**NEWS**

**Former Staff File Lawsuits against Adventist Hospitals in Florida Alleging Billing Fraud:** Incidents of improper billing, overcharging, and invoice padding amounting to millions of dollars have been alleged in civil lawsuits by past employees of Florida hospitals who identify themselves today as whistleblowers....

**Pennsylvania Conference President Re-elected Despite His Support for Women in Ministry:** Questions on the propriety of ordaining women to Adventist ministry continue to surface as pressure was applied in Pennsylvania to elect a conference leader who would rein in the practice....

**Number of Adventists in the U.S. Congress Backslides Two Decades:** The recent US general election saw Adventists in the House of Representatives decline from two to only one member—and down from three as recently as 2003. Does this slippage signal an overall decline in Adventist involvement in society as a whole?...

**North Pacific Union Conference Takes Cautious Steps on Gender Discrimination in Ordination:** Recognizing strong conservative sentiment among its membership as well as support for equality in ordination, the North Pacific Union Conference (US states of Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington) Executive Committee began a cautious, formal dialogue on the question this week....

**Syracuse Surgeon Appointed Interim President of Atlantic Union College (AUC):** Despite losing its accreditation and closing its doors for financial reasons more than a year ago, the board of AUC in Massachusetts has elected a prominent retired surgeon as its interim president, as it awaits action on its petition for accreditation reinstatement....

**Adventist Church in the Netherlands on Women’s Ordination:** Dutch delegates by a large majority have rejected inequality of men and women in Adventist ministry, but will hold off implementation of any change until after 2015 General Conference Session....
Civil Unrest, Education and Traditional Culture Issues Face GC President in Africa Visit: GC president Ted Wilson toured Africa in a role of statesman-peacemaker, focusing on nations wracked by ethnic unrest and civil turmoil in recent years, and frequently meeting with political leaders and addressing the public in the French language where applicable....

OPINION

Biblicism, Bibliolatry, and EGW: Blogger Stephen Foster sees in the writings of Ellen White evidence of a serious (perhaps over-serious?) attention to the Bible as a source of divine inspiration. Is her biblicism (and ours) a form of bibliolotry?...

Sexuality and Church Discipline: In the current edition of the Adventist Church Manual, "homosexual practice" is categorized right along with "incest" and "sexual abuse of children" in a list of forbidden behaviors. Blogger Andy Hanson finds this listing unrealistic and unacceptable....

Living the Dream: Student missionary blogger Katelyn Pauls has been so busy getting ready to fulfill life's dreams, she didn't realize until last week that she's living them right now, today....

"Let Us" Salad: Debonnaire Kovacs takes a closer look at the "let us’s" in Hebrews 10, as we ponder the accomplishments of Christ....

The Road Less Traveled, but Highly Recommended: Did Republicans lose the presidential election because their message was unpopular? Not so! says columnist and political science instructor Preston Fletcher, who finds educated youth and ethnic voters quite enthusiastic about small government and low taxes. But they see a disconnect when they see an expansion of government's role in legislating and adjudicating social issues....

SUBSCRIBERS' BONUS FEATURES

Aesthetics and Intelligent Design:Beauty and the Personhood of God (Special Bonus Feature Open to All Through November 23): Intelligent Design says little about the personality of the creative Force in nature, only that it appears to be intelligent. Bernard Brandstater says we can understand the nature of the Designer through the esthetic qualities of creation.... (New print magazine arrives shortly in homes and online; this article available to all through November 23)

Teaching Braille through the Fundamental Beliefs: A Freemont, California, congregation successfully focuses on building fluency in Braille among the adult-onset blind, using a
condensed version of the book "28 Fundamental Beliefs."... (Available only to subscribers at this time)

**Tractor Ministry:** What does a pastor do when his parishioners tell him they are too busy to sit down and visit with him in the parlor? One pastor has found his answer by visiting his members while they work on their ranches and in business, bonding with them and learning a host of new skills too.... (Available only to subscribers at this time)

