fragments at His cry. Inanimate

## 2022 SPECIAL GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSION

Official notice is hereby given that a Special Session of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists will be held January 18, 2022 in the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists World Headquarters Building, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States. The meeting will begin at 8:00 AM, January 18, 2022. All duly accredited delegates are urged to be present at that time.

*Ted N C Wilson, General Conference President  
Erton C Köhler, General Conference Secretary*

nature had known Christ, and had borne witness to His divinity” (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 771).

**Robert Rouillard**

*Lakewood, Washington*

### IN DEEP APPRECIATION

Thank you to Bill Knott for your editorials, for being a voice crying in the wilderness. They have been consistently words that I believe need to be spoken, crucial ideas and thoughts that call us away from the pitfalls we are being drawn into. A vision of who or what we can be as a church. A reminder and calling out when we get it wrong. “A Sign of the Times” especially moved me—encouraging because it expresses my lament for the divisiveness and anger that are becoming a norm, discouraging because I had perhaps a small hope that my limited perspective was not accurate and that if I would just shift a little I would see that the negativity was coming from only a few people on the fringes.

I am challenged now to dig deeper and find my contribution to creating spaces for and modeling civilized, caring dialogue. Please keep praying over and agonizing over what to write. Know that there are readers that deeply appreciate your words.

**Lynelle Weldon**

*Berrien Springs, Michigan*

## COMMENTS FROM ADVENTISTREVIEW.ORG

### BEAUTIFUL, WONDERFUL WORDS

Very inspiring narration and well-written article and podcast by Sarah Kannanaikkel. Life’s greatest gifts for human beings include the use of language, logic, and the power of using words. Every morning we listen to His voice to align [with] His plan, which is always good for us. God’s love is genuine; so also is His Word for us. A word project like this is a positive influence on our inner health and on many who are reached by us. What a blessing it is to be empowered by the life-giving, life-changing Word of God and to find new glories in the Word of God every morning, and to have a closer walk with our Creator God, in whom alone is our salvation!

**Dr. Marshall S. David**

### REAFFIRMING THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH’S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

A seat belt will not absolutely prevent your death in case of an automobile accident, but it greatly enhances your chances of survival. And, consequently, is the law that you “buckle up.” Likewise, a COVID vaccination will not absolutely prevent your catching it if and when exposed. But it will greatly enhance your chances of survival and lessen the severity if you do. So while the choice is always yours, the consequences of your choices are not a violation of your freedom of conscience.

**William Thomas**

### WHEN OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS, NOVEMBER, 2021

Love this! This is the way Sabbath School should operate.

**Olek Litvak**

### YOUR TURN

**We welcome your letters**, noting, as always, that inclusion of a letter in this section does not imply that the ideas expressed are endorsed by either the editors of the *Adventist Review* or the General Conference. Short, specific, timely letters have the best chance at being published (please include your complete address and phone number—even with e-mail messages). Letters will be edited for space and clarity only. Send correspondence to Letters to the Editor, *Adventist Review*, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600; Internet: [letters@adventistreview.org](mailto:letters@adventistreview.org).

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**“It is God’s intention that we cultivate a loving, caring, and kind attitude toward each other despite our cultural, economic, religion, gender, educational, color, language, and social differences.”**

— Jiri Moskala, p. 13



NAD president G. Alexander Bryant gives his report on October 28, on the first day of the NAD year-end meetings. PHOTO: PIETER DAMSTEEGT

## NAD PRESIDENT REPORTS ON GOD’S BLESSINGS

**G. ALEXANDER BRYANT SAYS THE LORD IS STILL WORKING.**

BY KIMBERLY LUSTE MARAN, NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION, AND ADVENTIST REVIEW

Despite of the challenges we have faced, God has continued to bless His church, and the mission of the church has gone forward,” G. Alexander Bryant, president of the North American Division (NAD), said as he opened his report to the region’s executive committee on October 28. “We thank God for the people of the North American Division—for their faithfulness in working for the Lord, their faithfulness in service, their faithfulness in time, and their faithful [giving]. During a pandemic when church [buildings] have closed, we see an unprecedented tithe gain,” Bryant added.

### A YEAR OF SUPPORT

Part of Bryant’s report, which open the region’s year-end meetings, in-

cluded a six-minute video highlighting the ways Adventist members and organizations have given support to their communities through food distribution, disaster relief, student-led community service projects, shoe donation and distribution, help for the homeless, free health and dental clinics, mental health outreach, hybrid (online and in-person) educational options, and online worship opportunities.

Bryant talked about how the church and its members have adapted and become more agile and flexible in the past year. “And God has blessed us richly. He is still working!” he said.

He specifically addressed the growth in Adventist schools. In the NAD’s early childhood program,

numbers of children increased by 1,295, with 158 centers and 4,347 children; in pre-K through eighth grade, numbers increased by 3,801, with 37,809 students; and in high school, numbers increased by 583, with 11,672 students, he said.

### OUT OF OUR COMFORT ZONE

“Is God pushing His church to get into an uncomfortable place?” Bryant asked before he moved on to briefly address church membership. “When we’re in comfortable spots, it’s easy for us to think the work is ours. But when we’re in uncomfortable places that we cannot predict or cannot control, we tend to lean on the Lord a little bit more. The question I ask us today, North America: Is God trying to say something to us? Is He pushing us out of our comfort zone into a place that we must depend upon Him to do His work?”

### MEDIA, MULTIPLY, AND MENTORSHIP

In February the NAD executive committee voted to focus on the three areas of media, multiply, and mentorship. “We need to look for ways that we can intersect in those areas in a way that we can leverage each other’s strengths to do more,” he said.

Bryant then broadened the net, saying that many have Facebook and other social media accounts, but that “we spend a lot of time sending pictures of what we ate yesterday. What if we could leverage that—all of those social media posts—into making an impact together for Christ? We would like to

train and equip 10,000 digital missionaries to be part of this . . . to help maximize the strength of the network that we have.”

The second focus Bryant addressed is multiply, the focus designated by the NAD Ministerial Association for 2022 and adopted across the division. “We said we wanted to ask the Lord to add 50,000 disciples to North America in the year 2022,” Bryant shared. “We want to add these disciples to help grow the kingdom of God.”

Mentorship was the final focus of Bryant’s presentation. He shared details about the church’s aging leadership. He shared that of the administrators who are eligible for retirement now—presidents, secretaries, and treasurers—40 percent currently serving are eligible for retirement. Those figures shift dramatically when one looks at the next five years, with 61 percent becoming eligible to retire; specifically, 78 percent of presidents will become retirement-eligible.

“We have approximately 4,000 pastors. We don’t have enough people in the pipeline in our schools to replace 2,000 pastors if they were to retire at their eligibility years,” he said. “We have to be more intentional and more active because the shift has already begun.”

### A STEP FURTHER

Bryant expressed the desire for the NAD to take “the three M’s” and move beyond rhetoric, applying these focuses to impact several metropolitan centers in the division. “We can take our sharpened strategic focus and collaborative approach with other entities to the cities,” he said. “What if we took all of our media ministries and made sure they’re online there? And we [connected] with our hospitals? What if we sent student missionaries, in addition to Thailand and Korea, to Chicago and Los Angeles and New York?” he pondered.

Bryant drew his report to a close with words of encouragement. “With all my heart I believe God has called us for this moment. “There’s nothing that can stop God’s church when we rally together and do God’s work; when we’re flexible and agile, and we say, by God’s grace, we’re going to figure it out,” Bryant concluded. “God will bless His people, and God has blessed His people. God wants to do more, and I am asking for God to do more. It is my prayer that we rise to the challenge. We work together in mission. We pray for God’s Holy Spirit. And we watch God do the miraculous.”

## “MEMBERS HAVE BEEN FAITHFUL,” NAD SECRETARY SAYS

**KYOSHIN AHN THANKS GOD, DISCUSSES KEY INDICATORS.**

BY ADVENTIST REVIEW AND NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION

**D**espite the pandemic, our church has carried out its mission with resilience; our members have been faithful to their mission,” Kyoshin Ahn, secretary of the North American Division (NAD), said. Ahn’s words marked the beginning of the secretary’s report at the NAD year-end meeting in Columbia, Maryland, United States, on October 31.

The goal of his report this year was “to have a better understanding about where we are as a church,” Ahn said.

### MEMBERSHIP GAINS

As of December 31, 2020, the Adventist Church in the division had 1,265,754 baptized members who worship in 5,639 churches and 894 companies. There was a net increase of 2,827 members in 2020, a figure that included a total of 17,392 accessions (a decrease of about 55 percent compared with the previous year).

“We are inspired by many of our churches that, despite the pandemic, engaged in evangelistic efforts,” Ahn said.

The number of member deaths topped 8,897 in 2020 (670 more than in 2019). Ahn explained that the trend continued in the first two quarters of 2021 when compared to 2020. According to Ahn, 4,247 members died in the first six months of 2020. In the first half of 2021, 4,655 members had passed to their rest. “Many of these deaths are related to COVID-19 or complications from COVID-19,” he acknowledged.

Regarding the composition of membership, Ahn shared that 32 percent of baptized members in the NAD are more than 60 years old. Another 47 percent



NAD executive secretary Kyoshin Ahn gives his report to the executive committee on October 31.

PHOTO: PIETER DAMSTEEGT

## HOW ARE WE SEEN?

In addition to his report, Ahn reported on a Gallup Research national survey on how Americans see the Adventist Church in terms of brand awareness, religion, interest, and values. Ahn said that more than 4,000 adults in the U.S. participated in the survey conducted in September. In the survey 49 percent said that religion was either extremely important or very important to them.

During his report Ahn shared just a few of the survey's findings. He said that approximately one out of five Americans personally know someone who is a member of the Adventist Church. When its favorability was ranked with other faiths and denominations, however, the church was listed largely as unfavorable, with a ranking of 13 out of 17—with 17 the most unfavorable.

"This survey shows us that we have work to do in terms of our brand awareness," Ahn said. "But it also shows that we are on the right track in terms of our mission statement," he added, citing survey responses that "our mission statement, emphasizing hope and wholeness, struck a chord among Americans."

Ahn concluded his report by emphasizing how thankful he is to God for how He has guided the Adventist Church in the division since the pandemic hit in early 2020. "God has walked with us . . . and will continue to do so," he said. "He is the one who has given us strength to come this far, and He will continue to energize us." 📌

are between 30 and 59. Only 20 percent are 13 to 29, and 1 percent are 0 to 12 (statistics do not take into account members not yet baptized). NAD church members comprise just 5.83 percent of worldwide Adventist membership.

## MEMBERSHIP SERVICES

Brian Ford, director of eAdventist Membership Services, reported on how the eAdventist tool for churches has been helping church leaders, pastors, and clerks to keep up-to-date membership records. Other services include a virtual way of handling bulletins and making announcements, Ford said, and we have more recently added email and text messaging. "We have a growing number of churches taking advantage of this tool," Ford reported. "Each year, we've been able to operate eAdventist a little more efficiently, so we are reinvesting those savings into new tools."

In July eAdventist released an initial version of the new myEADVENTIST mobile-friendly app. "It will provide an online church directory with phone numbers, and options for texts, emails, and maps," Ford said. The team is planning to add tools for pastors, ministry leaders, and messaging for small groups.

Beginning in 2022, eAdventist

will be the one and only membership statistic system for the NAD, Ford said.

## MISSIONAL CHALLENGES

In the last section of the secretary's report, Ahn discussed some missional challenges. He acknowledged that the growth rate has been plateauing for some time. Regarding the accession rate (how many members are added per every 100 members), Ahn reported that in 2010 it was 3.63 percent. In 2019, it went down to 2.73 percent, and in 2020 reached only 1.44 percent.

Another metric is member losses, Ahn said. Since 2010 the NAD has lost 500,704 members and gained 698,610. Missional losses (of members who came into the church from evangelistic endeavors) amounted to 36.7 percent. "It's a great challenge for all of us, reducing the losses," Ahn acknowledged.

Finally Ahn discussed the accession rate per congregation. In 2011 every congregation added, on average, more than six new members. That figure has decreased to a little more than four people per congregation. It is something that begs the question "How can we reenergize those congregations that seem to be having a hard time bearing fruit?"



Congress on Social Justice coordinator Willie Hucks II reminded participants that social justice “calls for us to actively affirm that everyone is created in God’s image.” PHOTO: MARCOS PASEGGI, ADVENTIST REVIEW

## ACTING IN GOD’S MISSION OF RESTORATION

**CONGRESS ON SOCIAL JUSTICE CALLS MEMBERS TO ENGAGE.**

BY MARCOS PASEGGI, ADVENTIST REVIEW

Scores of Seventh-day Adventist leaders, scholars, students, and advocates met at Andrews University (AU) in Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States, for a Congress on Social Justice October 14-16. The hybrid event at the university’s Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary connected presenters and participants in person with many others across the world, as it sought to bring attention to global issues of imbalance and biblical solutions that address them, organizers said.

“The biblical account of Creation informs us that humanity was created in God’s image and granted authority to rule over other animate beings that God created during the fifth and sixth days of that first week,” organizers wrote in the welcoming program booklet. “Unfortunately, the entrance of sin brought disequilibrium to all relationships and disrupted the ecological balance,” they added. “Humanity longs for renewal and restoration, and Christianity claims

the promise of re-creation.”

Organizers reminded participants that we are not called to sit idly by while waiting for the divine fulfillment of the promise. Biblical prophets call for immediate action to address existing injustices as a way of pointing people back to God and living in His image. The event, which enlisted the support of the Lake Union Conference and the North American Division, set out to outline the “intimate link [that] exists between caring for creation in its fullness and beauty and proclaiming the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14,” organizers said.

### DESCRIBING SOCIAL JUSTICE

The term *social justice* evokes responses that are often opposites of each other, Willie Hucks II, associate professor of pastoral theology at AU and event coordinator, acknowledged. For that reason he chose to describe the

term rather than try to define it.

“Social justice calls for us to actively affirm that everyone is created in God’s image,” Hucks said in his opening remarks. “It recognizes that everything God created during the first week of this planet’s existence was very good, [and it] also strives to better others and this world by actively living God’s mission on behalf of His creation.”

Hucks explained that each presentation was designed to establish the scriptural foundation for social justice. “Doing so proves critical in an era that is often defined by political ideologies that range from the left to the right,” he said. “These presentations also aim to [emphasize that] its biblical principles positively impact the mind, body, interpersonal relationships, finances, and care of the environment.” He added the event sought to show ways in which “Adventism can be distinctly missiological in its approach while caring for God’s creation in the same way Jesus did.

“Our prayer is that you will be equipped, enabled, and empowered to reimagine ministry as we anticipate our Lord’s return, impacting His people in ways that allow the love of God to shine more brilliantly than ever before,” he said.

### A DIVINE IMPERATIVE

Seminary dean Jiří Moskala confessed that when he was told to imagine a world in which social justice is respected, he imagined the new earth because this earth

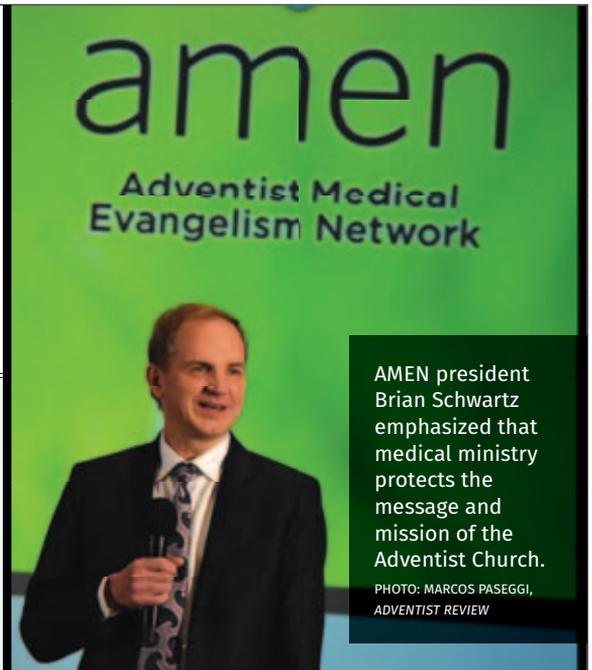
is full of social injustice. He reminded participants that today confusion, tension, self-centeredness, and hatred are the dominant features of human relations. “We live in the post-Christian, postmodern, and post-truth world,” he acknowledged.

But that was not God’s original blueprint, Moskala emphasized. “It is God’s intention that we cultivate a loving, caring, and kind attitude toward each other despite our cultural, economic, religious, gender, educational, color, language, and social differences,” he said. “As the prophet Amos said, justice can flow like a river, but only when we treat others as we would like to be treated if we were in their shoes.”

Jesus stated it plainly in the golden rule—do unto others what you want others to do to you, Moskala said. In that context, he added, the Congress on Social Justice seeks to inspire and stimulate every participant to be more sensitive to the issues around us and be moved by what our fellow human beings experience. “God’s truth, which has been entrusted to us, always has to have practical outcomes,” he said. “May each of us be attentive to the needs of our neighbors and be stirred into specific caring actions in order not to be spectators but part of solutions to suffering humanity’s problems.”

For Hucks, social justice is an essential part of discipleship. He prayed, “Lord, You have called us to be Your disciples. Part of that discipleship is being Your hands and Your feet in this world.” It is what will allow God’s children to reveal His character in a world that is hurting, organizers emphasized. And it is something that will point people back to God’s ideal.

“Just imagine a world,” Moskala said, “in which all the biblical counsel is taken into account.”



## HOW ADVENTIST MEDICAL WORK PROTECTS MISSION

CONFERENCE ATTENDEES REFLECT ON THEIR ROLE AS HEALTH-CARE PROVIDERS.

BY MARCOS PASEGGI, ADVENTIST REVIEW

What is it about medical missionary work, about medical ministry, that protects the gospel? Adventist Medical Evangelism Network (AMEN) president Brian Schwartz asked. “How does ‘the right arm’—the words Adventist Church cofounder Ellen G. White used to describe medical ministry—protect the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its mission?”

In his October 28 keynote address at the AMEN annual conference in Indian Wells, California, United States, Schwartz discussed how health work, as that right arm, can “serve to protect the body” and support the mission of sharing the gospel of Jesus.

### EXPOSURE, CREDIBILITY, AND ACTION

Adventist medical ministry can bring many benefits to the Adventist Church and its mission, Schwartz emphasized. First, he said, “it indemnifies us; it gives us protection.” Schwartz explained that medical ministry gives Seventh-day Adventists visibility and positive exposure to the public. “When we are engaged in medical missionary work, the media pick up on that,” he said. “The press is a little more careful with us. They see we are concerned about people, and we are presented in a better light.”

Second, doing medical missionary work gives Adventists credibility. “If I take care of my patient’s

## “When churches engage in medical ministry, it opens the door to bring people to church in a way that they don’t feel threatened and challenged.”

diabetes, heart disease, or whatever it is, and I do a good job, they are more likely to listen to me about other things,” Schwartz said.

According to Schwartz, medical ministry also shows the gospel in action. He shared an experience at one of the public free clinics the Adventist Church has offered, which on that occasion was in the city of San Antonio, Texas. As Schwartz was taking care of a patient with high blood pressure, the patient asked him, “Who are you guys? Are you sponsored by the government or something?”

