Adventist mission pilot Roberts dies in plane accident in Indonesia

An Adventist Aviation-Indonesia (AAI) mission plane piloted by veteran pilot Bob Roberts crashed upon takeoff this morning at the AAI headquarters in Papua, claiming his life as well as those of several passengers on board.

Witnesses said that the plane, a Quest Kodiak, appeared to have trouble lifting off just before it slammed into a bridge at the end of the runway. An official cause has yet to be determined by crash site investigators.

Roberts' work included delivering food, medicine and urgently needed supplies as well as transporting sick and needy passengers to and from the many isolated mountain villages of Papua. He was well known throughout the islands and had flown more than a thousand relief flights.

Roberts and his wife Jan, originally from the United States, have served AAI for more than 20 years in Papua. The couple previously served as missionaries in the African countries of Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zaire (now Congo) from 1976 to 1992. They have three grown children.

"He died doing what he loved best," Jan said.

Roberts is remembered by Darron Boyd, Adventist Mission and Evangelism coordinator in Papua, as someone who brought hope in his small aircraft to those in remote areas. Despite the often extreme terrain conditions that made his work challenging, Roberts had a love for his mission. "If they're really sick…, we fly them for free," he said in an Adventist Mission video report last year. "Those are the kind of things that make you glad you're a mission pilot. Helping people who would not have hope otherwise. That's why we're here."

Jonathan Kuntaraf, director of the Adventist world church's Sabbath School and Personal Ministries department said he was saddened by the death of Roberts, who was serving in his home country. "He and his wife are very dedicated people. Together we worked to raise money for the education of underprivileged children in Papua. Please pray for the family during this challenging and difficult time."

To see the feature video of Bob's mission work in Papua, visit this link and click on Called to Fly: www.adventistmission.org/dvd.

The Indonesian state of Papua is home to 2 million people and 20 language groups. It is also home to the East Indonesia Union Conference, which has 763 churches and more than 101,000 church members.
Decision to suspend “The Record Keeper” comes with strong endorsement for creative outreach

Seventh-day Adventist world church leadership today announced their decision to suspend the release of the 11-episode series called “The Record Keeper,” but agreed to explore the possibility of supporting similar creative outreach projects.

The decision came after carefully reviewing the Web series, which dramatizes the epic struggle between good and evil. Seventh-day Adventist church leaders from different parts of the world and the world headquarters evaluated the series, participated in the discussions and the decision-making process.

“Seventh-day Adventist world church leadership is committed to using and developing creative methods of outreach that are faithful to Scripture and Seventh-day Adventist ideals to reach segments of the population that will never be impacted by traditional evangelism,” said world church president, Ted N. C. Wilson.

“The Record Keeper” follows the story of Cadan and Larus, two angels who struggle to maintain their friendship after universal civil war breaks out. Meanwhile, another angel, Raina, pursues a record of events while trying to make sense of the chaos.

Seventh-day Adventist Church theology sees the controversy between good and evil as central to understanding the turmoil witnessed throughout history and evident in the world today.

The church’s Biblical Research Institute provided a biblical analysis of some of the problematic and theologically inaccurate matters raised in the Web series. In addition, church leaders were looking for a much stronger portrayal of the love of God, the creation of a perfect world, the Plan of Salvation and the final renewal of heaven and earth as recorded in the Bible.

While Bible studies were to be prepared to accompany the series and encourage further study, according to the Biblical Research Institute, the content of “The Record Keeper” would have put the church in the difficult position of endorsing the misrepresentation of biblical truth while at the same time offering studies that conflicted with the dramatic presentations. This would invite misunderstandings and cause confusion.

Church leaders at the world headquarters expressed their continued desire to produce creative material that would be in harmony with Scripture and capture the attention of people seeking divine truth.

Adventist Church joins amicus brief in support of ‘parsonage allowance’

The Seventh-day Adventist Church joined an amicus brief filed today in a United States Federal Court of Appeals challenging a November ruling that the “parsonage exemption” is unconstitutional.