**Talbings Poem:** AT blogger Chris Barrett reflects on moments of solace in nature, communing with the sounds of the environment and meshing them in a sonic habitat of understanding and wonder.... (Poetry & the Arts open for view by all AT site users at this time)
Former Staff File Lawsuits against Adventist Hospitals in Florida Alleging Billing Fraud

Submitted: Nov 15, 2012
By AT News Team

Former employees of several hospitals in Florida owned by the Adventist Health System have filed lawsuits under the “whistleblower” law, according to stories in the Orlando Sentinel. Marian Wilbanks, an attorney specializing in this kind of lawsuit represents these individuals and told the newspaper that they involve “tens of millions of dollars” in overbilling Medicare, Medicaid and Tricare, Federal health benefits programs.

These are not criminal cases filed by Federal prosecutors but civil suits filed under provisions in the law that allow employees or others who observe excess billing to be paid a part of the financial settlement in cases where the court decides that the allegations are true. The first lawsuit was filed in July 2010 and additional complaints were added in October this year.

The lawsuits make four accusations: (1) Improper coding was used in invoices for radiology services to the three Federal programs from 1995 to 2009. (2) Invoices were sent for larger doses of the drug octreotide, used to enhance MRI scans, than were actually administered. (3) Invoices were sent for computer-aided analysis that was never done. (4) Invoices for emergency services were routinely submitted that were “false, duplicate or padded” from 2001 to 2008.

The newspaper has identified two individuals as filing litigation. Amanda Dittman worked as a compliance specialist in Florida Hospital’s billing department from 2001 to 2008 and from 1996 to 2001 for Florida Radiology Associates. Dr. Charlotte Elenberger is a radiologist affiliated with Florida Radiology Associates since 1995.

“I saw upcoding happening daily in heavy volumes across seven hospitals,” Dittman told the Orlando Sentinel. She reported the problems to her superiors, she said. The health system “conducted an internal investigation that confirmed double- and overbilling were occurring, the suit alleges, but did not correct the problem or refund the money,” the newspaper stated.

The health system has twice filed motions with the court to dismiss the litigation. “The first motion … was denied by U.S. District Judge John Antoon, who called the evidence ‘extensive and sufficient,’” the newspaper reported. The second motion to dismiss has not been ruled on.

“Florida Hospital takes seriously our obligations under the law,” said Samantha O’Lenick for the health system. “If we discover mistakes, we take appropriate action to correct them. … However, we believe the recent allegations … are asserted to achieve settlement pressure in … ongoing litigation [and] are without merit.” Neither Dittman nor Elenberger had anything to do with emergency department billing, O’Lenick told the Sentinel.

Adventist Today has been told by an attorney familiar with health care litigation that legal action related to billing is used by the Federal government to reduce the cost of health care and pressure hospitals into returning sums of money. It is usually not a criminal matter and the facts involved in these cases are very complex.
Pennsylvania Conference President Re-elected Despite Opposition to His Support for Women in Ministry

Submitted: Nov 14, 2012
By AT News Team

Pastor Ray Hartwell was re-elected on Sunday (November 11) as president of the Pennsylvania Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church despite the opposition of a small number of people on the nominating committee. A secret ballot among delegates at a regular constituency session voted at 4:30 p.m., 236 to 102 to appoint Hartwell for another three-year term. A round of applause immediately occurred.

The nominating committee had previously recommended Pastor Mike Ortel, president of the denomination’s Northern New England Conference. This resulted in heated debate and a request to return the recommendation to the nominating committee for further consideration. At 12:30 p.m. Columbia Union Conference president Pastor Dave Weigley, in the chair, sent the delegates to lunch and asked the nominating committee to meet with him. Many people lined up to make statements to the committee as it met into the afternoon.

Hartwell has specifically avoided moving ahead with the ordination of women pastors despite the fact that there is at least one clear candidate for such a move. He has been criticized for commissioning Pastor Tara VinCross, senior pastor at the Chestnut Hill Church in Philadelphia, even though that is entirely within denominational policy and fully authorized by the General Conference (GC). Opposition has come from those who believe that women should not exercise spiritual leadership of any kind.