Schwartz shared that his team told the patient they were Seventh-day Adventists and that Jesus had called them to take care of the needs of the less fortunate and those around them. “He had never heard about that faith,” Schwartz said.

“You are not paid to do this?” the man asked, as he could see there were thousands of volunteers giving their time for that initiative. When the patient received the assurance that, in fact, it was a free and selfless service, he jumped up and cried out, “I can’t believe this! Nobody does this! I want to be a member of your church!”

“He had never had a Bible study; he didn’t know what Seventh-day Adventists were; but he saw the gospel in action, and he wanted to be part,” Schwartz said. “That is the power of medical missionary work, and we are called to engage in that with every patient, every day.”

### ENGAGEMENT, OPPORTUNITY, AND SELF-FUNDING

Schwartz also emphasized that medical missionary work engages Adventist church members. “It gets Adventist young people involved. It energizes Adventist churches, so they do something useful for the community that opens the door for evangelism,” he said.

Moreover, based on Bible prophecy, Adventists believe there will be a time toward the end of this world when believers won’t enjoy many of the freedoms they now have, Schwartz reminded his audience. At that time, “medical missionary ministry

will allow Seventh-day Adventists to work, even when it becomes hard for every other line of work to do so,” he said. “So even after we can’t buy or sell, I believe medical missionaries will be able to reach where a pastor or a [literature evangelist] cannot go.”

It is the reason, he said, that ministerial work and medical missionary work must be completely blended, working together on God’s mission. “[Adventist health-care professionals] have access to people from all walks of life. It’s a sacred calling to be part of medical ministry,” Schwartz emphasized.

He added that “by using the right arm of the gospel, we have access to people’s hearts. It opens the door.” And, he explained, “when churches engage in medical ministry, it opens the door to bring people to church in a way that they don’t feel threatened and challenged. And when they have a good experience, and they make friends, and they are invited to come back for an evangelistic meeting, they are much more likely to do it.”

Another interesting thing about medical ministry, according to Schwartz, is that it is self-funding. “Done right, it pays for itself; done right, it can pay for other things as well,” he said.

### EVERY FACILITY INVOLVED

Schwartz emphasized that Adventists should resist the idea that medical ministry can occur only in a self-supporting institution. “Every Adventist health-care institution must get involved, from the biggest hospitals to private practice offices. Every one of these places is called to engage in medical ministry,” he said.

So the challenge, Schwartz said, is not to make Adventist health-care institutions purely medical; in that regard, their leaders forget the primary call they have to spread the gospel. “It’s not just talking about a plant-based diet; that’s not what we are called to do. It’s to give the gospel combined with the medical ministry,” Schwartz told his colleagues. “This is a consecrated work; this is a blessed work; [and] God is going to see this work through.”



Children participating in an event at a Seventh-day Adventist school in Lviv, Ukraine. PHOTO: EURO-ASIAN DIVISION

## ADVENTIST EDUCATION EXPANDS ON FORMER SOVIET SOIL

SCHOOLS ARE TOUCHING THE HEARTS OF CHILDREN AND PARENTS ALIKE.

BY ANDREW MCCHESENEY, ADVENTIST MISSION

**A** boy with a non-Christian father and a former Seventh-day Adventist mother gives his heart to Jesus after studying at an Adventist school.

A third-grader's manners change so drastically after she enrolls in an Adventist school that her atheist mother wants to become an Adventist.

Two children beg to go to an Adventist school after learning about it from friends, and their parents end up becoming Adventists.

These stories show how God's power is transforming lives in Russia, Ukraine, and other countries of the former Soviet Union as Adventist education expands rapidly across once-atheist soil, church leaders said at the Euro-Asia Division (ESD) year-end meetings. The Adventist Church had just 14 schools in the region a decade ago, but today it operates 77 elementary schools and high schools with 4,128 students. Another 40 schools are expected to open over the next four years.

"Adventist education is closely connected with the mission of the church," Ivan Riapolov, ESD education director, said in presenting an annual report to the year-end meetings.

"You cannot separate Adventist

education and Adventist mission," he said. "Wherever schools open, the church grows."

### DAUGHTER TEACHES MOTHER ABOUT GOD

In a place within the ESD territory a mother called an Adventist school to say she did not know anything about religion, but she wanted her daughter, Natasha, to obtain an Adventist education, Riapolov said. The mother explained to the principal that Natasha had attended a private school that gave children free rein for the sake of their creativity, but she thought the girl needed discipline. She worried about Natasha and remembered that when she was pregnant, she had felt impressed, one day, to send her child to a Christian school. She had no idea where the idea came from, because she was an atheist.

"I want my daughter to study at this school," she firmly told the principal.

Two weeks after Natasha began third grade, the mother called the principal to say she was delighted with the changes that she could see in her daughter.

"She loves your Bible lessons, and she has fallen in love with the school," she said. "She tells us ev-

erything that goes on there and has us pray before meals. I am so happy I brought her to your school!"

Then the mother contacted the principal to ask for information about Adventist beliefs. "Natasha wants to become an Adventist, and I would like to know what changes need to be made in our lives," she said. "I also want to become an Adventist."

The family's story has not ended. "Their path with God is just beginning," Riapolov said.

### EDUCATION IS EVANGELISM

The ESD has made education a high priority and, at its request, the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering collected in the first quarter of 2021 is helping expand two schools, one in Russia and one in Ukraine.

Riapolov, speaking at the year-end meetings, praised Adventist education as "the longest and the largest evangelism event that takes place" in the Adventist Church. "All our efforts are focused on the mission of the church, which is to proclaim the three angels' messages," Riapolov said. "We want children to gain a biblical worldview and make a decision to give their lives to God."

Mikhail Kaminskiy, ESD president, told church leaders at the year-end meetings that education plays a key role in winning souls for Christ. "Education is evangelism at its finest," he said. ▀



The *Weltspiegel* show on German national TV station, ARD, discussed the lifestyle of Seventh-day Adventist members in Loma Linda, California.

## GERMAN NATIONAL TV FEATURES LOMA LINDA ADVENTISTS

**ARD'S WELTSPIEGEL REPORTS ON ONE OF THE WORLD'S BLUE ZONES.**

BY ADVENTISTISCHER PRESSEDIENST, AND ADVENTIST REVIEW

**A** national TV program in Germany recently featured Seventh-day Adventist members in Loma Linda, California, United States, and their way of life. In a report broadcast on October 24, ARD's *Weltspiegel* discussed the lifestyle of residents in one of the so-called Blue Zones, one of the areas in the world where people are significantly older and healthier than the average of similar population groups.

ARD U.S. correspondent Claudia Buckenmaier reported from Loma Linda on the daily life and habits of some members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the small California town located in the Greater Los Angeles area.

According to local statistics, about 9,000 Adventist church members live in the area.

During the report three residents were briefly portrayed, including 104-year-old Jane Pihl, and 82-year-old James Ho and his wife, Christine (85). They said they all consistently practice certain health principles, including eating a healthful diet, exercising regularly, and abstaining from tobacco and alcohol. Residents featured also keep socially active through volunteering in various local initiatives. They also said they keep Sabbath as a weekly day of rest. It is a day in which they do not work but attend church services and keep active social

relationships with other members, relatives, and friends.

### LONGER LIFE EXPECTANCY, BETTER HEALTH

In a long-term study, researcher Gary Fraser and a team of nearby Loma Linda University assessed the life expectancy of Seventh-day Adventists. In the ARD report, Fraser summarized one of the team findings: "We found out that men, unlike other Californians, live seven years longer, and women four and a half years. It is quite a lot. That's how much the life expectancy of an entire population increases in one or two generations." Diseases such as metabolic syndrome, lung cancer, and mental illness occur much less frequently.

Toward the end of the ARD report, Pihl gives simple advice: "Just do what nature, what God, wants from us. He didn't want us to sit around and watch TV. Go out into nature and enjoy life." 🍀



**A DAY OF PRAYER TO OPEN DOORS TO THE GOSPEL IN NORTH KOREA.** Leaders from the Northern Asia-Pacific Division, Korean Union Conference, East Central Korean Conference, and West Central Korean Conference held a special prayer session, Sabbath, September 11. Leaders also visited 17 Adventist churches near the Korean Demilitarized Zone to preach God's Word and hold prayer sessions, pleading with God to open the doors to the gospel in North Korea.



**SINGAPORE ADVENTISTS LAUNCH CHILDREN'S TV SERIES ON CREATION SABBATH.** The Family Ministries Department of the Singapore Conference joined hands with Hope Channel Singapore to develop a new TV series for children up to 7 years old, titled *Creatures Teach Us*. Each episode features six different animals found in Singapore. Every episode is about five minutes long, and the series was launched October 8.



**LOMA LINDA DEAN APPOINTED TO CDC'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON IMMUNIZATION.** Loma Linda University School of Pharmacy dean Michael Hogue has been selected by the American Pharmacists Association as its representative to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP). The ACIP is a group of medical and public health experts that develops recommendations on how to use vaccines to control diseases in the United States.



**IN PERU, ADVENTISTS DISTRIBUTE 1 MILLION BOOKS TO PROMOTE READING, SHARE HOPE.** "Share a Book, Share Hope" is the motto of the "Peru Does Read" drive organized by the Adventist Church in Peru. Volunteers in the initiative distributed 1 million copies of Mark Finley's book *Hope for a World in Crisis*. This drive was launched October 24 and ended October 30. On each of those days Adventist volunteers distributed thousands of books.



**CHAPLAINS MINISTER TO HUNDREDS EMOTIONALLY AFFECTED BY HAITI EARTHQUAKE.** A group of Adventist chaplains from French-speaking territories of the Inter-American Division went on a mission to minister to victims of the recent earthquake that devastated the southern peninsula of Haiti. The chaplains offered emotional and psychosocial support to more than 400 people from September 9 to 17. Eight chaplains from Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guiana flew to Haiti to pair up with eight chaplains from the Haitian Union Mission.



**SUMMIT EMPOWERS ADVENTISTS TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF THEIR COMMUNITIES.** Adventists from across Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific were equipped with the latest lifestyle medicine strategies and research during the third ELIA Wellness Summit, October 15-17. More than 190 individuals attended the online event, and another 120 attended two satellite events run in Honiara and at Atofi Adventist Hospital in the Solomon Islands Mission. The program featured a team of researchers and clinicians from Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and the Pacific Islands who shared their expertise, presenting a range of cutting-edge lifestyle medicine topics.

This was uncharted territory for them. Mary and Joseph were engaged but not married, and this was definitely not the right time for a pregnancy. The thing is that *God doesn't always explain His timing, but He does always promise His presence*. When Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant, he definitely knew that he was not the father and chose to secretly divorce her (in those days it took a divorce to break an engagement). While he was wrestling with his decision, an angel of the Lord appeared and beckoned him to believe beyond what he could see. This was definitely an uncharted territory, for both of them. Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, which had never happened before and would never happen again. They were facing the unknown and had to trust that God was with them and would guide them through this.

### THE BASICS

As we review the Christmas story of how God became flesh and came to save us, we realize that Jesus' parents had to trust, as we do, in God's faithfulness, protection, purpose, and guidance. Two thousand years later we still need to trust that God is faithful and keeps His promises, that He is orchestrating His redeeming purposes behind the scenes, even when we don't fully understand them, and that He still guides us when facing the unknown. Joseph and Mary had never walked this path before; they needed God to guide them and communicate

with them in a way they could understand. For thousands of years the people of God had been waiting for God to fulfill His promise of sending the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Redeemer. And now the time had come, yet everything looked so different than what they had expected.

Before we go on, let me share with you something about Matthew, the evangelist. He arranges his material very carefully in order to impact the reader most effectively. Five was an important number that carried significant symbolism for the Jews because the Law of Moses had five books. Matthew portrays Jesus as the new Moses, and arranges his material in his Gospel in groups of five; we call them the five discourses. Similarly, he divides the infancy of Jesus into five episodes, constructing each of them around an Old Testament prophecy: the birth of Jesus, the Magi, the flight to Egypt, Herod slaughtering the babies in Bethlehem, and Jesus growing up in Nazareth. In this fivefold infancy narrative God is seen in absolute control. He directs and guides each move for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, even sending His angel, sometimes in dreams. The fact that God is so willing to communicate with humans to guide us in difficult and unknown situations has always brought much comfort to my soul.

### GETTING INTO THE STORY

Now back to our story. The first of the five episodes is the actual birth of Jesus. Matthew 1:20

# *A Christmas Message for Times Like These*

WHY WE CAN ALWAYS TRUST OUR GOD



*God is with us.*

*God is with us.*

*God is with us.*

*God is with us.*

informs us that an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream when he was considering divorcing Mary after he had found out that she was pregnant.

I can't even imagine how confusing all of this must have been for him, and yet he submitted to God's viewpoint, surrendering to God's revelation even though he probably couldn't understand much of what was going on. The angel announced that Mary would bear a Son, and His name would be *Jesus*, which means "Yahweh (the Lord) saves" (see verse 21).

In the next two verses (22, 23) we encounter the first Matthean *prophetic formula*, in which he connects his narrative with a quotation from the Old Testament: "Now all this took place so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled: 'Behold, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they shall name Him Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God with us'" (NASB).<sup>\*</sup> This quotation comes from Isaiah 7:14, where Ahaz, king of Judah, is also going through a difficult situation, facing the unknown future.

Let me elaborate.

The kings of Israel and Aram are coming against Judah, and Ahaz and his people are terrified (see Isa. 7:2). The Lord sends Isaiah to Ahaz to deliver the promise of His presence, to encourage him not to fear and to offer him a sign. But Ahaz refuses to accept help from the Lord because he prefers to make an alliance with a military power instead of relying on God's presence. Still, God decides to give Ahaz a sign anyway so that he would never forget that God had offered him His help, comfort, and presence: a maiden would bear a son, and she would call him *Immanuel*, which means "God is with us!" Matthew asserts that this prophecy was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, and I believe that with all my heart. In times of uncertainty every part of this sentence should fill us with assurance: *God is with us. God is with us. God is with us. God is with us. Amazing!* In times like these we all need this Christmas message. In times of uncertainty, when facing unprecedented challenges, we need the awareness of His presence with us.

But wait, there is more!

The angel told Joseph that the baby's name would be Jesus, because He would save His people from their sins. Jesus, *God with us*, had come to die in our place on the cross so that we may have eternal life. This is the climax of God's presence. Can you imagine? Immanuel is hanging on the cross. *God with us* cries out: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46). Immanuel felt the abandonment so that you may never have to. None of us, even in the direst of circumstances, will ever have to utter those words! Jesus bore our sin so that we may never be abandoned by God. Never! *God with us* is an ever-present reality until the end of the world.

And just when you start thinking that the promise of God's presence doesn't apply to you because it is only for people like Joseph and Mary, who were righteous descendants of David and part of the chosen people of God, Matthew surprises us with the second of the five infancy narratives in his Gospel. It is the gripping story of God's guidance of the Magi from the East, a story recorded only by Matthew.

The Magi were a priestly caste of astrologers and magicians from Persia or Babylon, usually trusted advisors to the king (see Dan. 1; 2). They arrived in Jerusalem, the Jewish capital, asking a very striking question: “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him” (Matt. 2:2). But instead of encountering a nation rejoicing about the arrival of a new king, they find King Herod and all Jerusalem troubled (verse 3). What a paradox! These Gentile Magi had come to worship, but Jerusalem was troubled.

Here’s an interesting fact about the title “King of the Jews,” that the Magi used for Jesus. It is found again only at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus is condemned and killed. This title, spoken only by non-Jews in this Gospel, is the legal charge placed on the cross: “This Is Jesus the King of the Jews” (see Matt. 27:37). In this infancy narrative we already find a foreshadowing of the cross.

Back to the Magi: can you imagine how they are feeling? Lost? Fearful? Without answers? How could they find their way? This was definitely uncharted territory, for they had never walked this path before. Herod asked the chief priests and scribes where the Messiah was to be born (Matt. 2:4), for he knew what type of king the Magi were referring to. The religious leaders answered, “In Bethlehem of Judea,” and Matthew comments, “This is what has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for from you will come forth a ruler who will shepherd My people Israel!’” (verses 5, 6, NASB).<sup>\*</sup> This quotation fuses a prophecy from Micah 5:2, given seven centuries earlier, with a Davidic passage found in 2 Samuel 5:2-6.

Can you believe that hundreds of years before, God already knew the exact place where Jesus would be born? I am so comforted and assured by God’s foreknowledge and control over my life, aren’t you?

Herod secretly reached out to the Magi and pretended to be interested in worshipping Jesus (Matt. 2:7, 8), but God warned the Magi in a dream not to go back to Herod, and they never saw him again. But before that, what could the Magi do? Were they mistaken? Would they have to go back? And that’s when they saw the star again! And “they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy” (verse 10). Yes! God was guiding them, because God *was* with

them! He was *Immanuel* even for those who didn’t qualify in the eyes of the religious people of the time. They arrived at the place where they saw the Child Jesus with His mother, and they “fell down and worshiped Him” (verse 11). They opened their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And I am amazed that through these gifts, God provided for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus during their stay in Egypt. God was in control and took care of their provision in every detail during that season of “unknowns” for the family of Jesus. He also guided the Magi in a way they could understand. Isn’t this amazing? Don’t you think Immanuel will also guide you in your seasons of uncertainty and confusion?

The Christmas story reminds us that God’s presence is always with us. This is the message Matthew places, like *bookends*, at the beginning and at the end of his Gospel. He starts his narrative with “Immanuel,” “God with us,” and he ends his Gospel with Jesus announcing, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). This is God’s promise to us for times like these: He will never leave us. The One who suffered on the cross for us will remain with us until the very last day of this world. You will never, ever, be alone, whether you are receiving unexpectedly bad news, or going through a season of suffering, or finding yourself in the midst of a global pandemic. The entire Bible, from beginning to end, speaks about the plan of redemption that God designed for our salvation so that He could be with us forever, just as He had envisioned it when He created us in His image. When humans ran away from Him, God refused to leave them. He was determined not to go through eternity without us.

May the promise of God’s presence and guidance be yours through the Christmas season, and every day of your life, until we see Immanuel face to face when He comes to take us home (Matt. 24:29-31). And if you ever find yourself struggling in uncharted territory, remember His words: “I am with you *always*, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Yes, we are in His grip, and He won’t let us go. 📌

<sup>\*</sup> Scripture quotations marked NASB are from the *New American Standard Bible*, copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. All rights reserved.

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**Elizabeth Viera Talbot** is speaker/director of the Jesus 101 Biblical Institute, a media ministry of the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church—[www.Jesus101.tv](http://www.Jesus101.tv).

# Want to Have a Seating Problem at Sabbath School?

Could you imagine the biggest complaint at your church being, "I can't get a seat at our Bible study?" What would it be like if you had to take seat reservations at your Sabbath School so that your large group of visitors could even get in? Roy Ice has discovered how to do just that and more, and he and his team would love to share how God can do the same thing with your community by starting a Bible Lab.