The Adventist Church joined in the “friend-of-the-court” brief to the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals in
Chicago, said Todd McFarland, an associate general counsel for the Seventh-day Adventist Church headquarters.

The brief was led by Church Alliance, which is a coalition of more than 30 denominations that work together on common legislative and legal issues, primarily dealing with employee benefits, McFarland said.

The group is challenging a November ruling by a U.S. district judge that the clergy exemption for paying taxes on income designated for housing is unconstitutional.

Adventist Church leaders say that pastors may make a decent living wage on a "base pay" basis, but depending on where they live, their cost of living adjustments are usually drastically behind and not commensurate. The parsonage exclusion gives them the ability to deduct their housing expenses from their taxable income.

In her ruling, Judge Barbara Crabb said the parsonage exemption violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which prohibits Congress from making a law "respecting an establishment of religion."

The parsonage exemption, Crabb said, benefits "religious persons and no one else, even though doing so is not necessary to alleviate a special burden on religious exercise."

In an interview, McFarland said the religious coalition doesn't believe the exemption violates the Establishment Clause, noting that the tax code contains other similar exemptions.

“This exemption in fact serves to strengthen the separation between church and state by keeping the government out of church decisions, ecclesiastical matters, and treats all churches and religions the same,” McFarland said.

Other exemptions, McFarland said, include teachers and professors working for educational institutions, military personnel, employee lodging for the convenience of the employer, as well as certain tax-payers living abroad.

Judge Crabb’s November decision was the result of a suit brought by the Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation, which advocates for the separation of church and state. The foundation sued the U.S. Treasury secretary and Internal Revenue Service commissioner over the exemption, which was passed by Congress in 1954. Section 107 of the Internal Revenue Code permits a “minister of the gospel” to designate some compensation as a housing allowance and exempt it from income tax.

Her ruling, which she said would not be enforced pending appeal, has the potential to dramatically impact how religious groups compensate their ministers. Many have long depended on the tax benefit for the compensation package for their clergy in the United States.

Adventist Church officials in North America said the parsonage allowance significantly helps pastors to be able to live and minister in the large urban centers where the most people live.

"Not having this benefit would drastically impact ministry, especially for the pastors living in these..."
large people centers, which are high cost of living areas,” said Ivan Williams, director of the Ministerial Department for the Adventist Church’s North American Division.

McFarland, the denomination’s attorney, estimated the after-tax benefit to Adventist ministers is between 5 and 10 percent of their total compensation package.

McFarland said he didn’t think the matter was likely to end with the 7th Circuit’s decision.

“We anticipate this case to potentially end up in the U.S. Supreme Court,” he said. “Both sides have too much at stake and are too invested in this. Whoever loses is going to want to see it reviewed at a higher level.”

Black vegetarians at lower risk for heart disease, Adventist health study says

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Creative outreach projects highlighted at Council on Evangelism and Witness

Top regional leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist world church heard urban evangelism updates and examples of creative outreach yesterday during the Council on Evangelism and Witness report to Spring Meeting.

During a presentation led by Mike Ryan, a general vice president of the Adventist world church, and David Trim, director of the church's Office of Archives, Statistics and Research, several division presidents offered updates on the Mission to the Cities initiative.

Trim noted that there are 396 people per Adventist worldwide. That ratio, he said, jumps to 547 people per Adventist in urban regions. Some cities of a million or more fare much worse, while Lusaka, Zambia is a bright spot, with the best population-to-member ratio of any large city worldwide—one Adventist per 19 people.

Paul Ratsara, president of the church's Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, which oversees Zambia, said small groups are the key to evangelism in the region. "If we are not reaching the grassroots, then we are just talking to ourselves," he said.

The church’s South American Division, under the leadership of President Erton Kohler, is taking a similar approach. The region's goal is to plant an Adventist church in every one of nearly 7,000 neighborhoods in major cities. Currently there are 2,000 Adventist churches established in these neighborhoods.