The attempt to replace Hartwell as conference president on this issue is ironic since he is the delegate at the 2010 GC Session in Atlanta who asked for a study of the theology of ordination. That request resulted in an announcement a few days later by newly-elected GC President Ted Wilson that such a study would be conducted which set the stage for the current controversy on this topic.

Adventist Today has been told that in addition to the issue of women in pastoral ministry, there were also people in the conference who were upset with Hartwell’s handling of the youth camp facilities owned by Pennsylvania Conference. It is located in the far western reaches of the state while the majority of the membership lives in the eastern part of the conference. It has been a cause of contention since the Pennsylvania Conference was created from a merger of the previous West Pennsylvania and East Pennsylvania conferences nearly a half century ago. There has been sharp disagreement over whether to sell the property and purchase a new site closer to the middle of the state as well as years when the facilities have gone unused.

“A more than two to one margin of support for Elder Hartwell in a conference as conservative as Pennsylvania is a good sign,” a retired pastor who served in the state told Adventist Today. “It appears that support for women in ministry has grown to include a strong majority of Adventists across North America and Europe.”

Chaplain Barbara Rutt, a commissioned minister in the Pennsylvania Conference serving as a
chaplain for Lehigh Valley Health Network, told Spectrum, the journal of the largest organization of Adventist academics, “Women in ministry was only discussed in pockets of people during the lunch break. Some are for it, some are not. It is an issue that for now in Pennsylvania is best left for [the] 2015 General Conference Session.” Rutt and her husband were delegates at the constituency session.
When the new congress convenes in January, the number of Seventh-day Adventists among the elected legislators will be just one—for the first time since the early 1990s. Representative Roscoe Bartlett failed to gain re-election from rural western Maryland leaving only Representative Sheila Jackson Lee from inner city Houston. Bartlett is 86 and a Republican. Lee is 62 and a Democrat. The two are so different politically, at opposite ends of the political spectrum, that they have refused invitations to appear together at Washington Adventist University.

Since 1992 there have always been at least two Adventists among the elected members of congress in the United States. From 1995 to 2003 there were three Adventists serving in Congress. Some observers see in the return to just one representative an indicator of Adventist retreat from involvement in society in America.

Jerry L. Pettis was the first Adventist elected to congress in 1966, representing the California district that includes Loma Linda. He was an ordained minister who left denominational employ and started a small business before going into politics. He died in a private plane crash in 1975, and his wife Shirley ran for his seat, was elected and served until 1979. A Veterans Hospital was built near Loma Linda University in his memory. Both Jerry and Shirley were Republicans, although he was seen as more conservative and her agenda proved to be more moderate.

In 1977, while Shirley Pettis was still in Congress, Bob Stump was elected from a district in the suburbs and surrounding rural area of Phoenix, Arizona, as a Democrat. His official biography listed him as a Seventh-day Adventist, although his church participation was never confirmed. He was “assiduously private,” a cotton and grain farmer and long-time politician in Arizona. He served in the state legislature from 1959 until he was elected to the U.S. Congress, including a year as presiding officer of the state Senate. Stump was a conservative Democrat and in 1983 jumped to the Republican Party. He was re-elected until ill health caused him to withdraw from the 2002 election and retire from congress in January 2003. The Veterans Administration Medical Center in Prescott, Arizona, was named in his honor.

Bartlett was first elected in 1992, joining Stump as a second Adventist in Congress and the Republican caucus. He was among the few legislators with a PhD in one of the sciences, at one time a faculty member in physiology at Loma Linda University. Bartlett was an active member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He backed dissident pastor Richard Fredericks in a letter to the members of the General Conference Committee before Fredericks took a Maryland congregation out of the denomination. Bartlett stayed with the denomination and developed a close connection with Washington Adventist University in Takoma Park, Maryland.