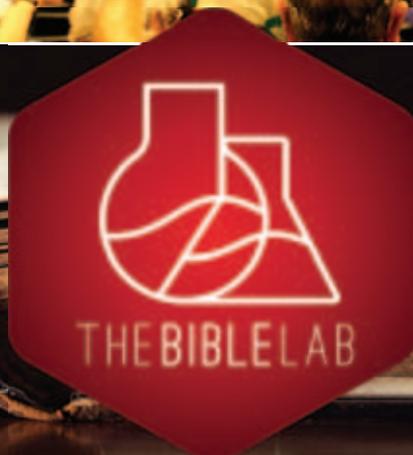
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# LED BY THE NOSE

I'm searching for a metaphor, a symbol, to depict God's wayward people since antiquity, Eden even.

The one that comes to mind is that of someone being led around by a ring in the nose. That is, a hand yanking the ring—and the nose—in whatever direction the hand wants. The hand is the prevailing culture; the nose belongs to the believer; and where the hand leads, the nose goes.

Though warned about eating from the tree in Eden, and exercising the free will inherent in love, Eve listened to the serpent, to the "culture." In contradiction to the words of God, the serpent/culture told her to eat from it. And then Adam, listening to her, followed. It's been downhill since.

When ancient Israel wanted a king, or worshipped idols, or sacrificed their children—they didn't pull these practices out of the ether. They got them all from their neighbors. As the Lord had warned Moses beforehand: "This people will rise and play the harlot with the gods of the foreigners of the land" (Deut. 31:16). In short, they were led around by the nose.

Turn to the early Christian church. Where did the idea of the immortal soul come from? Not from the Bible. It was absorbed from the pagans, from the surrounding culture, which flooded the church like a leaking septic tank.

And did Sunday worship arise from believers' fertile imaginations? No, they got it as permanent loan from their sun-worshipping pagan friends, neighbors, and acquaintances.

And what was the church of the medieval era—with its images, relics, transubstantiation, and praying to saints—but the result of Christians, led by the nose, borrowing ideas and practices that

originated in non-Christian faiths?

Protestants haven't done much better. Why did so many Christians make such good Nazis in the Third Reich? "The German Christians always painted Jesus as a non-Jew and often as a cruel anti-Semite. . . . Before the German Christians were through with him, the Nazarene rabbi would be a goosestepping, strudel-loving son of the Reich." Because they were led around by the nose.

And what hate-filled, fouled spring did Jim Crow, cross-burning nineteenth- and twentieth-century Southern "Christians" drink from? Pulled continuously by a racist culture that denied the full humanity of all persons proclaimed in the Bible, they ultimately justified attitudes and behaviors antithetical to the teachings of Jesus.

And (some) Adventists today? It's hard, for example, to find anything more antibiblical than the assertion that billions of years of evolution were required as Jesus' way of creating life on earth (John 1:1-3). However, led by the nose, which easily happens when the hand pulling the ring comes in the name of "science"—the closest thing to a god in the modern world—these Adventists have accepted theistic evolution in place of biblical creation. Again, culture prevails.

In the end, those who don't "worship the image of the beast" will be persecuted: some will even be martyred (Rev. 13:15). If led around by the nose now, how quickly and easily, when death is threatened, will persons accept the mark of the beast on their foreheads or on their hands (Rev. 14:9)?

Nose first. Forehead and hand next.

\*Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Thomas Nelson, Kindle edition, 2010), p. 172.

**Clifford Goldstein** is editor of the *Adult Bible Study Guide*. His latest book is *Risen: Finding Hope in the Empty Tomb*.

CLIFF'S  
EDGE  
CLIFFORD  
GOLDSTEIN



THEY ULTIMATELY  
JUSTIFIED ATTITUDES  
AND BEHAVIORS  
ANTITHETICAL TO  
THE TEACHINGS  
OF JESUS.

A miracle story from another time

*O*h, no. We have a problem! My troubled eyes spoke what lips could not as I gazed at the smiling child beside me, looking up expectantly.

*Adventure!* Her sparkling eyes indicated.

*Trouble!* My throbbing heart registered. *Would we be arrested?*

#### **A CHILD FOR BETHLEHEM**

Our wedding had been so grand, so beautiful, and so much fun. Reginald (my husband) and I had begun our honeymoon in St. Kitts on December 20, planning to travel to our first home in St. Croix the following day, December 21. Mighty waves crashed on the beach outside our honeymoon cottage, and the salty spray flushed our faces as we walked barefoot on the crusty sand. Miles of coconut trees

were our only neighbors, or so it seemed, but we were soon to have company. We were about to spend our honeymoon with a total stranger.

At the airport in St. Kitts on December 21, as we prepared to leave for St. Croix, a young woman approached us with an urgent question:

“Are you going to St. Croix?”

“Yes,” we replied.

She pleaded, “Please take my daughter with you. Her father will meet her at the airport, but the airline won’t let her travel unless she is accompanied by an adult. Please. She will be so excited to spend Christmas with her father.” Dazzled by the stars in our eyes from our just-completed wedding, we were obviously not thinking. We nodded “yes” without even getting her name. *What better way to begin our new lives together than by doing a good deed?*



# Another Bethlehem

**ANNETTE WALWYN MICHAEL**

## *In Bethlehem, with its fields of wild, tall sugarcane, we stopped to pray.*

As our 16-seater neared St. Croix, we peered through the telescopic lens of the airplane's window, looking for familiar shorelines, beaches, roads, and buildings. We were almost home!

What could possibly go wrong?

Everything. After scanning every face at the airport, we faced the truth: no father eagerly awaited his child's arrival. In that pre-cell phone era, how could we find him? We had a post office number for him and his name, but no telephone number or address. *Had we really just inherited a stranger on our honeymoon? Could we board the return flight to St. Kitts to take her back? To whom? We did not even have the name of her mother.* Now face to face with this huge problem, we drove home.

The first meal I prepared for my brand-new husband was a meal for three. Little stranger quickly finished her food and looked around for seconds, unperturbed by our plight. She was already having fun. We were the ones left to figure it out. What should we do? This dilemma did not fit our honeymoon plans. We should be unpacking suitcases, opening wedding gifts, reading greeting cards, but we were doing none of this.

After lunch we piled into our Toyota, little stranger in tow, and began our search for her father in the 82 square miles of St. Croix with its 40,000 residents. It shouldn't be too difficult, should it? We drove through Upper Love, asking everyone we saw if they recognized the name we showed them. No one did. We tried Mon Bijou. Kept asking. Nothing. Colquhoun? Same response. Hours passed. Night was now approaching. The days are short in December, even in the Caribbean. We were becoming desperate.

### **A MIRACLE IN BETHLEHEM**

Then we remembered to pray.

In Bethlehem, with its fields of wild, tall sugarcane, we stopped to pray, stopped to pray . . . in Bethlehem! I can now reflect on the significance of the location. Ancient Bethlehem was the place where the Christ child was born, the miracle of Christmas. Could we hope for another miracle in this warm, Caribbean Bethlehem? At the side of the bumpy road where we had pulled over, we pleaded with the God of miracles to help us find the child's father. Then we continued our quest. Within 10

minutes we noticed a small social gathering outside a house in Bethlehem where loud music and the smell of food suggested a party. Interrupting the board games, we queried, "Do you know ——?"

"Of course," the nearest man responded, still maintaining his place in the game. "You brought the child? Her father has been going to the airport every day to meet her. He couldn't go today, so he will be delighted that you brought her. He lives in Sion Farm." The speaker quickly gave directions to the father's house, about 10 miles away. *Was this real? Had we finally located him?*

The first stars had already begun to twinkle in the evening sky when we pulled up at the house in Sion Farm. What a reunion as little stranger embraced her family! She could not stop hugging her delighted father, who explained that he had gone to the airport for several days to meet his daughter, but he had missed today. We described our odyssey, including the hours of searching for him and of the answered prayer. "Thank you. Thank you so much," he kept repeating as he took the child's suitcase from our car.

### **A LESSON FROM BETHLEHEM**

We said little on our drive home, still reflecting on the fact that, without divine leading, we could have "inherited" that child or been arrested for "kidnapping." That night we thanked the God of miracles who had intervened so we could still have a honeymoon and, going forward, a life of ministry.

The "Star of our hope" had indeed appeared on that "silent night." We could lustily sing, "Joy to the world." Now you can understand why the carols of Christmas have special significance for me. Each year I am reminded of the first miracle of Christmas, of the Child born in a lowly manger in Bethlehem, born to save the world. But I also think of that other miracle for another young couple (with a child) on a little Caribbean island in another Bethlehem, at another time.

May the "angels we have heard on high" sing, "Gloria in excelsis Deo," as you too experience whatever miracle you need this Christmas. ♣

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**Annette Walwyn Michael**, retired English teacher, is a member of the Central Seventh-day Adventist Church in St. Croix, United States Virgin Islands.



# Christmas from the Rubble

The King:  
Carpenter  
of hope

**HEATHER VANDEN HOVEN**

*T*he neighbor's tree slammed our home Thanksgiving night.

## **HAVOC FROM THE STORM**

Patio destroyed; family room beams split, cracked, and fallen down inside the rooftops; sliding door glass strewn all over the carpet and patio; water pipes dislodged and cracked underground; mangled gutters, shingles, roof, and support posts; tree branches in every direction.

The wind-driven gravity of a giant Douglas fir had brought it down with a thunderous boom, the second of two connected trees: our neighbor's home had taken the first tree assault four hours before as it pummeled through their roof to their kitchen floor. We spent Thanksgiving afternoon (1) knowing it was only a matter of time until the adjoining tree assaulted our home, and (2) wondering what part of our house it would smash. We pulled our trailer out to safety in the driveway, finished clean-

ing up Thanksgiving food and dishes, and gathered some blankets to bunk in the trailer, waiting.

Ten minutes after we were safe in the trailer, the tree slammed down. God had held it up while we prepared, and had boldly delivered us to safety.

What do you feel? Terror? Shock? The exhaustion of cumulative 2020 assaults? Are you frightened? Questioning why this had to happen on Thanksgiving or ever? Or are you grateful that God has delivered you, and touched by His timing? Yes to all: my feelings have been everywhere! Tonight my heart envisions Christmas from the rubble.

## **JOY IN THE HAVOC**

Is that my King out in the backyard? It looks like He's pulling a couple beams

out of the rubble. Is He taking them to the dump? Doesn't look like it. Why not? They're devastated; broken beyond repair. He's picking up a saw and cutting them into small pieces. Doesn't He know they're full of splinters, nails, and glass? I keep watching, face stained with tears of exhaustion. It looks like a tornado hit. The Kleenex box is empty, and my jeans are pretty dirty; but I keep watching. He's picking up a hammer now; nailing the small boards together. It looks like He's making a little animal trough, but I'm not sure why He'd be doing that in the middle of my mess—no one needs an animal trough after a tree falls on their home. He just stood up the trough from all the nailing, and it looks like He's picking up pine tree bows for it. I keep watching and wondering what's going on as He gently arranges the pine bows inside the little trough.

Suddenly He picks the whole thing up and places it back in the middle of the rubble. There's now a glow coming from this little trough, but I'm not sure why. Is there a piece of broken glass reflecting off the sun? I get up from the couch and walk over to the broken sliding door to peer out. As I get closer, I see it clearly: the King has built a manger. The broken glass and debris is now reflecting off the Son: Christmas from the rubble.

There are more people coming now. Who are they? I haven't seen them in the neighborhood before. I put my slippers on and grab a coat to go outside and see who they are. Now there are tons of them, coming from every angle, into the yard. They're so brilliant and shiny, and I notice their clothes aren't made of denim like mine. They look more like beautiful wispy robes, certainly not good attire for a dirty pile of rubble. Then I begin to hear—an engulfing sound of majestic music rising from their voices. Suddenly I realize: these are the legion, the celestial chorus, the choir that heaven has appointed for this hour; these are angel singers, powering up the yard with strains of "O Holy Night!" This is incredible!

I watch as they move to the middle of the shattered pieces and broken roof. I see them encircle the manger built by the King—their King and mine. They're standing in the mess now, blasting

out, in full formation, the radiance of their matchless song. I've never seen rubble look so weak. Rubble so loves to rule by overwhelming, owning the whole scene with its selfish domination. The King is looking at me with all His loving being, reaching for my hand to walk among the singers. I say "yes," and He whispers, "I can build you a manger from any devastation. I love you." Christmas in the rubble.

### CHRISTMAS FROM THE PANDEMIC

The year 2020 was a year of devastation that didn't stop when the calendar turned. People you know lost homes, lives, livelihoods, normalcy, and hope. Tonight, today, I pray that they—and all of us—envision the Son reflecting off our broken glass in a manger in the midst of our rubble. I pray we hear the voices of heaven's choir and lift our hearts to "O Holy Night." Jesus has not left us. No, He has come to us, entered our rubble to build

*As I get closer,  
I see it clearly: the King  
has built a manger.*

and occupy His manger. He will always enter our rubble to build His manger. And as we walk onward from here in our tear-stained jeans, we hold the King's hand to follow no matter where life takes us. For He is our King, the Son in the manger, in the rubble where the broken glass glistens off the Son the very most. He is the Paradox we care for as Babe and revere as Lord, in our paradox of storm and safety, chaos and joy. Tonight, today, is our Christmas from the rubble, where life triumphs over personal and global disaster, because the virgin has conceived; she has born the Son; and we have been blessed in the rubble by God with us (see Matt. 1:23). 🍀

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## BRINGING FAITH FORWARD

*Ken Shaw, a 1980 graduate of Southern Adventist University, was inaugurated as president of the university in a September 30 ceremony. Shaw previously served as president of Southwestern Adventist University in Keene, Texas, for seven years, and before that as a professor and administrator at Florida State University for 25 years. Adventist Review editor Bill Knott recently sat down with him to talk about his return to his alma mater.—Editors.*

**BILL KNOTT:** If I worked in this university's marketing department, I might be writing a story headlined "Southern Alum Returns as New University President." What does that feel like?

**KEN SHAW:** First of all, I'm overwhelmed to be president of a school where I've had so many rich experiences. As a student, I've taken classes in these buildings. I've walked the Promenade. I've climbed "Jacob's Ladder" [the long staircase that climbs from lower to upper levels of the university]. I've rubbed shoulders with tremendous professors like Drs. Hefferlin, Kuhlman, Richert, and Hanson, and other wonderful, godly faculty members. To be asked to come back and serve in this capacity is an awesome experience. I don't take it lightly.

**Sometimes when you return to an institution in a new role, you recall a whole set of impressions from your previous experience. What's different about Southern Adventist University now from when you attended as a student?**

Southern is a much bigger place now. There are newer buildings on campus, specific to different academic areas, for instance. One thing that hasn't changed for more than 100 years, though, is the faith element. We're unique in higher education because our foundation is built solidly on the biblical principles that we and our church hold dear. Actually, it's the continuities that are more impressive to me just now. We still want to help young people understand their calling. We still don't want them to just get a job. We have fantastic faculty who will help them obtain

great occupations, but if they don't have God's calling in their life, they're going to miss something. Our Adventist higher education institutions are special in that we value a relationship with Jesus Christ. If we can help young people acquire that grounding and become more fully rooted in Jesus Christ, they're going to be His representatives for the rest of their lives. That's what we're proud of here at Southern.

**I was walking the Promenade on the campus recently. Several golf carts came by with prospective students and parents on campus get-acquainted tours. If the campus guide stopped the cart and introduced you to a visiting family, what would you share in 60 seconds about their potential experience here?**

I'd first welcome them to this beautiful campus. I'd inquire, "What brought you here?" I like listening to families and their stories. I'd talk about the care that our faculty and staff can provide their young adult. They're going to have many opportunities to grow in their faith experience while they're here.

**Say, for example, that I'm that parent riding in that golf cart, and I linger to privately ask you, "Dr. Shaw—one more question. What's the likelihood that my child is going to emerge a faithful Adventist after attending Southern for four or five years?" How would you respond?**

I would ask you, "What are the odds of your child being a vibrant Adventist if they go to a public institution?" There was a study done, probably eight or nine years ago now, that compared Adventist students who went to public institutions of higher education with those who attended private, faith-based Adventist institutions. Statistically, there were significant differences between the two: better prayer life; more church engagement; involvement in a community of faculty members who pray for them and care for them not only academically, but mentally, socially, and spiritually. Those are things parents really need to consider as they contemplate where their young adult will go to school. But today, as you know, many high school students are making the key decision about which college, not the parents.

**I've been watching that phenomenon increase for the past 10 years.**

Students really need to consider these same factors as well. We offer great academics here at Southern, but we also offer a great spiritual environment where they can grow. We want this to be a safe place where students, if they have doubts or uncertainties, can ask hard questions. Faculty, staff and even the president here will listen and try to understand where they're coming from. We can be empathetic, but we can also share our own experiences and encourage them to be strong and faithful as they move forward.

**You've spoken in other settings about "bringing faith forward"—into all aspects of the campus experience. How do you move an employee group, some of whom may not have had that tradition in their department, to create opportunities for faith discussions—in math, in chemistry, in the social sciences? How do you build those skills among employees?**

That's a great question. You can't mandate it. I think you have to model it. The faith experience of young adults shouldn't be just in the religion department. The religion department is a vital component of what we offer, but we need to have conversations about faith across all departments. We already are sharing testimonies with our faculty of how employees across campus are connecting with students and each other. Maybe those staff members are into hospitality, and can invite students to their home, creating opportunities for fellowship and deeper conversations.

**I've heard many students on this campus talk about how much those experiences mean to them.**

Faculty and staff may organize a family-style Friday night vesper experience, or something more spiritually intimate than a campus event. Those moments evoke conversations like—"Wow, I enjoyed your chocolate-chip cookies, but it was that worship thought given by my friend that really touched me." As we learn and grow together as a campus family, I'd love to see faculty and students praying on the Promenade—just pausing and saying, "Looks like you're having a difficult day. Can I pray for you?" It's not just about prayer: it's about caring. It's about listening to where students are coming from; what issues are going on at home; learning about the things that weigh them down. We have an opportunity to

guide them, direct them, listen to them, and help them affirm their beliefs. If you just think of a student as a number in a classroom—that's not what Southern's all about.

**How do you build that culture as an administrator? How do you communicate to a student, "We are really hoping and praying that your time at Southern will help you make a commitment to Jesus Christ"?**

It can be hard to define, but if we all understand what our mission is here at this university, that we are seeking to help form a well-rounded individual—physically, mentally, spiritually and socially—then we'll be more intentional about having informal conversations with young people. We'll show a genuineness in our own faith experience. It won't be a veneer.

**Some have observed that Adventist higher education might not continue to exist if it weren't for government-supported loan programs. That has increasingly become an area of concern because various government and advocacy groups are now suggesting that if federally backed loans are supporting students, then the government may have an interest in the way that campus employs, retains students, applies discipline codes, or things like that. What do you say to parents, to faculty, to stakeholders who worry that somehow the dependence on Guaranteed Student Loan programs might be opening a door to forces that could change or alter the value system of an Adventist university?**

We have a board of trustees: that's our governing board. We are Seventh-day Adventist-centric here at Southern. Would we modify our values to get federal dollars? As long as I'm president, the answer is, unequivocally, no. We will not change the values of this institution. None of our sister Adventist institutions would waver on changing their values either, because those values are why we exist. They are what makes us unique. What can colleges and universities do to be ready in the event that government restrictions begin to follow federal loan dollars? Increasing endowments for colleges and universities can be very helpful in building independent financial resources to support student expenses. How much would an institution need to have the equivalent investment

returns as those loans and Pell grants that students receive? Every college or university needs to look at those questions and make certain their capital campaigns or five-year strategic plans are building an endowment that could offset any lack of government-insured loans.