In Europe, the Adventist Church is focusing on Geneva. While the city isn’t home to millions, it is influential in the eyes of the international community, said Bruno Vertallier, president of the church’s Inter-European Division. A team of Adventist young people is working in Geneva in what Vertallier said he hopes becomes a model of outreach for the region. The group has already planted a church attended by 60 new believers and former Adventists.

Ryan steered many of the presentations toward planning and accountability. The Adventist world church, he said, pledged to carry out an evangelism plan in every city with a population of over a million, and results are mandatory. "We want to track progress intentionally," he said.

Blasious Ruguri, president of the church’s East-Central Africa Division, told the story of an Adventist pastor in the region who was beaten for his faith and hospitalized. The pastor's first move post-recovery, Ruguri said, was to visit the man responsible for the attack and forgive him. The man, then a clergy member of another faith, was so impressed by the pastor's spirit of reconciliation that he accepted an invitation to study the Bible. Later the man accepted the Adventist faith. He now directs an inter-faith ministry in Nairobi, Kenya, Ruguri said.
In Korea, a growing number of Adventist churches are launching nearby vegetarian restaurants—ideal settings to spur conversations about health, wellness and ultimately spiritual wholeness, said Jairong Lee, president of the church’s Northern Asia-Pacific Division.

Elsewhere in the region, Lee said, a fledgling chain of pizza restaurants is doubling as a gathering place for Adventist believers. “During the week, this is a pizza restaurant, but on Sabbath, this is a church,” he said, gesturing to a picture of the flagship restaurant. The restaurants employ Adventist young people and serve as centers of influence. At least 50 people worship in one location every Saturday.

Dan Jackson, president of the church’s North American Division, offered a new perspective on the 10/40 Window, a region spanning Northern Africa, Middle East and Asia where less than 2 percent of the population is Christian. “[The 10/40 Window] just moved next door,” Jackson said, referring to a massive influx of immigrants and refugees to some American cities. Now home to 90,000 refugees, the southern California city of San Diego is considered the refugee capital of the world, Jackson said.

There, the Paradise Valley Seventh-day Adventist Church counts members from 51 nationalities. While worship services are conducted in English, headset translations and Sabbath School classes are available in Arabic, Laotian, Tagalog, Nepalese, Swahili, French and Spanish. The church’s refugee ministry also serves food to some 500 people every week, at church and through a delivery service led by a former Buddhist priest who accepted Adventism. A bus from Paradise Valley makes Saturday morning stops in local refugee communities to pick up residents who want to attend church but don’t have a means of transportation.

Will James, senior pastor of the church, said refugees often battle feelings of isolation and loneliness. “Our church has become the loving, caring community that they crave,” he said.

Spring Meeting delegates also watched the trailer for a film that dramatizes the life of evangelical theologian Edward Fudge and debunks misconceptions about the character of God and the eternal destiny of unbelievers.

Top church administrators endorsed “Hell and Mr. Fudge” (LLT Productions) and called on regional church leaders to distribute DVDs of the film, host church-sponsored screenings in public venues and share copies with family and friends.

“This is a powerful evangelistic tool,” said Mark Finley, special assistant for evangelism to Adventist world church President Ted N. C. Wilson.

Another resource church leaders plan to use for outreach—especially in 2015—is a book on comprehensive health outreach edited by Finley and Dr. Peter Landless, director of the Adventist world church’s Health Ministries department. “Health and Wellness: Secrets That Will Change Your Life” (Review & Herald Publishing Association) offers simple ways to avoid chronic diseases such as cancer and diabetes.

But “resources without the Source are not enough,” Landless said, referring to the spiritual component of wholeness. With chapters on topics such as forgiveness, relationships and mental health, the book covers the spectrum of holistic living.

Wilson closed today’s Council on Evangelism and Witness with a call for outreach that finds expression beyond the margins of plans and PowerPoint presentations.

“I want to encourage all of you not to just talk about evangelism, but to participate in it,” Wilson said. “Be a visible leader in evangelism in your church and in your community.”