Often described as the “most conservative” Republican in the House of Representatives, Bartlett was also recognized as an inventor, farmer and business owner. Spectrum recently stated the he had “associated himself with survivalist ideology,” although Science, a publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, described the same involvement on his
part as leadership on the issue of how to respond to potential problems with electro-magnetic pulse (EMP) warfare. Bartlett’s district had been re-drawn by a state legislature dominated by the other party and his loss is generally attributed to that factor as much as his age and marginalized position which one Baltimore newspaper said included his Adventist faith.

Lee was first elected to Congress in 1995, joining Stump and Bartlett to make three Adventists among the Federal legislators. She was a liberal Democrat who had served on the Houston City Council since 1989 and as a municipal judge prior to that. She grew up in New York City, completed a law degree at the University of Virginia, and moved to Texas with her husband, Dr. Elwyn C. Lee. She continues to be a very active member of the Black Caucus in the House of Representatives and was re-elected with a majority of over 70 percent.

It should not be surprising that the only remaining Adventist in the U.S. Congress is an African American. Parallel to the withdrawal of more and more White Adventists from the mainstream of American society has been the emergence of Blacks and immigrants both within the church and in the larger society. "The demographics of the Adventist Church in North America are on the cutting edge of the demographic trends for the whole country," explains Monte Sahlin, one of the denomination’s research specialists. "The election was won by America’s first black President with strong support from Hispanics, and that surprised a lot of people who weren’t looking last year when the Census Bureau released trend projections that show that within two decades whites will be in the minority."

Adventist Today is interested in identifying church members who hold or have run for elected office in state, county and municipal governments. This level of government provides the likely candidates for Federal office in future elections. Readers are invited to send information by Email to news@atoday.org and will not be identified without their specific permission.
North Pacific Union Conference Takes Cautious Steps on Gender Discrimination in Ordination

Submitted: Nov 16, 2012
By AT News Team

In the wake of decisions by four other union conferences to end gender discrimination in ordination, the North Pacific Union Conference (NPUC) executive committee voted three steps at its regular, quarterly meeting on Wednesday (November 14). A careful process will (1) “inform and educate Northwest members of the rationale toward biblical church leadership without regard to gender; (2) engage and encourage constituents in structured conversation and discussion on women in ministry; and (3) call a special session of the NPUC constituency to address ministerial ordination without regard to gender.” No date for the constituency meeting was specified.

A Committee on Women in Leadership, which was appointed a year ago, reported to the executive committee and a paper reviewing the New Testament references to ordination was presented. The paper makes the point that in the most recent English translations of the Bible, the word “ordination” does not appear because of its questionable origins. The paper was prepared by Dr. John McVay, president of Walla Walla University and a Bible scholar.

“Some have actively wondered if perhaps our system of ordination is not even biblical, but rather, based on a tradition far removed from our own Protestant roots,” says a statement published yesterday on the web site of the Gleaner, the NPUC periodical. Clearly defensive on the controversial topic, the statement addressed the question, “Has the NPUC leadership already made up their minds?” In fact, the executive committee includes those who “believe strongly in the value of equal inclusion of women in all facets of Adventist ministry and leadership,” as well as those “very much opposed to the idea of ordaining women,” the statement said.

“The Northwest includes Seventh-day Adventists with quite progressive views as well as some of the most conservative members in the denomination,” a retired administrator told Adventist Today. “It has had congregations leave the denomination in recent decades who felt that the Adventist Church was too sectarian and it is the home of some independent ministries that have been condemned by the denomination for acting like schismatic groups.” Balancing such a range of opinion will be difficult for the NPUC leadership.
Syracuse Surgeon Appointed Interim President of Atlantic Union College

Submitted: Nov 16, 2012
By AT News Team

Dr. Duane Cady, a general surgeon with long experience in government and nonprofit organizations, was appointed interim president by the board of Atlantic Union College (AUC) this week. The college closed down in the summer of 2011 when it lost its accreditation, but has applied to the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education to reestablish degree-granting authority. Cady will work with board chair Pastor Donald King, the president of the Atlantic Union Conference, in pursuing this application.