A college education is a valuable investment, and some think of it an expensive investment. But as Adventists, we shouldn't just have the most economically advantaged students attending our schools. Here at Southern we have many middle- to low-income families who send their young adults to us. They should have the same opportunities to finance that college education. Even if the government doesn't change any rules and regulations, we still need to find ways to ensure that middle- to low-income students who desire this rich experience can get it. It's our job to provide that opportunity for them. Adventist education is an eternal investment.

**Your university has for many years enjoyed a reputation as a place where faith can flourish. But Southern takes its share of "shots," like every Adventist college or university does, from some constituents who have very conservative or very progressive agendas. What do you say to faculty and staff about how they conduct themselves, the way they image Southern? How do you address faculty and staff when they become aware that every public presentation, even an individual lecture, is being examined by potentially negative reviewers?**

My leadership style has always been mission-centric. If things come across my desk that aren't focused on the mission of this institution, I don't spend a lot of time on them. I could spend my time reacting to a million things that distract me and are disruptive to the institution. My counsel, or at least the experience I share with fellow employees, is to be Christlike. We need to be compassionate; we need to be listeners. That doesn't mean we have to do exactly what a particular group says we need to do.

As any leader of an institution knows, sometimes you make decisions that aren't the right ones; sometimes you make mistakes. People are going to find out pretty quick—and I'm sure some already have—that I'm going to make mistakes on this job. I'm fallible, but I love the Lord, and God loves me. I'm going to do the best I can in my role here as president. I have wonderful people who work closely with me. They



**“A lot of emotional energy gets expended when you deal with non-missional and divisive issues.”**

give me advice; they give me suggestions. But sometimes a hard decision has to be made. I'm willing to make that decision. If there are people who disagree, that's OK. Maybe I can do something a little better in the future, but I'm going to stay focused on our mission.

I'd say the same thing to all of our faculty: "Don't spend a lot of time with people on the fringes, whoever they are. It will save you a lot of stress. A lot of emotional energy gets expended when you deal with non-missional and divisive issues. Jesus wants you to fulfill the mission you have here at this university. Focus on that mission. Don't be distracted by what's going on around."

**Talk to me about what you learned in public higher education that you think is of value to you now leading a faith-based institution.**

I worked at a top 25 public university for 25 years. I learned that accountability is extremely important. For an institution to get to number 25, you have to measure things: you also need to hold people accountable. For example, at Southern or any of our institutions, you hire people to carry out certain functions, and for the institution to be successful, those employees must do their part. I am going to take a look at Southern's major metrics and see how we are working to achieve those goals.

Having a strategic plan is also essential to improve an institution. In a recent cabinet retreat, we reviewed Southern's current five-year strategic plan and are in the process of sharpening it so it is very clear where we would like to be in 2025. As president of a university, 50 percent of my time needs to be invested in thinking about the future—where we're going to be in 10 years or 20 years. Specifically, I need to know where

we want to be by 2025 and then make sure we have appropriate metrics and practices in place to move the university in a positive way to achieve those goals.

So a key word I learned in public higher education is "accountability." "Excellence" is another. Everything goes back to leadership, and I am not just referring to the president. Every employee has a responsibility for the excellence and progress of Southern Adventist University. Whether you're in charge of landscaping, a building manager, or one of the department chairs, every staff member has a leadership role: to be excellent in their behavior and how they treat other people, both colleagues and students. Southern is God's school. We should be excellent because God desires excellence in each of us and from each of us.

**I've heard that before the school year began, there was a faculty colloquium during which you introduced themes and a mission focus for the year. Tell me what you shared at that first faculty gathering of this year.**

I reminded every employee at this university that they're not working for Ken Shaw as president—they're working for God. This is a God-given, God-inspired institution. We need to put everything we have into the different jobs we do. Yes, there are elements of positional leadership, but there is also personal leadership. Every employee at Southern has a job and a mission to fulfill, no matter their position. During colloquium I focused on personal leadership and the responsibilities we have as servant leaders to our students, and also in our community.

I'm as certain as I can be that God is going to lead this group of faculty, staff, and students to a deeper experience with Him. And frankly, I'm excited for what lies ahead. ♣



*What  
Happened  
on  
Christmas?*

Love came  
down and  
got in the  
middle.

DAVID E. SMITH

Everybody knows what happened on Christmas. Don't they? Let's take a Christmas quiz.

#### A CHRISTMAS QUIZ

First, an easy question. Which very old holiday has been celebrated for centuries on December 25 and is characterized by the custom of exchanging gifts? Christmas, right? Wrong. The correct answer: the Roman festival of Saturnalia. Wait, Jesus was not born on December 25?

Here's our next question. Who is the jovial elderly man of heavy build with a long white beard, whose favorite color is red? This man rides in a chariot pulled by creatures with names like Cracker and Gnasher, and he lives far in the far north in a palace made of icebergs. The fireplace of every home is an especially sacred place, for this man who is said to come down the chimney to visit human beings. It's Santa Claus, right? Sorry. That's Thor, the pagan Germanic god of fire. So, Santa Claus comes from an ancient European myth?

Who said this was easy? Here's one you'll know. What green plant with white, pink, or red berries provides a place beneath which friends or foes may exchange a personal greeting (a kiss), a tradition begun by Christians during the celebration of Christmas? Yes! You scored a correct answer! It's mistletoe! But its roots aren't Christian. It was a plant used in sacred ritual by the ancient Druids of Britain.

What have we learned? Jesus wasn't born on December 25, and Santa Claus and mistletoe descend from pagan traditions. So what really happened on Christmas? The Bible has our answer.

#### THE REAL STORY

Tucked away in the first chapter of Luke's familiar two-chapter Nativity story are details that identify an unparalleled cosmic event. Early in my ministry I

*The incarnation of Almighty God occurred just this time of year! The preborn Jesus came into the human family by choice so we may have the choice to come into His.*

heard a camp meeting presentation by Professor Richard Davidson of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary ([digitalcommons.andrews.edu/auss/vol44/iss2/1](http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/auss/vol44/iss2/1)). The biblical chronology embedded in his presentation of the New Testament Nativity narrative and Old Testament priestly process enthralled me. Luke's clues, we can pinpoint God's most astonishing landmark act in all the plan of salvation. Let's follow Luke's steps:

**1** *First-century temple duties* were one week long, and began with the first course of priests in the week following Passover.

**2** *Passover in 4 BCE was in the third week of April,*<sup>1</sup> and lasted one week. The first one-week course of priests served the last week of April.

**3** *Zechariah* was of the order of Abijah (Luke 1:5), so Abijah's priestly course was the eighth (1 Chron. 24:5, 10, 19). Counting eight weeks from the last week in April (first priestly course), Zechariah's duties were in the third week of June and lasted one full week.

**4** *Elizabeth's pregnancy* occurred "soon after . . . he came home" (Luke 1:24), which would have been about the fourth week of June.

**5** *John, the Baptist*, the fruit of Elizabeth's pregnancy, was six months in the womb (verse 26) when the angel Gabriel came from God to personally explain to Mary that she would be the human mother of the Son of God. The fourth week of December would mark Elizabeth's sixth month of pregnancy.

**6** *Christmas Week*—Gabriel's very personal explanation (Luke 1:28-35), Mary's remarkable agreement (verse 38), Mary's "hurried" trip to visit Elizabeth, and John the Baptist's *in utero* excitement (verse 44) in the presence of the prenatal Savior of the world—all happened during the final week of December or Christmas week.

What happened on Christmas? Almighty God entered the body of a pregnant teen. The Son of God named Wonderful became woundable. The Person of the God family called Counselor was here, soon to submit to a human father's advice. The Mighty God set aside His omnipotence to become mighty dependent. The Prince of Peace became a fetus whose agitated toe jabs would be stroked to calmness like every child of Adam submerged in their mother's womb. What happened? The embryonic Christ child entered this vale of humanity so we would never doubt that the Creator of all knows how to cry. So celebrate! Exchange gifts! The incarnation of Almighty God occurred just this time of year! The preborn Jesus came into the human family by choice so we may have the choice to come into His.

I am wowed by the incarnation, but if you're still interested in Jesus' birth, you can easily count a normal nine month gestation period from His conception at the end of December to the fourth week of September. That birth week would be consistent with the Nativity story, when shepherds would still be in the fields before autumn rains would have driven them indoors.

#### **HIS BIRTH MIRRORED HIS DEATH**

Who can blame us for idealizing the only divine-human baby ever born? He had to have had a supermodel mother! In Nativity art every strand of stable straw is aligned with glory rays from hovering angels? And our precious Lord as a baby would never drool. Idyllic views of Christ's birth can obscure the reality of why He came. What lay ahead wasn't going to be pretty. So much in Christ's birth may be seen as prefiguring what would happen at the cross.

*Rejected by men:* We know that on Crucifixion weekend Jesus was rejected by men. In Pilate's judgment hall they shouted, "Crucify Him! We have no king but Caesar!" Doesn't that remind us of the rejection at His birth? The innkeeper's "No

Vacancy” sign was an ominous forecast of the jeering rejection at His trial.

*The stable cave:* The Son of God was born in a stable, but it was no picturesque wooden barn. It was a typical Middle Eastern stable, a hollowed-out stone cave. The only significant difference between that cave and the tomb of a rich man probably relates to the size of the opening and the size of its interior, but Jesus was born to die.

*Swaddling clothes:* The Saviour Babe was “wrapped in swaddling clothes” (Luke 2:12). Modern mothers are beginning to swaddle and carry their infants this way again. Mary’s were strips of linen identical to the burial cloths that would be wrapped around a rich man at his death. Considering this, Christ’s birth may be seen as a foreshadowing of His death.

*Surrounded by animals:* In Bethlehem our infant Saviour was surrounded by animals. First century animals in Palestine were used for only two purposes: work and sacrifice. At His birth the One who would sacrifice Himself on Calvary was surrounded by animals regularly sacrificed to typify His own—His birth mirroring His death.

*The Manger:* Mary laid Jesus in a manger or feeding trough like those found today in Megiddo and other chariot cities of Solomon. Horses reached their muzzles into a hollowed-out stone. At birth and death, Christ was laid to rest in stone.

*Josephs:* Jesus was watched over at His birth by a Joseph. He was watched over at His death by a Joseph. In this, His birth was a preview of His death.

There’s a story told of a piece of art in a European cathedral, in which the artist depicts Mary at the foot of a hill, down on one knee, arms outstretched. At the top of the hill the sun beams down the grassy grade. On the slope of the hill the Boy Jesus races down the sun-soaked lawn with His arms spread wide. The sun at His back creates a huge shadow in front of the toddler Christ. The shadow is a cross. That picture catches a vital message that the New Testament teaches about Jesus: His whole life was lived in the shadow of the cross.

## ON CHRISTMAS: ONE WITH US

A torn warm-up suit melted by a distant campfire and stained by countless driveway oil changes hangs in my closet. I hide the grimy garment in the back of the pulpit on Sabbaths I preach this message in church. When it’s time for the application to real life, I pull out the greasy pants and jacket and put them on over my suit while John 19:16-18 is read: “They took Jesus . . . out to . . . ‘The Place of the Skull’ . . . There they crucified him along with two others, one on each side, with Jesus in the middle” (NET).<sup>2</sup> All the Gospel writers state that Jesus was crucified in the middle. Matthew and Luke say: “Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left” (Matthew 27:38, KJV). Late manuscripts of Mark 15:28 mention Christ’s crucifixion between two thieves as fulfilling Isaiah 53:12, the prediction that He would be numbered with us.

What happened on Christmas? The God of Love dressed up in our grimy clothes pulled over His divinity and got in the middle with us. He came all the way down to where we are. He came all the way down and got in the middle of our pain and grief and toil and temptation. His pure life lived, Christ suffered on the cross. His mighty heart burst from the weight of our disloyalty; and by this awesome means the grandest gift of all was purchased. It couldn’t have happened without His incarnation. That’s what happened on Christmas, and it’s surely worth celebrating! Love came down and got in the middle. 📌

<sup>1</sup> Born in the reign of Herod the Great (Matt. 2:1; Luke 1:5ff.), Jesus was evidently up to 2 years old when Herod tried to eliminate Him by ordering the slaughter of all boys up to 2 years old (Matt. 2:16). Emil Schürer corrected calculations on Jesus’ birth to 4 B.C., three years earlier than the [1 B.C.] year that originally—and inaccurately—established our B.C./A.D. calculations. Josephus dates Herod’s death as falling between a lunar eclipse and the annual Passover. Such an eclipse-Passover sequence occurred in 4 B.C.: the eclipse on March 13 and the Passover 29 days later. Seventh-day Adventists accept the 4 B.C. birth date for Jesus. This chronology synchronizes with the 70 weeks and 2300 days prophecies of Daniel 8 and 9. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronology\\_of\\_Jesus#Year\\_of\\_Jesus'\\_birth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronology_of_Jesus#Year_of_Jesus'_birth).

<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations credited to NET are from the *New English Translation Bible*, copyright © 1996-2021 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. All rights reserved.

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# *Immanu'el*

THE BACKSTORY



*To hear His mother speak of Him,  
you would believe that there has never  
been another child like Him.*

#### LAEL CAESAR

**P**ass Him by, if you will, on your donkey, or on foot with your loaded donkey, on the dusty path to the humble first-century Galilean building you call home—two rooms, clay brick with mud and straw for mortar, dirt floor. Two rooms and an open courtyard. You've worked since sunrise. Now food and rest are all you're thinking of, not dramatic encounters with important strangers.

#### ALL ABOUT CHARACTER

The Man who went by in the other direction may have been Yeshu'a ben-Yosef, a twenty-something Palestinian Jew you've heard of but never met—as far as you can tell. Granted, the man you just passed by didn't look like the stuff of dramatic encounters anyway, and perhaps that's the very reason you've never met Him: there wasn't any arresting physical beauty to the Man you just passed that struck your attention.<sup>1</sup>

But to hear His mother speak of Him, you would believe that there has never been another child like Him in the little mountain town of His youth—so gracious in disposition, ready in helpfulness, and humbly charming even in painful, awkward, difficult moments. She will tell you, even now, the story of His steady blossoming into a soul of profound wisdom, even as He also matured physically.

This Son of Miryam and Yosef was one of all the cute little kids who didn't turn into a brash teen. Or a know-it-all young adult. But there's no denying it: He does know a great deal! Still, all He did was become a Youth of meek boldness and a kindly, sensible-looking face. I'll grant that anybody as focused as you were on that barley bread and fish you were savoring could go by Yeshu'a and never notice Him. He misses things too, maybe: How come He didn't get married a dozen years ago? He's almost 30 years old and still as single as He's ever been.

His mother, Miryam—and his brothers, too, though with much less delight—could tell you how

persuasively he speaks His ethical convictions. Her heart is ever bursting with holy gratitude for His devotion to the Scriptures she so carefully and faithfully taught Him. For Him, everything has to be based on the Scriptures. He draws from Devarim (the Deuteronomy scroll): "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut. 8:3, NIV).

His brothers can attest to things mother Miryam said. But the fire inside them when they speak is different from the fervor burning in her soul that shows in her transparently honest eyes. Ya'akov or Yosef, or Shim'on, or Yehudah—or all of them at once—wonder aloud sometimes, about His impractical holiness: He's crazy (Mark 3:21). Others think so too, and worse: perhaps He's demon-possessed as well as crazy (John 10:20). Does He truly understand the first thing about His nation's history and the great fathers of that history? How stable is His head? He talks with conviction about what God did for us through patriarchs like Avraham, Moshe, and David; then He goes off about misguided zeal, admonishing when everyone else is admiring—how Moshe put that Mitsri in his place (under the sand); or how David could elude both Israelite king Shaul and Philistine king Achish. How brilliant was that! He blames David for the death of 85 priests.<sup>2</sup> Imagine that! Rather than recall their exploits—like what they did at Shechem (Gen. 34)—he chafes at the thought that the fathers of our tribes were themselves the fruit of so much contention, deception, and flames of criminal jealousy that burned just as furiously in their own time as they had in their father's generation.<sup>3</sup> Nobody's perfect after all!

That, of course, is one of the worst things to say if you were hoping to silence Him. That's what turns Him on! He'll readily agree with you. Because that's the problem. Nobody's perfect: that is humanity's problem! We need a better example, a better guide, a better model; a different orientation, away from ourselves to God our Father in



heaven. We do not need to model ourselves after our fellow fallen humans when we may seek the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength—Devarim again; when we may lean on heaven’s grace and power every moment of every day. It’s not about us. It’s all about God our Father, who means for His children to value purity of soul and integrity of action more than . . . more than life! You serve the cause of your Father who is in heaven by letting Him live His selfless life through you in the service of others, “that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16, NIV).

Nothing ever slows His Scripture searching and learning. He sees truths in those scrolls that His mother, His principal teacher, hasn’t thought of, or garnered from conscientious conversation, or heard from the synagogue or its leaders before. Including what He really believes about His nation, God’s specially chosen people. Sometimes the brothers lean on Mary so hard when they hear Him talk about family. She feels it, but it never leads her to denounce her Son when He says, “My mother and my brothers are all those who hear God’s word and obey it” (Luke 8:21, NLT).<sup>4</sup>

#### **THE SYNAGOGUE RULERS**

The synagogue rulers have come to be aware of ben-Josef’s exceptionalism. It doesn’t make them comfortable. You can’t describe Him as hostile. Maybe He’s even modest. But modesty notwithstanding, the free familiarity with which He invokes the Torah leaves them unsteady on their theological feet. The occasions He refers to as “discussions” involve moments—rather long moments sometimes—of infuriated shouting from congregational leaders who end up feeling more like enemies than discussants. His disrespect for His elders is close to unpardonable. They’ve tried as hard as they can to summarize their claims of disrespect for authority, distortion of Torah, and disloyalty to God’s chosen nation. But they end up with little, if any, proof. Mostly they feel themselves wishing the Almighty would inflict on Him the grievous bodily harm He deserves for the blasphemies of which they can’t quite prove Him guilty. He drives them to madness, but nothing they can put down to His pitch or volume, His vocabulary or body language, or anything else about Him beyond His insufferable correctness! They simply feel intense hatred for Him—and struggle mightily to find some justification for it (see Ps. 69:4; John 15:25). They’ve known Him now for going on three decades, and share memories in abundance, of His gentle disruptions. They aren’t sure He properly defers to even the most venerated rabbis. They can’t tell what He believes about the Romans. Nor can He be counted on to denounce and repudiate the publicans who work for them. Everyone—everyone else, I guess—knows that the Romans, specifically the Roman military, are a despicable presence in our midst, cruel and evil, with no one but publicans less welcome than they.