Cady has been a member of the board of the American Medical Association (AMA) for a number of years and served a term as chairman of that board. He has also been president of his county and state medical societies, as well as a key player in a number of committees and organizations related to physician payments by third-party payers. He founded and was president for ten years of a health maintenance organization in Syracuse with 30,000 members. Former New York governor George Pataki appointed him chair of the state’s Medicaid Managed Care Advisory Council and two task forces on health care issues.

An AUC alumnus, Cady is also a medical school graduate of Loma Linda University. He is an elder in the Syracuse Seventh-day Adventist Church and has served as chairman of the board for the local church school as well as a member of the New York Conference Board of Education.

A decision was announced in March that AUC would operate an unaccredited training center for lay evangelism and community health outreach. Adventist Today has been told that nothing has been done to implement that decision. Local newspapers have published speculation about the future of the empty campus and the institution has pursued its application with the state to regain degree-granting status. The future of the defunct college remains unclear.
Some 200 delegates representing 56 Adventist churches across the Netherlands spent considerable time at their union conference constituency session on Sunday (November 11) discussing a motion on the ordination of women, which eventually passed with a large majority. The delegates voted to both give the General Conference (GC) time to complete the current study of the theology of ordination and mandates that discrimination on the basis of gender must end in the Netherlands Union Conference six months after the next GC Session in 2015.

The voted action reads: "Considering the biblical principle of the equality of men and women, the delegates in session indicate that they reject the current situation of inequality in the church on principle. For this reason, and considering the context of Dutch society, they charge the Executive Committee to vigorously promote this perspective in the worldwide church. As quickly as possible, and no later than six months after the next session of the General Conference (2015), equality between men and women will be implemented at all organisational levels of the church in the Netherlands. The equal ordination of female pastors also falls into this category."

Pastor Wim Altink was re-elected president of the Netherlands Union Conference. He stated that the decision “reflects both a determination to end gender discrimination in the church and a strong commitment to taking part in the process laid out for us by the world church until July, 2015. The action is to hold implementation until we know the outcome of the global study of the Theology of Ordination and the final decision scheduled for the General Conference in 2015.”

Pastor Bertil Wiklander, president of the TED, was the official representative from the GC at the session. He was asked to comment and responded:

“It is good that the church supports women and men as equals in the priesthood of all believers. In 1990 the GC Session decided to withhold the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, not because of theological reasons, but for practical reasons, such as the differences in cultural contexts and the danger of losing our world-wide unity. I understand that some in our Division are now impatient, because 22 years have passed and while more and more women have accepted the call to serve as ministers in the Trans-European Division, little progress has been made on the matter of their ordination as pastors. I also appreciate that there is, in the Netherlands Union, a clear commitment to work with the Church in the study of the Theology of Ordination, including Women's Ordination. I appreciate that the Netherlands Union does not intend to implement ordination of women until the current process has culminated at the General Conference Session in 2015.

“However, what I pointed out to the Session delegates on 11 November, is that I think the decision would have benefitted by two things: Firstly, the action would have been improved by recognising in its language that the Union has already, through the Trans-European Division, asked the General Conference for permission to ordain women and that, as a division family, we are waiting for their answer, which will come in 2015, and that, therefore, it looks somewhat odd to now decide to do in the future what you have already asked for permission to do, before you..."
have received the answer from the General Conference. Secondly, I think it is in principle, inadvisable to word an action now about what you will do in three years, since nobody knows exactly what the result will be of the study of the Theology of Ordination. The Church may, for example, change its policy language and use different and more biblical terminology about the induction of pastors, which the action of the Netherlands Union Session would want to recognise. In addition, there are members in the church in the Netherlands who are not yet clear on Women's Ordination, and the study process that is now in progress would in my view help them. With this action being taken now, these people are not given time to understand what may come from the world-church study process, but you tell them in advance what the outcome will be and what they are to think.

“Having said that, I want to underline that the Trans-European Division is deeply committed to working for the unity of the Church, while doing all we can to empower men and women in their spiritual and administrative leadership in our church.

“I continue to pray that God will lead His Church to full clarity on the matter of ordination and that we will be given the wisdom to handle the current situation in a true Christian Spirit, in patience, humility, with a concern also for the interests of others, and a commitment to do what is right,” concluded Wiklander.