And everyone knows that children owe obedience to their parents, and that they and their parents owe full loyalty to the wider family and the community elders. But this Man, with His most reserved yet assured manner, cites Torah—the Shema, to be precise—to the effect

that God alone is due absolute loyalty, and that even breaking up families is completely appropriate for the sake of anyone's determination to follow God: He sees people making enemies inside their own household for the sake of choosing God's kingdom above every other dedication (see Matt. 10:34-36). And if it shocks somebody, He clarifies: "enemies" is just what He said. Then, if you let Him, He'll hug you so tightly that you'll know He hasn't got a hateful bone in His body, and that He loves you just the same whether you agree or disagree. But the sum of the matter is still unsettling: generally speaking, He can't be trusted to give the Romans their due, or give family and community leaders the support they might need when the moment comes to act together for their people and against their enemies.

### OTHERS

Amazingly, there are others in the community, even among the older population some say He doesn't really respect, who speak of Him with the same awe that mother Miryam does. Now, these aren't people ever known for malice or divisiveness: and they've lived long enough for you to know what they are like. And they certainly aren't celebrated for their gullibility. It's just that the stories they tell about Him are of monumental improbability: He isn't originally Natsri; He was brought to the city as a toddler from Mitsrayim; His mother was pregnant before time, but his father still took her as his wife. A formidable workman, that Yosef; taught Him the carpenter trade He now practices. He'd be proud to see the infinitely meticulous work ben-Yosef is turning out. Didn't fall too far from the block; just a great guy.

He once forsook His mother and father after Passover. They spent three days searching for Him on the way home. When it became clear that He wasn't among the pilgrims now homeward bound, they turned back to Jerusalem in desperation. Turns out that He was in the temple, engaged in intense "discussion" with "the teachers," sitting among them, "listening to them and asking them questions" (Luke 2:46, NIV). For all I know, it may have been the first time in her life that Miryam publicly reprimanded Him: "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you" (verse 48, NIV).

And can you imagine His response to His mother Miryam?

No, you can't; I'll have to tell you: "Why were you searching for me?" He thought everything was just fine: "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (verse 49, NIV).

One other thing I should probably mention. His age at the time. He was 12 years old.

### IMMANU'EL

A wave of strong emotion swept over her being when Miryam heard His answer. At that moment her mind rushed backward a full lifetime—His lifetime—to when she stood alone in her room and a visitor showed up without sound or permission, bathed in holy light that drenched the room and overwhelmed her betrothed girlhood with terror, and mystery, and wonder: "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you. . . . Do not be afraid. . . . You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Yashu'a" (Luke 1:28-31, NIV).

Yosef, her fiancé, got his own message from heaven, his own word of reassurance. She was not to be afraid. Neither was he: "Do not be afraid to take Miryam home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Yashu'a, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:20, 21, NIV).

Prophetic fulfillment, they say. And they were to be the ones through whom eternity's ages would descend to earth, inhabit a human body, live a pure and flawless life, and die to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29, 36): "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him 'Immanu'el' (Isa. 7:14, NIV).

Maybe Miryam's right: never been, never will be, another child like Him, 'Immanu'el, God with us. ♣

<sup>1</sup> See Isaiah 53:2 as rendered by *The Voice Bible*, Copyright © 2012 Thomas Nelson, Inc. *The Voice* translation © 2012 Ecclesia Bible Society. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> Moshe [Moses] putting the Mitsri [Egyptian] in his place: Ex. 2:11, 12; David eluding King Sha'ul [Saul]: 1 Sam. 23:7-13; 24:1-14; 26; deceiving King Achish: 1 Sam. 21:10-15; death of 85 priests: 1 Sam. 21:1-9; 22:7-19.

<sup>3</sup> Criminal jealousy among the fathers of the 12 tribes: Gen. 37, selling their brother into slavery; contention and deception in the previous generation: Ya'akov [Jacob] steals the birthright from Esau: Gen. 27; Laban endlessly cheating Ya'akov: swapping brides: Gen. 29:20-25; removing all the flocks whose young would have belonged to Ya'akov: Gen. 30:35; Rahel [Rachel] versus Leah: Gen. 29:20-25; 29:31-30:23.

<sup>4</sup> Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

# HIS Impact On Me

## A Strong Claim for the Gospel



The Holy Spirit was working miraculously in the group pictured above, not only in the hearts of the students but to their parents/guardians as well. In addition to the **sixteen students** that were baptized, **three parents** were also baptized along with **two graduate students**, and **five staff children** for a total of **twenty-six** souls.

Pastor Ludy Mahinay is the school's Bible class teacher, chaplain, and Pastor. He spends a lot of his time in the spiritual area of our students. However, he would be the first to tell you that these baptisms are the result of a collaborative work of Divine power and a staff that loves their students.

"I did a random survey in class, asking our students what inspired them to accept God or get baptized," he said. "The multiple-choice options included: various specific teachings/doctrines or topics of the bible and a space for an 'other' response." The responses are heartwarming.

"Some answered with specific topics that convinced them," Pastor Mahinay recalls, "but generally, they wrote what convinces them is how all the staff here treated them, cared for them, and loved them. To me, this is a perfect reflection of God's love through action and not just in words."

This is how God works: He utilizes a network of human vessels, from the supporters of Holbrook Indian School who help make the resources and staff possible, to the staff who in turn provide direct education, love, and care.

"The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian."

— Ellen White

You can help other Native American youth experience God's transforming love by making a gift to Holbrook Indian School today at [HolbrookIndianSchool.org](http://HolbrookIndianSchool.org)

# MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

I had a friend recently ask why I remain a Seventh-day Adventist. He's not a member of our church and knows there are a few issues that frustrate me (as any organization is bound to have), so he was puzzled by my allegiance to the denomination. Without hesitation I quickly replied: it's because I'm in love with Adventist theology and the Jesus that theology reveals.

Of course, I'm not naive to think there aren't psychological and cultural factors at play. After all, this is the only religious community I've ever belonged to, and there's a certain familiarity that brings a deep sense of comfort and security.

Yet even accounting for that, the one thing that consciously keeps me in this church is the beautiful and rich theological paradigm we've come to understand.

It's not simply that it makes sense to me in some objective way, like an algebraic formula that I've calculated and been convinced of intellectually. I'm not committed to Adventist theology solely because of a sort of Enlightenment-defined absolute certainty. As I said, I'm *in love* with Adventist theology, not simply cognitively *convinced* of it—which is an important nuance. It speaks to my heart as well as my head. It makes sense to me emotionally, relationally, socially.

That is, it does all these things when properly understood and presented—all within the framework of God's love, set against the backdrop of the grand story of a cosmic conflict.

The way we've come to understand God's character through this lens, pointing to His humility and willingness to patiently demonstrate His goodness for the eternal well-being and security of the universe;

how this clarifies and expands our understanding of the significance and meaning of the cross; the gift of the Sabbath; the refusal of God to torment people eternally—all these snapshots, among others, create a beautiful mosaic of theological goodness and delight that enrapture my heart, mind, and soul (while recognizing there's ever more to discover).

And yet it's precisely because I am so in love with Adventist theology, properly understood, that I find myself so incredibly jealous for it, leading to an increasing impatience when people make Adventism about anything and everything else. We're sitting on a gold mine, yet burying it seemingly beyond reach through our preoccupation with secondary and inconsequential matters, clinging to our rituals, cultural traditions, and conspiracies, and fighting over nonessentials.

It's also deeply frustrating and saddening that we fail to live up to our beautiful theology. I very much include myself in this. Theoretically, such a beautiful paradigm should make us the most beautiful people on the planet. And yet so often we're anything but—likely because we've made Adventism about so much other than that beautiful theology.

So here's my humble appeal to rediscover, or perhaps discover for the first time, what truly lies at the heart of Adventist theology. Don't just become *convinced* of it; fall in love with it. And, more important, fall in love with the Jesus it reveals. 🍷

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REIMAGINING  
FAITH  
SHAWN  
BRACE



WE'RE SITTING ON A  
GOLD MINE, YET  
BURYING IT  
SEEMINGLY BEYOND  
REACH THROUGH OUR  
PREOCCUPATION WITH  
SECONDARY AND  
INCONSEQUENTIAL  
MATTERS.

What did *Adventist Review* say in Christmas seasons past?

# A Christmas Retrospective

WILONA KARIMABADI

*Over the years the Christmas season has been commemorated in various ways in the pages of the Adventist Review. Sometimes we learn best when we look back. See if you can connect to these excerpts from the last 100 years.—Editors*

## 1921

**F. M. WILCOX, EDITOR**

At first, there was nothing specifically “Christmasy” about December editions of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, which is what the journal was called then. However, the year’s final issue, looking ahead and setting the tone for the new year, graced its cover with a poem titled: “A Happy New Year!” That article’s message, though from 100 years ago, applies with notable accuracy to our present circumstances, as we seek to know how to live beyond a global pandemic.

“We wish for all our readers a happy new year. The year just closing has brought many blessings. We can say with the prophet: ‘It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness.’

“But while God has always been true to us, we have often been untrue to Him. For this we need



to seek forgiveness in sincere repentance, and to learn the coming year from the failures of the past. But let us not live under the pall of past mistakes. We can ill afford to rob the present of its just demands upon our thought and energy by useless repining. ‘Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,’ we must ‘press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.’

“Let us look forward, not backward; up, and not down. Christ lives, and He is our mighty helper. We have no strength or wisdom of ourselves to enable us to succeed; but He who has called us to His service will supply us with strength according to our need.

“In His power let us make 1922 the best year of our whole Christian experience.”

## 1968

**KENNETH H. WOOD, EDITOR**

The 1960s were a turbulent time in North America. The church saw its young people wrestling with issues of belief as well as others pervading society. Roland Hegstad, then an associate editor for *Liberty* magazine, wrote a column for our journal called *Especially for Men*. In his December 26 piece, “A Christmas Message From Derelicts,” he recounts a Baltimore, Maryland, holiday event starring a “libertine” who spurred the crowd to debauchery, yet whose efforts were thwarted in an unexpected way. The story of what transpired instructs





us all on the manifold workings of divine grace.

“As the quartet runs out of songs, and the audience settles into silence, a bleary-eyed guest arises and begins to testify in quavering voice:

‘Friends, I just want to tell you what good people have done for me. I had a good mother, and I was brought up under the influence of the Word. But I was led by the devil into the hands of wicked men—yes, wicked women, too . . .’

“Ashen-faced, the libertine flees into the night, as the man concludes with a plea to ‘pray for me.’ Then, as the midnight hour of Christmas nears, voice after voice arises in testimony—some to the influence of mothers long dead, others to speak of the prayers of friends and families.

“Those derelicts of Baltimore speak to us, too, this Christmas. Their testimony in song and speech says that there is still, even in the most depraved of men, a spark of yearning for the approval of Him who is love; that all the vices of the world are as ashes to one who feels the lightest touch of the Spirit’s concern.

“They tell us that should we depart from the tree with loaded arms, and yet with hearts devoid of that gift of love called the Comforter, we depart with nothing. And, ultimately, the fact that they spoke at all tells us that even if we receive no earthly gift we need not depart without priceless treasure. For on us, too, there shines a star, and angel voices proclaim, ‘For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.’”

## 1983

**WILLIAM JOHNSON, EDITOR**

The 1980s has been called “The Decade of Excess”—a time when the United States prospered and the Adventist Church continued to grow and make inroads into countries that were starting to open. This edition shows the magazine’s increasing attention to the Christmas theme by comparison

with the *Review’s* earliest years. Adventist theologian Herbert Douglass contributed a piece titled, “Why the Angels Sang Over Bethlehem—1,” that was featured in the December 22, 1983, issue.

“So through His life and death, Jesus became humanity’s Saviour and Example—a Saviour who substituted Himself for all sinners in revealing the awful end of sin (being Godforsaken), and an

Example who revealed the nature of true unselfishness, the fairness of God’s laws, and the perfect human response to God’s love.

“He could not be a Saviour unless He satisfied justice as our sinless Example, nor could He be our Example unless He resisted sin even unto death—the second death—as our Substitute, showing the universe that unselfishness is the true

nature of a greater maligned God.

“The value of His death depended upon the quality of His life. If He had not obeyed His Father’s will in every respect under the same conditions as any son or daughter of Adam has had to live in this side of Eden, then Calvary, as far as our salvation is concerned, would not have been sufficient.”



## 1999

**WILLIAM JOHNSON, EDITOR**

In 1999, current executive editor Bill Knott wrote the piece “A Night to Meet our Need” while an associate editor of the journal, dedicating his gift for sensitive yet profound prose to the composition, excerpted here from our December 13, 1999, edition.

“And then, one day, the lights went on. I discovered that what it meant was ‘Glory to God in the highest,’ and that unbeknownst to me, I had been

singing Latin all those years! So the song really did have a meaning all that time, and I never understood it until I heard it in my own language.

“That is the heart of the old story, I believe. It has had a meaning, a profound meaning, all these years. But only when we hear it in our own language, only when we see that the child born that night was the great God of the universe come down to live with common men and women like us, will we ever understand it. Only when we see the Jesus who was born in the middle of the night shift will we be ready to trust Him as the Saviour of our lives—lives lived out in sweat and pain and joy and home and work, yes, even work on the night shift.

“This is the Lord we proclaim at Christmas, the Word who was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. And with millions of common Christians all over this world, I pray with every fiber of my being for the day when the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ.”

## 2011

**BILL KNOTT, EDITOR**

By 2011, readers could count on the last edition of the year to deliver messages that spoke to the marvelous event when the Christ child came to the world in a humble stable. And the December 22 edition did not disappoint. Associate editor Gerald Klingbeil rounded out another year of the work of *Adventist Review* with his piece “The Darker Side of the Manger,” excerpted here.

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross’ (Phil. 2:5-8).

“Jesus knew the end from the beginning, and yet He stepped into our world. He chose to be born in a peasant’s family, living a life of hardship. He did it because He is interested in us—no, because He loves us, even in the midst of our sin grime



and dirt that we so carefully try to mask and hide. Broken and mangled Baby Jesus is a powerful reminder of what the gospel is all about. It is authentically good news that has the power to transform lives. It is an invitation to let God fix the real problem in our lives.

“Hang on—can you hear the angels singing in wonder, awe, and amazement?”

## 2018

**BILL KNOTT, EDITOR**

By 2018, *Adventist Review* had transformed into a monthly 72-page journal. No longer the size of a traditional magazine, it was now smaller, sturdier, and longer than before—ideal for slipping into a laptop bag or purse, and ready for sharing. As we moved forward with an eye toward using new technology and marketing techniques to reach more readers, the December edition again reminded readers of the “reason for the season” with a piece called “Observing Christmas,” from the writings of Ellen White.

“What matchless love Jesus has manifested for a fallen world! If angels sung because the Saviour was born in Bethlehem, shall not our hearts echo the glad strain, Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, good will to men?”

“Although we do not know the exact day of Christ’s birth, we would honor the sacred event. May the Lord forbid that anyone should be so narrow-minded as to overlook the event because there is an uncertainty in regard to the exact time. Let us do what we can to fasten the minds of the children upon those things which are precious to everyone who loves Jesus. Let us teach them how Jesus came into the world to bring hope, comfort, peace, and happiness to all. . . . Let the hearts of all respond with exceeding joy for the priceless gift of the Son of God.”—*Review and Herald*, Dec. 17, 1889. 🍀

\*We acknowledge this is not the most charitable language that identifies drunks as “derelicts of Baltimore” or “the most depraved of men.”



# INTRODUCING GOODBYE

I'm not usually one to dwell on the past, but today warrants a bit of reflection. After I served as a summer intern in 2007, my first official column for the *Adventist Review* appeared at the beginning of 2008. Almost exactly 14 years later you're reading my last (well, for now).

The germination of the big idea took place at Valentino's Grand Italian Buffet (if you know, you know) on a blustery winter day in Lincoln, Nebraska. I sat in a greasy vinyl booth across from my professor, mentor, and friend Chris Blake. Over lukewarm pizza we batted around ideas for my forthcoming regular monthly feature in the *Review*. After a lot of thought—and pizza—we landed on a relatively simple concept that concisely summarized exactly what I wanted this space to be about: *Introducing the Why*.

In those first few columns I walked on familiar ground—prayer, church, the Second Coming—with a focus on fresh, practical application. As I transitioned out of college and began encountering numerous life milestones, my goal each month was simply to share my daily experiences and hope that you might get something out of them. With that came a lot of vulnerability and honesty about being on my own for the first time, getting married, and becoming a dad.

Along the way I developed relationships with many of you from afar. As I ventured out of town—whether to a conference, a new church, or an academy flag-football tournament—I'd inevitably have someone come up to me and start what would become a somewhat regular occurrence throughout the years.

"Your name sounds really familiar; have we met before?"

"You don't happen to read the *Adventist Review*, do you?"

Some interactions stand out more than others. One reader sent my wife, Natalie, and me a wedding gift from our online registry. Another invited me to take a 12-hour train ride to speak at her rural church in Oregon. An inmate at a California prison wrote *me* a letter of encouragement. Most recently, as my family made the emotionally taxing move to Kettering, Ohio, a church member tapped me on the shoulder and said, "I love reading your articles in the *Review*; we're so glad you're here."

Along the way, countless others wrote public letters and private emails. Every time I received a note, I always made a point to write back. And every single time, I learned from the dialogue.

And so, as I sit here trying to find a way to bottle up 14 years into 550 words, there's one thing that especially stands out: we grow by being willing to productively share our views and by truly listening as others do the same. As someone who often speaks first, I've learned there's a huge difference between listening to respond and listening to understand.

In closing . . . thanks to Chris Blake for teaching an energetic and very green college kid how much words matter.

To Steve Chavez for letting me sleep in his guest bedroom and walk his dogs during the summer of '07.

To Bill Knott and the entire editorial staff for taking a chance on me and always making my disparate thoughts sound better.

And to everyone who ever read one of my articles, took the time to write, or prayed for me and my family:

Thank you—and goodbye (for now). 🍷

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**Jimmy Phillips** is vice president of marketing and communications for Kettering Health.

INTRODUCING  
THE WHY  
JIMMY  
PHILLIPS



ALMOST EXACTLY  
14 YEARS LATER  
YOU'RE READING MY  
LAST COLUMN  
(WELL, FOR NOW).



The

*"After seeing him,  
the shepherds  
told everyone . . ."*  
(Luke 2:17, NLT).<sup>1</sup>

# Shepherds' Story

TIMOTHY NIXON

**E**yewitness testimony has for ages been the most reliable testimony in courts of law. It is the bedrock of the American judicial system. Individuals have lost freedom and life based solely on eyewitness testimony.

## VISION DEPENDS

Usually what one sees and does not see is determined by one's perspective. In recent years sociologists and other behavioral professionals have done many tests of the reliability of eyewitness testimony. The tests have shown that the way questions are phrased to eyewitnesses can cause them to add information or details to their recollection that never happened. But eyewitness testimony continues to be the most reliable means of establishing truth.

Sadly, our idea of authority correlates too closely with who the witness is: man over woman because men are deemed more analytical, and women more emotional; rich over poor because the rich have not much, if anything, to gain; American over foreigner; Caucasian over person of color; orthodox accent over foreign accent, etc.

The Nativity disrupts all this: in announcing Messiah's birth, God could have used any virgin of Davidic ancestry from Israel's elite or priesthood. Mary was not the nation's only virgin. But God chose her—poor, teenaged, unmarried—to bear the Messiah. Jesus' dedication could have been before one of the powerbrokers of Israel's priesthood. But instead God allows an old man, not much known, to dedicate the Christ child. He allows an aging widow to witness the dedication. He sends a star to guide foreigners to the place of His Son's birth.

These commoners are the people who will serve as eyewitnesses to the story of the birth and infancy of Jesus Christ. And in the ranks of God's chosen eyewitnesses, there's a team of shepherds.

## MEETING THE SHEPHERDS

Luke's introduces them "staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flocks by night" (Luke 2:8).<sup>2</sup>

Shepherds were unnamed, unknown, undistinguished, and distrusted, known to confuse "thine" with "mine." They lived in the fields both day and night, after the rainy season of April and before the rains of November, the time when sheep were kept outdoors.

This shepherd company would prove themselves trustworthy. And in selecting them, God would show that stereotypes and prejudices do not determine whom He will use to advance His kingdom. Inspiration tells us that these shepherds were among those who longed for the Messiah to come.<sup>3</sup> They discussed and prayed about it. And on that night God would dramatically answer their prayer.

Faithful people, likely of limited literacy and Bible knowledge: their selection teaches that every now and then God takes the ordinary from obscurity and places them in the limelight of opportunity—what I once heard labeled "the aristocracy of the ordinary." The angelic announcement given them of the birth of Christ is not what today's political operatives would have recommended for an introduction. You and I have seen inaugurations of new leaders, of college and university presidents perhaps—people and processes I admire and support—but with full respect for Jesus' warning to

# *God takes the ordinary from obscurity and places them in the limelight of opportunity.*

beware of heights: Beware of obsessing over recognition. Beware of the potential dizziness of prestige and titles. When God announced Christ's birth, He taught something unique, something distinctive, about His kingdom; something upside down about the salvation that He brings. God does not save from the top, down; He saves from the bottom, up.

## **MESSAGE FOR THE SHEPHERDS**

The shepherds' message comes by supernatural delivery: "an angel of the Lord suddenly stood near them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them," leaving them "terribly frightened" (verse 9). The shepherds will be eyewitnesses of the Messiah's birth. But how confident, and how credible, will they be? Neither angels nor good news are frequent events. Indeed, for an angel to appear to them, they probably thought it meant judgment. And judgment, for outsiders such as they, was usually bad news. This angel appearing to society's despised could have been their undoing, given how they were looked upon. So often society, even church society, has made some person or group feel unworthy before others, and even before God. But instead of threatening rejection or punishment, these angels calm the shepherds' fears: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people" (verse 10).

How powerful the gospel is! The God of the universe comes to pitch His tent next to the worn and tattered shelters of this earth. Sinners though we be, God sends the gospel so we may feel good about ourselves. The good news is that no matter how sinful we may be, or what we've done, there is hope, salvation, healing and reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

And the good news is accompanied with "great joy." I reflect on the stern, sad countenances that we have associated with sainthood—statues as well as breathing saints—when salvation is supposed to bring great joy. "The joy of the Lord is [my] strength" (Neh. 8:10). It's the joy of salvation

for all people. For God's good news is for everybody. In a world that votes some in and others out it's good to know that the Savior is for everybody. The Messiah the shepherds had been praying for came to save everybody, including them.

God wants to make salvation accessible and available to all people. And the shepherds are told that the sign of messiahship will be a humble, unassuming entrance into the world, not in a mansion but in a manger; wrapped, not in satin sheets but in swaddling clothes: born, not in a gilded city but in Benton Harbor, or a Mexican barrio, or Korea Town in San Francisco, or Chicago's South Side.

It reminds of Jesus' parable about a great man, a great banquet, and a great bunch of superficial excuses by the greats who were invited. So the man sent his servants out into the streets and alleys to invite the poor, crippled, blind, and lame: He means for His banquet hall to be full (see Luke 14:16-24). So too, God sends His angels into the highways, hedges, and alleyways of Judea; sends a star to the Magi from the East while the priests, who count them heathen, remain in Jerusalem. He invites shepherds from the fields to worship the Christ child, while the Sanhedrin who know the prophecies of His birth remain in the temple.

The experts are not always right. Sometimes the theologians get it all wrong, charged with great information but lacking divine inspiration. Trusting in ourselves, our own knowledge and understanding, instead of trusting in God, can be our greatest danger. If we listen as the shepherds did, we may learn of a greater and higher focus: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom He is pleased" (Luke 2:14).

## **IMPACT OF THE MESSAGE**

The angels showed up, spoke, sang, and departed, leaving great agitation behind: "The shepherds began saying to one another, 'Let's go straight to Bethlehem'" (verse 15).

Sometimes we hear a message from heaven, powerful and moving, life-changing and mind-altering, convicting and animating, and leaving us in wonderment. And we prove its moving, life-changing power by a response of action. Whenever we encounter Jesus—for the first time or all over again—whenever we encounter God’s good news of saving grace, we are compelled to act. No matter whether it be alone in a room, watching a movie or at a party with friends, listening in person at church or tuned in to virtual worship: wherever God’s grace confronts us, the Spirit of God demands a decision.

And we know, unmistakably, that making no decision is a decision: “I called and you refused, I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention” (Prov. 1:24, 25). “You neglected all my advice and did not want my rebuke” (verse 25). “The complacency of fools will destroy them” (verse 32).

Divine moments of invitation come to each of us. When we make no decision, we choose to be, and find ourselves right back where we were before God’s visit and message. And a fool’s complacency has been known to lead to dreadful ends, ends much worse than before (see, e.g., Luke 11:20-26; 2 Peter 2:21).

For the shepherds of Bethlehem the angels’ message was life-changing, and they realized it; they could not just sit there tending their flocks. They could not continue doing what they had done all night and for so many other days and nights. They could not stay still. They had to make a move. They told each other, “Let’s go straight to Bethlehem, then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us” (Luke 2:15).

If famous American investor Warren Buffett were to seek you out, give you a guaranteed investment tip, and then tell you, “You’ve got 20 minutes to make the investment or the door will close,” how long would you wait? The shepherds got their tip, their news, their chorus. And acted. Have you ever thought, *What if they had delayed?* Who

knows? Would we ever have heard the news? Might they themselves have missed Jesus? Might they have undone their own status as eyewitnesses?

One of the important aspects of validating the accuracy of an eyewitness testimony is communication. In eyewitness testimony, communication is the ability of an eyewitness to describe an event in a manner that converts the memory’s image into language that transforms into an image in the receptor’s mind. The ability of the eyewitness to articulate descriptive facts determines the reliability of the testimony. So, as you speak it, the spoken word converts the event you witnessed into an image in the receptors of your brain. Think of what could have happened to the truths they experienced that night if they’d kept the story to themselves! Instead they “made known” what they had been told (verse 17). The last we hear and see of them, they’re returning to their duties on the hillside, “glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them” (verse 20).

So what’s your story? Do you too have a story to tell? Have angels visited and sung for you? Have you seen the Baby Jesus? Or maybe the crucified Jesus? You don’t have to be a shepherd. And you don’t need a story like anybody else’s. But if Jesus has shown up for you—in a feeding trough or on the cross—you already know it’s worth telling. If heavenly angels have sung for you, go tell the world, because it’s sure to be good news. 🦋

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<sup>2</sup> Except otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible*, copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. All rights reserved.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898, 1940), p. 47: “Through the silent hours they talked together of the promised Saviour, and prayed for the coming of the King to David’s throne.”

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**Tim Nixon**, a pastor in the state of Michigan, works for the Lake Region Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

# Santa Drives a Cadillac

A little boy  
learns a great  
big lesson.



## CHARLES MILLS

**T** it was the most incredible train set I'd ever seen. The big black steam engine puffed smoke and whistled loud and long as it pulled swaying coal cars and low-riding flatcars around the shiny silver track.

Boxcars lined the siding, and at each crossing lights flashed while little wooden arms dropped down to warn miniature automobiles and their equally miniature drivers to stop. Towns and farms seemed to tremble at the passing of the mighty engine and its line of clinkety-clackety cars. Painted cows watched silently as the train swept past. The Santa Fe Express was coming through!

A tall, well-dressed man stopped and stood beside me. He glanced at the train, the curving lines of track, and the colorful collection of houses and barns. Then he walked over to the salesperson waiting nearby and, in a matter-of-fact voice, said, "I'll take it"

"Well, of course you'll take it," I muttered under my breath. "Who wouldn't? It's just the most wonderful train set in the whole world. Any kid with half a brain would jump clean out of his skin to get it for Christmas." My 10-year-old stomach almost ached with desire.

Just then my father wandered by, arms filled with odd-shaped packages. "Dad!" I yelled, running to meet him. "I know what I want Santa Claus to bring me for Christmas. Look over there!" I motioned toward the table. "Just look at it"

My father stared in the direction I was pointing, then glanced down at me with a questioning frown. "You want a baby doll that wets its pants and cries 'Mama'?"

"No," I grimaced. "To the right. Over to the right!"

"Oh," Dad said, walking toward the glory land of whistles and wheels.

"What a great train set. Wow. It's got everything. Little roads, stops signs, cows, houses. And it's a Lionel, too." He pointed at the boxes stacked beside the display. "They're the best, you know. Been around for years. This is really something."

I trailed behind him as he admired the layout from different angles. "And Dad? See that man over there? He just walked up to the salesperson and said, 'I'll take it.' *You* can do that too. Just go up to him and say, 'I'll take it.'"

"What?" My father looked surprised. "And leave poor old Saint Nick with nothing to lug down our chimney on Christmas Eve? That wouldn't be right?"

OK. So I knew there would be no jolly fat man from the North Pole stopping by our house on Christmas Eve. I knew that was all just kid stuff. "Sure, Dad," I whispered with a wink. "I'll leave this great, incredible, amazing gift for 'Santa' to bring. He knows what I want. He's a very smart man."

Walking away, I glanced back to see my dad bending low, studying the price tag hanging from the little red station house by the freight yard. I smiled. Yup. Santa was no dummy.

I continued shopping, hunting for special gifts for Mom, Dad, and my little sister Susan. Mom was easy. What kitchen wizard could resist a new frying pan? Dad would receive his yearly dose of aftershave—the one with the ship on the bottle.

Susan was another matter. What do you get a girl whose idea of fun is peeling the clothes off of dolls and leaving their tiny, bleached bodies lying around the bedroom like casualties in some cosmic fashion war? I decided that the most loving thing I could do was buy her another doll to undress.

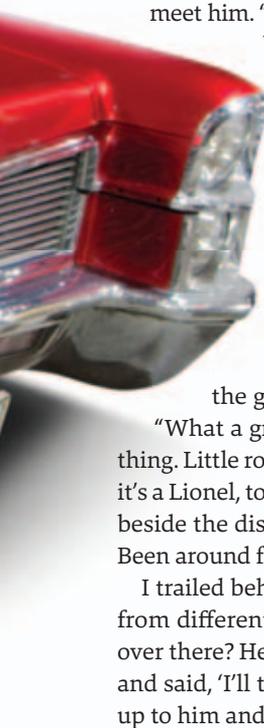
As I shopped, the echo of the train whistle and the rumble of those mighty wheels kept crowding into my thoughts. Yes, sir. I was going to get a Lionel train set in just a few short days. The world was sweet. I Merry Christmas'd everyone in sight.

## CHRISTMAS TRACKS AND CADILLACS

Snow was falling by the time we were ready to leave the shopping plaza. Fluffy flakes floated through the glow of the tall parking lot lights, and somewhere a Salvation Army bell rang into the crisp late-evening air, inviting shoppers to leave a few coins to help the poor.

As I was walking to where we'd parked, a long, sleek automobile pulled up to the stop sign guarding the exit. I glanced over at the driver and froze in my tracks. There, behind the wheel of a brand-new Cadillac, sat Santa Claus—white beard, stocking cap, corncob pipe, the works! His head nodded to the beat of a popular rock tune pounding against the thick, rolled-up windows of his big, cherry-red car.

My mind refused to accept what my eyes were seeing. Where were Dancer and Prancer? Where was Rudolph with his rosy nose? Santa doesn't drive a car! He . . . he drives a sleigh—a fast, gift-



*There, rumbling around on shiny silver tracks,  
was a steam engine pulling a line of boxcars.*

packed, reindeer-powered, starburstin' sleigh! What was Kris Kringle doing in a Cadillac?

In a moment he was gone.

"What's the matter?" Dad asked, noticing my shocked condition. "You look as if you've seen a ghost—which, I may add, is difficult, because there are none."

"Yeah," I muttered. "No ghosts."

There are some images that a 10-year-old boy has in his mind that aren't supposed to be challenged—like how Columbus looked when he stepped on American soil for the first time, the shape of the world's fastest airplane, what it's like to skydive, and how Santa Claus gets from point A to point B.

Yes, I knew Santa wasn't a real person. But if he were real, he'd be flying through the sky in his sleigh, not plowing around a parking lot in a big red Cadillac. That's just not part of the picture. That's not how it's done!

#### **MORNING REVELATION**

Christmas Eve finally arrived. We sang carols, popped corn, ate ice cream, played board games, ate ice cream, wrapped presents, ate ice cream, built a fire in the fireplace, looked at the Christmas tree, and ate ice cream.

When bedtime finally rolled around, I dragged my tired, stuffed body up to my room, eager for the morning to come when we'd open presents. I soon fell into a restless sleep. Steam engines and Cadillacs chased each other around and around in my dreams.

"Wake up, wake up, it's Christmas!" My sister's cheery voice rang out from the doorway. I opened my eyes. Yes. YES! The wait was over. The magic hour had arrived. At long last it was time to graciously accept my wonderful, awesome, exciting, eat-your-heart-out, willing-to-die-for Lionel train set.

I paused at the top of the stairs. *I must present a proper mixture of surprise and pleasure without actually fainting*, I told myself. *Parents like to see their children's faces overflow with looks of joy and wonder on Christmas morning. Yes, I could do that.*

Striking a curious yet innocent pose, I crept down the stairs. Dad was waiting at the bottom,

a broad smile wrinkling his cheeks. "Merry Christmas, Charlie Boy," he said when I reached the landing. "We have a surprise for you."

"Oh?" I gasped. "A surprise for me?"

Dad motioned toward the tree waiting across the living room. There, rumbling around on shiny silver tracks, was a steam engine pulling a line of boxcars.

I rushed across the room and dropped to my knees beside the rolling train. "Oh, Dad," I gushed. "It's . . . it's beautiful! It's just what I . . ."

Wait a minute. There's something wrong here. The engine isn't as magnificent as I remembered. The wheels aren't as detailed; the cars not as colorful and real-looking. Even the little station has painted-on windows, not the cut-out ones I'd seen in the store. This isn't my train. This isn't a Lionel!

"Do you like it?" Dad was saying. "I wanted to buy the one you showed me, but it cost far more than we could afford. With your brothers in college and you and Susie in church school, we don't have any extra money."

I sat in stunned silence.

"Besides," Dad continued. "I think it's a nice set. Look, it came with a couple logs for the flatcar." He paused. "I know it's not a Lionel, but it's a train."

My Christmas dreams had been shattered. First, I see Santa Claus driving a Cadillac, and now this. But a little voice seemed to be speaking to me from somewhere deep in my disappointment. It was saying how 10-year-old boys must sometimes accept what's real even when dreams are more fun, more exciting. Things can't always be the way you want them to be. Maybe a kid like me needs to learn that a father's sacrifice is more valuable than a son's desire.

I watched the little train puff its way around the base of our Christmas tree. The whistle blew long and loud. "Dad," I said, looking into the face of the man who had given me the very best he could, "it's the most wonderful train set in the whole world." ♣

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**Charles Mills**, author, radio show host, and media producer, has published several books, including *Religion in the Real World*, *Refreshed Parables*, and *Surprising Nature*.

# BEARING ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

*Lessons from elementary school*

When I was in elementary school, we had an event that at that time was called “Handicap Day.” Every student chose a physical challenge they didn’t normally experience, and we were expected to complete the entire school day with that challenge.

I chose crutches because I thought that walking on crutches sounded like fun, which wasn’t the point of the exercise. At the time, though, I didn’t get that. To my inexperienced and unaware young mind, it seemed enticing to swing myself back and forth across the classroom.

By the end of the day, though, I realized how very wrong I’d been. Crutches were awful. My arms ached, I had red chafe marks under my arms, and one leg was tired from supporting my full weight. Plus, I hadn’t gotten to play at recess, and carrying things (such as my homework paper to the teacher or my lunch to the microwave) was immensely challenging. I frequently had to rely on classmates—who themselves were managing their own physical challenges—to help me.

There was another side to this experience as well—a very important piece that didn’t strike me until years later: I wasn’t helpless. Yes, I needed help carrying things; and no, I couldn’t walk on my own; but what I *could* do was *see*.

One of my classmates had chosen to be a person who was visually impaired for the day. She wore a blindfold and navigated by touch and sound. From the moment she entered the classroom, the rest of us became hyperaware of where she was and what she was doing, warning her of obstacles in her path, guiding her safely through her day as best we could.

An element of grace was involved in this experience as well. When my crutches got in the way of someone’s wheelchair, the person waited patiently for me to move them. When my blindfolded friend knocked someone’s water off their desk, we simply cleaned it up. We all knew that blunders were bound to happen, because none of us was on familiar ground, and each of us had our own struggles to manage.

As a healthy, able-bodied 11-year-old, I had no idea what it was like to go through a day, let alone an entire lifetime, with such physical challenges. And though I’ll likely never fully understand such experiences of others, I do know what it’s like to do life as a human and to experience the ups and downs that come with it.

Galatians 6:2 instructs us to “bear one another’s burdens.” Hebrews 13:16 says, “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have.”

Despite the challenges life throws at each of us, we’re not helpless. We know everyone around us has their own set of challenges, and maybe we need help with ours, but we can *be* the help to others. We can help guide our loved ones past obstacles they can’t navigate alone and allow them to guide us past ours. And we can extend grace—the same grace God has given to us—in the moments when they need it.

*“Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (1 Peter 4:10). ▀*

\*All Bible texts are from the New Revised Standard Version.

**Becky St. Clair** is a freelance writer living in California with her husband and three children. She has a decade of experience in public relations for the church, and currently writes and copyedits for various church entities around the world.

THE FAITH-FULL LIFE  
BECKY  
ST. CLAIR



DESPITE THE CHALLENGES LIFE THROWS AT EACH OF US, WE’RE NOT HELPLESS.

**HAMILTON WILLIAMS**

**T**he biblical story of Ruth is one of compassion, courage, boldness, and integrity. We certainly need these virtues displayed and portrayed and illustrated for us. Their opposite, a slew of negative traits, seems to be on exhibition today.

**FAMINE**

Ruth's book may have only four chapters, but the legacy of her story endures, and still inspires both men and women.