Adventist Press Service (APD) is based in Basel, Switzerland.
Pastor Ted Wilson, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, is preaching peace as he tours nations in West Africa this month. Liberia is healing from 14 years of civil war. The Ivory Coast had civil unrest last year following a disputed election. Ghana is seeking to prevent political violence as it prepares for a national election later this year. He will also visit Sierra Leone, where a war was fought in recent years, and the Gambia.

Wilson called for a “period of reconciliation” in the Ivory Coast, where he lived from 1981 to 1990 as a regional administrator for the General Conference (GC). “We must have the spirit of the Good Samaritan,” he said in remarks delivered in French at the Palace of Culture in Abidjan. “Reconciliation must first start in the home, the neighborhood, the church and then spread to the country.” He specifically singled out attitudes toward women in his comments. “We must treat our women with respect.”

In Ghana, he urged his audience to “promote the virtues of peace, forgiveness, good neighborliness and generosity in their communities and the nation at large,” reported the Ghana News Association (GNA) wire service. He “prayed for God to take absolute control over the upcoming general election [and] advised church members to desist from electoral malpractice that will hamper the peace, prosperity and development of the country. He said the church was built on the foundation of truth and peace.”

Meetings with top government officials are a significant part of Wilson’s itinerary. He met with President Alassane Ouattara of the Ivory Coast on November 7 and this week with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia, as well as Vice President Joseph N. Boakai and Alex Tyler, the speaker of parliament. “Wilson also met with Alfred O. Vanderpuije, the first Adventist mayor of Accra, Ghana’s capital,” reported the official Adventist News Network (ANN).

In Ghana, Wilson met with Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, the “Asantehene” or traditional ruler of the Ashanti people. Local observers recalled that 24 years earlier his father, Neal C. Wilson made a similar visit while he was GC president. In fact, one local newspaper seemed to confuse the two Williams, referring to the current GC president as “Neil” in a story that correctly identified him in an earlier paragraph.

“Tutu commended the Adventist Church in Ghana for its contribution in the areas of education and healthcare,” stated ANN. A local newspaper reported that there was also some controversy about the involvement of this tribal leader in certain traditional practices. Tutu “dismissed claims that chiefs and traditional rulers are idol worshipers,” according to Myjoyonline.com. “Traditional rulers are true Christians,” Tutu said. “It is wrong for people to assume … traditional leaders are idol worshippers because they pour libation to gods,” the online publication stated. The Ashanti leader presented a Kente cloth and a golden stool to Wilson and “pledged his unflinching personal support to the leadership of the church.”

Major speaking appointments gathering tens of thousands of people, both church members and
the general public, are scheduled in most countries on the tour. In Ghana he spoke at the Baba Yara stadium in Kumasi, according to GNA. In Liberia the *Daily Observer* reported that he will speak at the Samuel K. Doe Sports Arena in Paynesville.

Wilson participated in key events at several Adventist educational institutions. On November 11 he was the graduation speaker at Valley View University where more than 500 students received degrees. He helped inaugurate the Multicultural Training Center in Kumasi, Ghana, which will provide job training in computers, catering and sewing, as well as classes in evangelism. He the *Daily Observer* in Liberia that the GC would consider providing some funding for construction of the Adventist University of West Africa campus in that country.

Wilson also attended the annual meeting of the executive committee of the West-Central Africa Division of the GC. The governing body voted to extend full conference status to 14 organizations in Nigeria and one in Liberia, a move that demonstrates how the Adventist Church in traditional “mission fields” is increasingly able to finance itself without personnel or money from Europe or North America.
Biblicism, Bibliolatry, and EGW

Submitted: Nov 9, 2012
By Stephen Foster

Whatever else may be said of her and her writings, the ‘problem’ with Ellen White is that she affirms the Bible.

Which of course begs the question, why is this, or why would this (or how could this) be considered a problem?

Well, obviously it is not a problem for everyone; but it is a huge, impenetrable, insurmountable problem for some of you/us.