Ruth was a Moabite woman, a foreigner. Israel's rules and traditions did not encourage intermarriage with foreigners. But this does not stop God from using a foreigner as a part of His plan. Sacred

# NO BREAD IN BETHLEHEM?

Scripture often shows the God of heaven using individuals whose qualification is a heart open to the

divine promptings of the Holy Ghost, rather than belonging to the correct ethnic grouping and family, or subscribing to the appropriate religious persuasion. It is the will and desire of our innermost soul that counts. For God does not see or count as humans do (1 Sam. 16:7). And if He sees that within us is a longing to know and serve Him (2 Chron. 16:9), He finds and engages us as participants in His plans. There is none like Him (Deut. 4:35; 33:26; 1 Sam. 2:2).

Ruth's story takes place in less-than-ideal times. This makes it a story for our own times. There was a famine (Ruth 1:1). Famines come in various ways. And not all famines represent a shortage of material goods, food, and drink: "'Behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord God, 'that I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water but of hearing the words of the Lord'" (Amos 8:11). Those deprived will wander everywhere, "from sea to sea," and, in the desperation that inspires false leads and fake news, "they shall run to and fro," in search of what they once had in easy abundance; they will search with craving for what they miss only now that it is too late. Theirs will be unrewarded desperation: they won't find it (verse 12).

The unrewarded search may be for a word of saving grace because "the harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved" (Jer. 8:20); or it may be a longing for justice; or a famine of decency and respect. It may be a famine of facts and truth; or of integrity and selfless service. All these may be public shortages, societal deficiency in areas crucial to the functioning of a truly free society.





## Now we fathom, somewhat better, the meaning of Jesus' teaching us to say, "Our Father!"

But there may also be other droughts, shortages of which no other has ever heard—famine in your personal life, something you absolutely need to fill a hole, a great void in your soul!

### IRONY

The question is one of absurdity, a dramatic irony: why should there be famine in Bethlehem, when Bethlehem (*bet-lechem* [bait-LEH-hem]) means "house of bread"? Why should it be? How could they speak to us of lack of bread in the house of bread, indeed, the house of food? For throughout the Hebrew Bible *lechem*, being so fundamental, such a staple of meals, comes to stand for far more than the standard products of barley and wheat and other grains. *Lechem* comes to stand for everything that makes the meal: *lechem* is the word for food. Yet in the very place one would expect an abundance of good food there is no bread? It is akin to speaking of food insecurity or starvation in the United States of America, richest country in the world.

And there are more famines of which we may speak: for how often have you been disappointed by a failure of leadership? When you looked for encouragement, direction, protection, help, or simply support, and there was none? You found yourself starving! What do you do then?

One man, of the name Elimelech, took his wife, Naomi, and their sons, Mahlon and Chilion, with him, saying to himself, *We need to get out of here before we die*. So Elimelech took his family to Moab. To escape famine and death.

Leaving home was traumatic. But their comfort was the assurance that they were going to greener grass. Perhaps you, my reader, sometime hauled up your anchorage, to launch out into the deep for something superior, only to find yourself lunging and flailing in a storm fiercer than anything you would ever have experienced if you had stayed close to the shore. You leave Bethlehem's famine and arrive in Moab to have to cope with experiences more dreadful than any you ever encountered in your entire life in Bethlehem!

Granted, you have come to Moab for only a temporary stay, sitting out the famine in Moab, intend-

ing to return home when things look up again in Bethlehem. And by the way, have you consulted with your God about your very sensible move? I hope these parents did, but we aren't told that.

Sometimes the move we want to make seems so logical, so reasonable, that we are already sure of God's response without asking Him: we don't need to ask God; we know what He'll say. Big mistake! Life is complicated enough to completely surprise—or shock—you around the next bend! How dare we try to do our living without consultation with and submission to the one who sees the future! Sometimes God just says to us, "If that is what you want to do, I'll need to let you dance, for only a little while, to the music you create."

Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, stepped out to Moab, intending to step back into Bethlehem soon enough. But things didn't go according to plan. Because you don't come and go, step out of and back into the will of God for your life, stepping back and forth all on your own terms. Our gracious God always wants us back in when we step out. Sometimes He gets to draw us back in, but we come limping, bruised, battered, and bleeding because there is an enemy out there just waiting to have us for lunch.

Elimelech never made it back to the House of Bread! Nor did either of his sons. But one day Naomi and Mahlon's wife (Ruth 4:10) show up in Bethlehem, confirming Ruth's determination to serve Naomi's God, as expressed in Ruth 1:16.

### GLEANING

It's barley harvest time. The God of all compassion, the God of second chances, receives His children back with a party: harvest time is party time, and Ruth, the newbie, will give her dear mother-in-law the dance of her life at this party! She goes out to pick up food left by the combined teams of human harvesters. The law is that they not do a thorough job: they don't harvest the corners; they don't pick up what falls (Lev. 23:22), because there are people with no flourishing field who are willing to work for food; who will follow them to glean the leavings, to clean up the corners and fallen stalks, take them home, separate chaff from barley and

wheat grain; pound and winnow, and save good grain to make themselves good bread, good food.

Ruth turns out to be a “super clean-upper.” Naomi is amazed at the gleanings and the story she brings home: “Where did you work? Blessed be the one who took notice of you” (Ruth 2:19).

Ruth named her answer “chance”: she had “happened to come” to a field belonging to a Mr. Boaz (verse 3). And the man had told her to stay and work—glean—in his field (verse 8); his laborers would be looking out for her, the men had been “commanded . . . not to touch” her; she could drink from the water they had if she felt thirsty (verse 9).

She couldn’t know it, but with all that providence, her gleaning had only just begun. And Mr. Boaz would turn out to be the reason for the rest of it, his initial kindness apparently unrelated to any potential final gleaning that featured in Naomi’s dreams. Boaz, it appears, was kind to Ruth because Boaz was kind.

### **GLEANING , BREAD, AND BOAZ**

But Boaz was also unmarried, and a relative of Elimelech’s, lost to death in Moab, a fact that held consequences. Elimelech had no son to inherit and pass on his legacy: Mahlon and Chilion were as dead as he. But there was an inheritance rule to take care of that, because the God of Israel “is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to Him” (Luke 20:38), meaning that all God’s children, breathing or unconscious, will always matter to Him—“red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in His sight” He does not forget His children as we, His children, do! He remembers us when we forget ourselves. And He remembers Elimelech when we forget him because he had the misfortune to die. If death were to be the end of remembrance, what human history would there be? By way of response, you recommend chiseled stone. But you know, even as you stutter your answer, that were marble memorials to be the measure of our yesterday, there would be precious few, and many of the few most bitterly contested because of what they mean to whom. Either we forget, or we fight over what we remember.

Mostly, though, for humans, mortality’s impenetrable wall blights everything with its termination:

we die and we have perished.

But God so loved Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion, you and me, that Father and Son arranged a pact already standing when the world’s foundations were laid, to pay with His innocence for the mess of human guilt not yet accrued, to establish a provision of life through the eternal Son who would take the oblivion we would choose, so “that whoever believes in Him should not perish” (John 3:16; Matt. 25:34; 1 Peter 1:18-20). The rule was that in the absence of children, brothers—or the closest relative available—should symbolically live the life of the deceased and secure his future by marrying his widow and rearing children who would carry their brother’s name into the future.

There was a name for this noble soul: kinsman-redeemer (Hebrew *go-el* [go-El]) (Ruth 3:11-13; 4:1-12). And reading Ruth and meeting Boaz forces our reluctant heads to recognize the facts we have been so blind to! Now we fathom, somewhat better, the meaning of Jesus’ teaching us to say, “Our Father!” “Our Father!” That is what we ought to say (Matt. 6:9). Because God our Father sends us His Son to be our Kinsman-Redeemer. We are dead and have no future. But we are family, and He, the dedicated Brother, comes to resurrect our name and guarantee a future inheritance. And He will do everything it takes.

So does Boaz, while teaching us one more compelling lesson: There is a rule. And he obeys the rule. But there is no grudging obedience here, only a heart of love. Before the matter of a *go-el* arose, Boaz was gracious. He was kind to Ruth because he is kind. The rules he followed explained his behavior, even the strange behaviors of that night at the threshing floor.\* And so it is with the God who is our Father. His rules are our guide, explaining the behavior a loving God expects and in which He Himself engages. We may understand later, but we’re safe obeying all along. Things may vary from time to time in Bethlehem, but in God’s Bethlehem there will always be great gleanings and a Kinsman-Redeemer—if we will have it on our Father’s terms. ▀

\* As laid out in the book of Ruth’s third chapter.

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**Hamilton Williams** pastors the Beacon Light Seventh-day Adventist Church in Phoenix, Arizona, United States.



STUDIO-ANNIKA / ISTOCK / GETTY IMAGES

## WHAT SHALL I GIVE HIM AT CHRISTMAS?

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*Honoring our Savior  
with the best possible gift*

**T**he Lord Jesus Christ came to our world as a helpless babe. He was born in Bethlehem, and the angel announced to the shepherds as they watched over their flocks by night, “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

### TO GIVE HIS ALL FOR US

The Redeemer of the world might have come attended by ten thousand times ten thousand and

thousands of thousands of angels; but instead of this He clothed his divinity with humanity, made Himself of no reputation, took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of sinful flesh. For verily He took not on Him the nature of angels, but He took on Him the seed of Abraham. For it became Him for whom are all things, and by whom all things consist, in bringing many sons and daughters unto glory, to make the Captain of their salvation perfect through suffering. . . .

Jesus, the world’s Redeemer, submitted to humiliation that we might have hope. For our sake He became poor, that through His merits we might be entitled to imperishable riches. . . . Let us look upon the Majesty of heaven as He shrouded his glory in the form of a child, and was cradled in a manger. But though He was so lowly born, so humbly circumstanced, angels bowed in adoration before the Babe of Bethlehem, without forfeiting their place in the courts of God or marring their allegiance to the Deity.

The Babe of Bethlehem, though the King of glory, was not entrusted to wealthy parents. His was a lowly lot. When presented in the temple, his parents could not offer anything but the offering of the poor—a pair of turtle doves or young pigeons. This offering was made in behalf of the child Jesus; yet when Simeon took Him in his arms, the Holy Spirit fell upon him, and he knew the Lord’s Anointed, and he blessed God, and said, “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all

people; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.”

### **A TIMELESS STORY**

His divinity veiled in humanity, Jesus grew up as a child, and it is written of Him that “the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him.” . . .

The story of the birth and childhood of Jesus never loses its fragrance and interest, and it should be often repeated to the children and youth. Jesus was ever in sympathy with all phases of the life of childhood and youth. . . . His compassionate voice was heard saying, “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” He took the children in His arms, and blessed them, and spoke words of encouragement and sympathy to the mothers, and both mothers and children returned to their homes strengthened and blessed by the divine love of the Master. They loved Jesus, and often repeated to others the story of their visit. They told how the disciples had forbidden them, but how the Lord had had compassion upon them. . . .

The Lord will give to the praying mother the wisdom and grace she needs to instruct and interest her little ones in the precious old story of the babe born in Bethlehem, who is indeed the hope of the world.

### **NO PARTIAL OR HALF-HEARTED GIFTS**

Jesus is our Saviour, our Redeemer, our wisdom, our sanctification, our righteousness. . . . It is the first duty of parents to make the precious truths of salvation very plain and simple and attractive to their children. . . . The first precept from their earliest years should be, Give your heart to Jesus; live to please Him. Do not live simply to amuse and gratify yourself; but live to honor Jesus, who has loved you, and given Himself for you. Were parents in earnest in thus educating their little ones, there would be a great company of children in the army of the Lord. They would then make sacrifices for Jesus’ sake, and desire to give, not only their little gifts of love, but their whole hearts to Jesus.

We should bring gifts to Jesus, as did the wise men when they found the Lord of glory. They had been studying the prophecies, and they knew that the time was fulfilled, and that Jesus had come to be the Saviour of men. Guided by a star, they journeyed to

## **The Babe of Bethlehem, though the King of glory, was not entrusted to wealthy parents.**

Jerusalem, and all along the way they were inquiring, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.” “And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.”

### **A GOOD EXAMPLE**

The wise men have left us an example of what we should do. Jesus should be the object of our adoration, the recipient of our gifts. It is not man, but our Redeemer, that should be honored. To Him we should offer our praise and gifts and treasures; but instead of this, the world sets its treasures flowing in the channel of self-gratification, and to the honor of men. Christmas gifts are bestowed on our children, on our friends and relatives, and few think of what they can do to show their love and gratitude to God for His great love and compassion upon them.

In celebrating Christmas, fathers, mothers, children, and friends are diverted from the great object to which the custom is attributed. They give their whole attention to the bestowal of gifts upon one another, and their minds are turned away from the contemplation of the Source of all their blessings both spiritual and temporal. In their attention to gifts and honors bestowed upon themselves or their friends, Jesus is unhonored and forgotten. Parents should seek to teach their children to honor Jesus. They should be instructed how He came to the world to bring light, to shine amid the moral darkness of the world. They should be impressed with the fact that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” ♣

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Seventh-day Adventists believe that **Ellen G. White** (1827-1915) exercised the biblical gift of prophecy during more than 70 years of public ministry. This excerpt was taken from *The Bible Echo*, December 15, 1892.

From left: Maureen Faywana Heavens Little; Pablo with his dog, Tequila; and Treveen with her dog, Ella



## PABLO'S JOURNEY TO JESUS

---

*It started with two dogs.*

**P**ablo Meza arrived in Jamaica from Venezuela on April 4, 1996. Then in 2013 Pablo and his wife, Adriana, became our neighbors, and I welcomed them with homemade corn bread. Our interactions after that were sporadic.

Then one night in January 2021 my daughter Treveen's dog, Ella—a little black shih tzu—kept me awake with incessant barking most of the night. Several times I got up and looked through the windows, but I could see nothing wrong.

The following morning Ella came into my bedroom and went over to the door that leads to the balcony and started barking again. When I stepped outside, I saw that my neighbor's

dog, Tequila, a large black-and-brown rottweiler, had fallen into the bushes and needed to be rescued.

I didn't have a phone number for Pablo, Tequila's owner, so Treveen and I went next door to his house and knocked on the door. He answered, and I alerted him of his dog's dilemma. After he had freed her from the bushes, I asked him for his phone number so I could easily reach him in the future.

After that, I kept in touch with Pablo via WhatsApp, direct calls, and face-to-face conversations. I sent him religious and inspirational material. I also invited him to join the young adult Sabbath School class at the Andrews Memorial

## The one most needing to be rescued wasn't so much Pablo's dog, Tequila, but Pablo—who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, was rescued for God's kingdom.

Seventh-day Adventist Church, of which my daughter is the leader. He accepted and became a regular attendee.

### **BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP**

Pablo enjoyed the services. After some months I told him about our church's Spanish congregation and suggested he might want to check it out. Rose Cameron, a member of the Spanish congregation, promised to watch out for him.

Pablo and I regularly shared different food dishes we'd prepare, such as lasagna, as well as produce from our gardens, including avocados, peaches, bananas, and plantains. We became friends and discussed many things, both happy and sad—such as his mother's birthday party and his brother's illness and subsequent death.

As Pablo became more comfortable with our church services, he began actively participating in Sabbath School activities as well as in prayer meetings and worship services. He even invited his daughter, Michelle, to attend. Pablo often expressed his delight and appreciation for my serendipitous intervention in his life.

Pablo and all his family had been born and raised in another church denomination. After moving to Jamaica, he attended services at a couple different churches. God, however, was about to change that trajectory.

### **A LIFE-ALTERING DECISION**

Mickel Allen, a Bible worker with the Spanish congregation, studied the Bible with Pablo, and on August 28, 2021, Pablo shared the good news: "I'm going to get baptized into the Adventist Church!" I was ecstatic. He had one caveat, however—he wanted to be baptized in a river near our home community.



Pastor Adrian Johnson baptizes Pablo Meza in the Plantain Gardens River. [Courtesy of the author]

On September 9, 2021—his daughter, Michelle's, birthday—Pablo was baptized in the Plantain Gardens River by Pastor Adrian Johnson, with the support of his family. Pablo Meza's joy is full!

### **GOD USES EVEN DOGS**

In the Bible God enabled a donkey to speak (see Num. 22:21-35). In January 2021 God used two dogs, Ella and Tequila, to reach Pablo. The one most needing to be rescued wasn't so much Tequila but Pablo—who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, was rescued for God's kingdom. Oh, what rejoicing there must be in heaven!

Thank You, Lord, for using dogs to be part of Your plan to share the gospel message with Pablo! 🐾

To view a video of Meza's baptism, go to <https://vimeo.com/639576487/6592071226>.

**Maureen Faywana Heavens Little** is a social worker and a university lecturer living in Kingston, Jamaica. She and her husband, Trevor, have three adult children and a granddaughter, Safiya.



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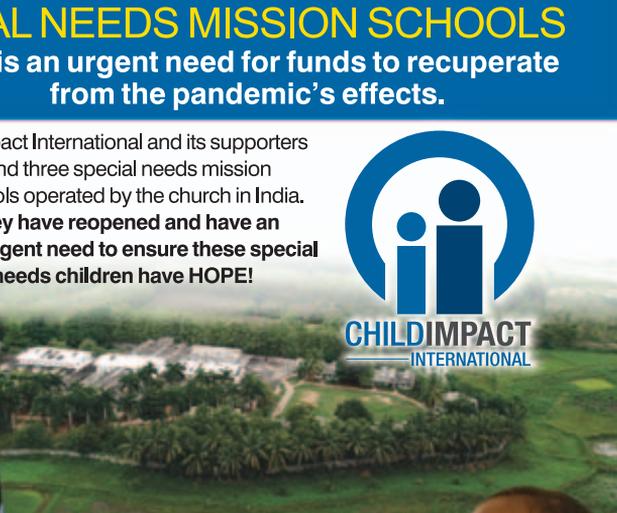
# BLIND, DEAF & ORPHANS

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Child Impact International and its supporters totally fund three special needs mission schools operated by the church in India.

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### **Kollegal Speech & Hearing School**

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### **Sunrise Home**

Sunrise Home was established to be a home for children who have sadly been abandoned. Over 100 children reside here and recently, the government allowed the intake of 40 Covid orphans who lost their parents to the pandemic. Funds will provide additional resources.

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PETER N. LANDLESS ZENO L. CHARLES-MARCEL

## VIOLENCE

*What's fueling the fire?*

**Q:** My normally peaceful, slender cousin joined an extreme survival training group in 2019. He's now emaciated and has become violent. He's a different person! Could this be brainwashing?

**A:** Your question is disturbing on many levels, and we seriously recommend urgent professional intervention.

Extremism and fanaticism thrive in times of uncertainty and perceived threat, and there's growing evidence that uncertainty correlates with and quite possibly is a precondition for extremism.<sup>1</sup> Supportive communities ease internal tension and provide "safe havens" where extremism may flourish. We have no expertise in "brainwashing," but we wish to alert you to an important yet underappreciated contribution to violent behaviors.

It may be obvious, but for normal body function good nutrition is essential and is important for recovering from, preventing, and mitigating conditions caused by other factors. Even subtle nutritional deficiencies may lead to cellular and systemic biochemical abnormalities that preclude normal or optimal physical and mental function. Recent research is uncovering relationships between nutrition and mental well-being; there's even a new discipline called nutritional psychiatry.<sup>2</sup> Levels of specific nutrients correlate with mood, behavior, sleep patterns, and responses to physical and mental stress. Nutrient levels also affect brain development and the severity of brain and psychological disorders. What you eat affects how you think.

Food-mind interactions have intrigued researchers for many years. Researchers have concluded that nutritional factors may even cause delinquent and violent behavior. Multiple studies confirm that among incarcerated adolescents and adults, removing "junk food" and replacing it (or improving it through supplementation) significantly decreases within-institution delinquency. Studies

in California, New York, Virginia, and Oklahoma all show that serious offenses are more likely to occur among adolescents and adults with dietary inadequacies, and that appropriate dietary intervention was *always* followed by less-violent and nonviolent offenses.<sup>3</sup>

The main nutritional factors cluster among the water-soluble B vitamins, especially thiamin (B<sub>1</sub>), pyridoxine (B<sub>6</sub>), and folate (B<sub>9</sub>), and the omega-3 fatty acids. Interestingly, the demographic groups at highest risk of B-vitamin deficiencies measured in blood samples obtained through population studies of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are people of color, teenagers, and biological males—a striking similarity to the demographics of those charged with violent crimes in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

It's a special blessing and assurance that the Judge of the universe takes into account all of one's life's course. Your cousin probably has multiple issues that feed his new behavior; we don't know him and can only scratch the surface here. Yet you (and he) can still have hope. A thorough, professional, wholistic, nonjudgmental approach is highly recommended. Times may be uncertain, but there's certainty found in the God of Creation and His Word.

Pray fervently for your relative. Without condoning his behavior, surround him with love and compassion, and encourage him to get professional help—including an improved dietary plan. 🍌

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 3 (2013): 407-418.

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 76 (2017): 427-436.

<sup>3</sup> California Association of Collaborative Courts, 2020 Conference on Crime and Delinquency, Stephen J. Schoenthaler, "The Effect of Nutrition on Crime and Delinquency," <https://www.ca2c.org/handouts/Session%2025.%202020%20Nutrition%20and%20Crime.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> *Science* 325 (2009): 1614-1619.

**Peter N. Landless**, a board-certified nuclear cardiologist, is director of Adventist Health Ministries at the General Conference. **Zeno L. Charles-Marcel**, a board-certified internist, is an associate director of Adventist Health Ministries at the General Conference.



Hatcher Pass, near Palmer, Alaska, October 2021

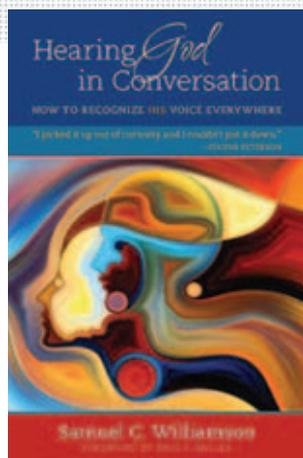
Photo credit: Celesta Babb, pastor, North Pole Delta Junction, Barrow, Alaska.



The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand.

(Psalm 37:23-24)

# CLOSER LOOK



## Hearing God in Conversation: How to Recognize His Voice Everywhere

Samuel Williamson, *Hearing God in Conversation: How to Recognize His Voice Everywhere* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2016), 216 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8254-4424-1; available on Amazon; reviewed by Vanesa Pizzuto.

**L**ike fingerprints, human voices are unique. Each has distinct acoustic features that allow you to recognize it from a myriad of other voices: You walk into a busy café to meet a friend; as you open the door, a cacophony of sounds welcomes you—background music, people chatting, clattering cups and saucers; someone calls out, “Hey, I’m over here!” You immediately know that it’s your friend. You recognize him, even shouting from behind you, because you are familiar with his voice.

As Christians we believe that God speaks to people. But what does God sound like? How can we know if we are hearing God’s voice or our own imagination? If you have ever asked yourself these questions, you should enjoy Samuel Williamson’s book. *Hearing God in Conversation: How to Recognize His Voice Everywhere* is both refreshingly practical and theologically balanced. Williamson makes it clear, from the early chapters, that conversation *is* the point. Learning

## Enjoying the Bible: Literary Approaches to Loving the Scriptures

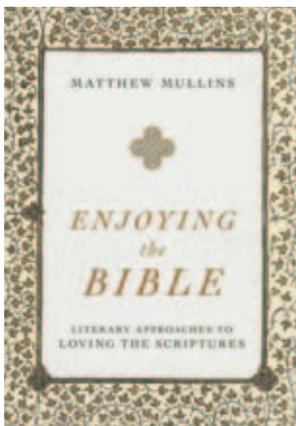
Matthew Mullins, *Enjoying the Bible: Literary Approaches to Loving the Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 224 pages, US\$22.99. Reviewed by Gerald A. Klingbeil, associate editor, Adventist Review Ministries.

**M**atthew Mullins, associate professor of English and history of ideas at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, offers in this volume a practical guide to learning how to read and love poetry, which, he suggests, will help readers of the Bible to learn to read and love God’s Word even more. *Enjoying the Bible* reminds us, personally and collectively, of the moment Scripture suddenly becomes meaningful to us as we enjoy engaging the mind and emotions of the Creator and Revelator instead of trying to simply gain information and knowledge. It leaves us wondering, *When last did I read Scripture and truly enjoyed it—not as part of preparing for a sermon, an article, or a Sabbath School presentation, but just relishing its beauty, simplicity, depth, and wonder?*

The volume contains 12 chapters covering such

to hear God’s voice is about deepening a relationship, not using God as a celestial GPS. “What if God wants to converse with us more than He wants to direct or advise us?” Williamson wonders.

In the central part of the book Williamson shares practical guidelines for recognizing God’s voice, sprinkled with his own stories of failure and success. This section is a true gold mine! Let me share just a nugget: according to Williamson, we often fail to recognize God’s voice because it sounds different than we expect. God can speak through a simple impression or an inspired thought. However, because there are no special effects, no lightning or thunder, we tend to dismiss it. Oddly, we



topics as “How Reading Literature Became a Quest for Meaning,” “The Bible as Literature,” “Meaning Is More Than Message,” “Reading With Our Guts,” “Delight and Instruction,” and “Why We Worship.” It moves to make the case for “changing our approach,” followed by three practical chapters suggesting strategies to discover the “general sense” of a passage, its “central emotion,” and the “formal means” used to communicate. I felt that chapter 12, “A Short Compendium of Forms,” introducing readers to typical characteristics of biblical literature (such as parallelism, imagery, simile, metaphor, metonymy, etc.), would have worked better as an appendix following and not preceding the conclusion.

The volume contains a substantial introduction and conclusion, as well as an “afterword” that

also tend to dismiss His voice because it is kinder than we expect. “Unlike the other voices that we hear, which shout, bully, and badger, God wants to woo us rather than coerce us,” says Williamson. Thus, learning to recognize God’s voice involves silencing the inner critic. It involves healing emotionally and opening the heart to God’s compassion, because He “compels but doesn’t coerce, He speaks but does not overwhelm.”

Williamson concludes his book with a useful appendix entitled “Questionable and Excessive Practices.” Faithful to the accountability and wisdom that he calls for throughout the book, Williamson highlights some common pitfalls to avoid, such as self-importance, overspiritualizing decision-making, syncretism, etc.

Overall, this is a very useful and well-thought-out

emphasizes the importance of reading aloud when we are alone as part of the overall strategy of slowing down as we engage with God’s Word.

Most chapters conclude with “exercises”—suggestions to put into practice something learned or introduced in the chapter. In other places Mullins includes “Questions for Review.” The book concludes with seven reading practices as examples of the type of reading that will lead to true enjoyment (and engagement) with the Word.

*Enjoying the Bible* offers a helpful introduction to the literary beauty of the written Word. I enjoyed reading it and will practice in my own engagement with Scripture a number of Mullins’ suggestions. Let me leave the final words to the author: “The basic argument of this book is that much of the Bible is written to be enjoyed. The implication is that if reading the Bible does not exact pleasure in you, then you may not understand what you have read. By ‘understand’ here I don’t mean that you simply realize you *should* be comforted as a result of reading Psalm 23. I mean that the act of reading Psalm 23 should literally make you feel comforted. The Bible is our most direct access to God’s words—it was written not only to convey information about Him but also to provide a way for us to commune with Him, to meet Him in His Word” (p. xi).<sup>♣</sup>

book. There are a few caveats, though. Williamson uses words like an impressionist artist. There is a deliberate bluntness of stroke, intended to paint a more vivid picture, which could make some readers uneasy. While he comes from a different Christian tradition, most of his suggestions are extremely helpful. Finally, I found the cover of the book somewhat misleading. But after overcoming my initial apprehension, I recognized the wisdom in that idiom “Never judge a book by its cover.”

“God calls to each of us, ‘Walk with Me,’” says Williamson. “Let’s respond to His invitation for intimacy, connection, and conversation.”<sup>♣</sup>

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**Vanessa Pizzuto**, Latina abroad, freelance communications specialist, works for the Trans-European Division. Her latest book, *No Fears, No Chains* (IADPA), is a daily devotional for women seeking to live with freedom and emotional abundance.

## THE SHEPHERDS SPEAK

We may still share the thrill.

We know the shepherds' Christmas story: living out in fields near that now-famous stable; being terrified by the bright, heaven-appointed spokes-angel, who tried to calm them with "Do not be afraid!"; being overwhelmed by an army of glory first hiding in the night, then, when they could restrain themselves no longer, breaking out of the gloom into radiant song and splendor, crying out, "Glory to God in the highest heaven; and greetings of peace to earthlings who receive His favor."

We know that thereafter, Bethlehem's original pastor group could not hold their silence any better than the angel chorale had harnessed theirs. Everyone everywhere had to hear.

This time around, it's the turn of shepherds you may personally know, inheritors of the Bethlehem legacy. They share with us their own greetings of peace, their own memories of, and humble reflections on, that unparalleled event. You know them as pastors because "pastor," the Latin word for "shepherd," is the title they now bear. So here, then, are the voices of shepherds of our time, pastors from around the world, recalling, reflecting, commenting on that splended night:

**PASTOR GLENN**—Four months of lockdown [in Australia]—isolated to my home and essential services. Missing family, friends, colleagues . . . But Jesus came to a world, locked in sin, for 33 years without direct contact with God. Jesus chose to die and conquer sin and get me out of lockdowns forever! That's good news!

**PASTOR LUIS**—Recently, shopping for a few holiday decorations, my wife and I learned that Christmas decorations have been out since July! Yes, 2021 has been difficult; we need hope. And we find it in Jesus, the light that shines in the darkness (Isa. 9:2).

**PASTOR GERALD**—"Fear not!" was the first thing the shepherds heard from jubilant angelic hosts bringing them good news. God continues to mouth, whisper, and sometimes even shout to us, "Fear not!" as we await the glorious appearing of our Savior. "Fear not" is always good news.

**PASTOR WASHINGTON**—Emmanuel—"God with us"—is one of Jesus' most powerful and majestic names. God's Son was manifested in the flesh to reveal the Father and to redeem our fallen world.

What an amazing gift to humanity!

**PASTOR STEPHEN**—"A child is born": words that count because of later words—"He is risen!" May this gift of a child victorious over death and sin uplift, enthuse, and fill you with hope.

**PASTOR MARIO**—God's greatest gift to us is Jesus Christ. His birth, death, and resurrection made our salvation possible. This is good news—to share with everyone!

**PASTOR RICHIE**—The Prince of unlimited power became a baby, choosing humanity with all its vulnerabilities, to provide us an escape from the clutches of sin. This is the strongest reason I believe in Jesus . . . I simply cannot find that kind of love anywhere else.

**PASTOR HENSLEY G.**—The first Christmas: gatherings of people from all walks of life: lowly shepherds, Gentile kings, barren Elizabeth, priest Zach, prophet Anna, ancient Simeon. Today we see that beautiful picture again when families gather at Christmastime.



**PASTOR CLINTON**—Christmas means family, and sharing Jesus!

**PASTOR ROBERT**—An opportunity for personal focus on, and sharing with others about Jesus choosing humanity and death to give us eternal life.

**PASTOR JD**—My Savior, in a feeding trough. But from this straw the Light of the world shines brighter than a thousand suns. Let us share His light, the treasure in the trough, joining the heralding angels to sing “Glory to God!”

**PASTOR MELINDA**—Greetings all, or as we say at Christmastime in Samoa, “*Manuia le Kirismasi.*” Although many have dealt with sorrow this year, I am confident that God will bring us comfort as we venture into this holiday season and new year. May you always keep God first: “*Fa’amuamua le Atua.*”

**Because of a baby in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes, we now have a Friend and a Savior in heaven. Go, tell the world!**

—**PASTOR HENSLEY M.**

**PASTOR ADRIENNE**—Wow! Wow, WOW! Let me tell you . . . Listen, listen to me . . . I just *saw* the Messiah! The Messiah is here! Did you hear me? He will save us! Good news, good news . . . Oh, my heart is bursting with joy! Hallelujah! We have waited for so long, but take hope, my friend, and find courage: the Messiah is born!

**PASTOR KYOSHIN**—At Christmas we celebrate the life of humility and sacrifice that Jesus lived for us. Born in a manger, He embodied supreme love and kindness. That power resides in humility, was shown

and declared once and for all. As His followers we are called to live just such a life on this earth.

**PASTOR ASHIA**—He is here! The Messiah—the one the ancients spoke of! HE IS HERE! Four hundred years of silence, 400 years of waiting; living under Roman tyranny! Our Savior has come to rescue us!

**PASTOR MIKAELA**—I still ask the others if we were dreaming. I replay that moment over and over, the bright sky, the music—oh, the music! The Messiah is here, the promised one, the one I first heard about from my grandmother. His name is Jesus. You’ve just got to meet Him!

**PASTOR EXTON**—The Christmas season takes us back to a significant beginning when God unwrapped His greatest gift, Jesus Christ, given to redeem a sin-trapped world. Our greatest response should be to glorify His provision and magnify His purpose in our lives.

**PASTOR MARCOS**—The baby has no form or comeliness; no beauty that we should desire Him. Bound to be despised and rejected, a stumbling block and foolishness. And yet, in His light we see light. Let us bask in it.

**PASTORAL TEAM WILLIE AND ELAINE**—Luke 2:11 proclaims: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” (KJV). During this Christmas season may we be reminded not only of His birth, but also that He is coming very soon to give us peace forevermore!

**PASTOR ALEX**—God gave us His best, Jesus, when we were at our worst. And that gift is still ours. So, come, reflect on the gracious gift we have in God’s only begotten Son; come, let us adore Him, Christ our Lord. ♠

## THE ABSCISSION PRINCIPLE

I have always enjoyed autumn weather. In Maryland, where we currently live, autumn offers a welcome reprieve from hot, humid summer days. The mighty maple and oak trees in our neighborhood present a colorful spectacle of green, yellow, red, and beige leaves. As I walk through one of our woodland neighborhood parks I relish the crunchy sounds my feet make as I walk through piles of leaves. I remember the exhilaration I felt as a child jumping into huge leaf piles and dumping leaves on my brother.

I recently learned a new word. *Abscission* describes the act of cutting off something. In biology it is used to describe the shedding of leaves, flowers, and fruit following the formation of an abscission layer.\* The leaves of trees contain three main pigments: carotene, anthocyanin, and the photosynthetic pigment, chlorophyll, which helps the plant to synthesize energy from the sun. Since chlorophyll is the most abundant pigment, leaves are generally green.

But there is another important chemical in leaves called auxin. Auxin controls a special band of cells at the base of each leaf that is called the abscission layer. The shorter autumn days cause the leaf to produce less auxin, which in turn allows the abscission layer to grow and cut off the circulation of water, nutrients, and sugar to the leaf. Since chlorophyll disintegrates rapidly, the leaf's other pigments become more visible, resulting in the yellow and red hues we love.

Abscission is part of God's design to keep trees healthy and prepared for winter. No fungus or infection can enter the tree because of the abscission layer. Water and nutrients are stored in areas that cannot easily be affected by frost. Letting go often results in real growth.

Autumn is a good moment to consider the important things in our lives. We mostly live in add-on mode. Our lives get fuller and fuller. Our calendars don't show many empty spaces. We live from project to project, or, in my role as an editor, from deadline to deadline. Incessive busyness and distraction mark our times. Whether virtually or in the real life separate from our screens, we run and rush, driven by ambition or duty or necessity.

Falling leaves remind us to refocus on first things. What is important and what can be reduced or even cut off? Where can we find shelter from our busyness and regain strength, energy, and vision? What is life-giving to me, and how can I focus on those relationships in my life that I need and want to grow?

Sometimes these questions result in radical change. Others choose to reduce gradually. Like a tree preparing for winter and a new life cycle of another spring and summer, we too are invited to practice the abscission principle in order to remember, once again, what really counts. David's words encouraging his people to build the temple summarize it well: "Now set your mind and heart to seek the Lord your God" (1 Chron. 22:19, NRSV).<sup>†</sup>

\*Cf. "Curiosities: Why Do Leaves Change Color in the Fall?" *University of Wisconsin-Madison News*, Oct. 11, 2007, online at <https://news.wisc.edu/curiosities-why-do-leaves-change-color-in-the-fall/>.

Gerald A. Klingbeil serves as an associate editor of Adventist Review Ministries.

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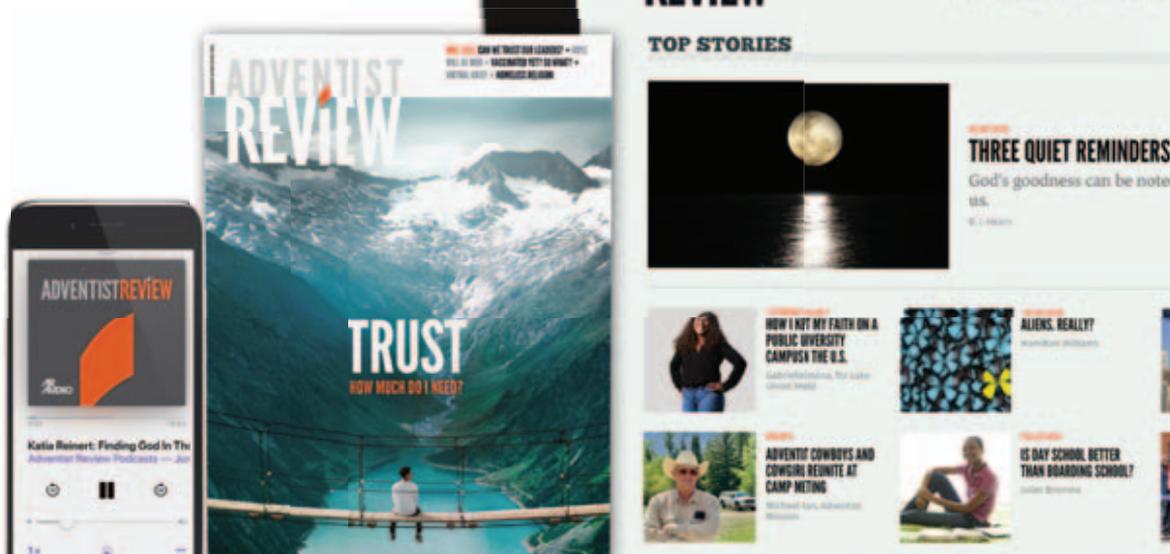
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