If there ever was someone apparently ‘guilty’ of bibliolatry, it had to be her. Of course, I do not believe that there is such a thing as bibliolatry; but if there is, she committed it.

It is seemingly not possible to distinguish between worshipping God and learning of Him. We learn of Him through His Spirit. His Spirit inspired the God-chosen men to write that which we find in Scripture. What we find in Scripture is God.

But supposing that you don’t buy this, and you think that it is indeed possible to distinguish between worshipping God and that which we are encouraged to do in Matthew 11:29 and 2 Timothy 2:15; then White did it—she seems to have reverenced the Bible as God’s words.

It seems to me, and I could be wrong, that Ellen White believed that the Bible represented the Word of God. She seemingly believed that the Bible has, or represents, and/or is a conduit for, transformational power to those who study it.

“The earth itself is not more richly interlaced with veins of golden ore than is the field of revelation with veins of precious truth. The Bible is the storehouse of the unsearchable riches of God. But those who have a knowledge of the truth do not understand it as fully as they might. They do not bring the love of Christ into the heart and life. The student of the Word finds himself bending over a fountain of living water. The church needs to drink deeply of the spirituality of the Word.” MS 117, 1902

Since Jesus claimed to be the Source of that “water welling up into eternal life;” if this isn’t elevating the Bible as representative of, and a source of the living water that Christ claimed to represent, what is?

The question then is, was she right? Should the Bible indeed be held in such lofty esteem, such that we should actually consider it to be the holy Bible?

If the Bible is to be considered holy; if it is indeed representative of the Word of God; if it is actually inspired and brought to us by God (by way of holy men of His); then how is it possible for Biblicism or bibliolatry to be considered pejoratives?
Personally, I think they are pejoratives simply because the enemy would prefer that we not take
the Bible as seriously as it should be taken; and that’s all. I’m curious as to what others think.
Sexuality and Church Discipline

Submitted: Nov 15, 2012
By Andy Hanson

The Church Manual brackets "homosexual practice" between "incest" and "sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults" in its list of sexual perversions.* Surely, "homosexual practice" should be awarded a different perversion category.

One wonders about what the Church might label "heterosexual sexual perversions." Last time I checked, every homosexual sexual act has its counterpart in heterosexual sex. To be on the safe side, these "perversions" should be enumerated for us Adventist heterosexuals.

Included here are excerpts from Bishop John Shelby Spong's essay, Should a competent Newspaper Publish Uninformed Prejudice?

*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual
Revised 2005, 17th Edition
Page 195

We all have but one sexual organ and that is our brain. All else is equipment. It is our brains that tell us to whom we are attracted. We now know that a small percentage of the human population, estimates are between 5 and 10%, have brains that orient their affections toward their own gender. The same thing is true in the world of nature. There is no reason to think that because this is a "minority," it is abnormal...We have removed a lot of things from the ancient writings of the Torah. Deuteronomy, the last book of the Torah, calls for the execution of children who are willfully disobedient and who talk back to their parents. Leviticus calls for the execution of both partners in an adulterous act, as well as for anyone who worships a false god. Leviticus mandated kosher dietary laws. Those, like you, who want to affirm the condemnation of homosexuality in Leviticus, might want to read the whole Torah and see how much of it you want to take literally.

You might also be interested, as long as you are going to appeal to the authority of the Bible, to know that there is no reference to homosexuality in any of the gospels. Jesus, however, is recorded as commanding us to love our neighbors and when asked who is our neighbor, responded by saying your neighbor is the one for whom you have the deepest prejudice.

CHURCH DISCIPLINE 195
1. Denial of faith in the fundamentals of the gospel and in the cardinal doctrines of the church or teaching doctrines contrary to the same.
2. Violation of the law of God, such as worship of idols, murder, stealing, profanity, gambling, Sabbathbreaking, and willful and habitual falsehood.
3. Violation of the seventh commandment of the law of God as it relates to the marriage institution, the Christian home, and biblical standards of moral conduct.
4. Such violations as fornication, promiscuity, incest, homosexual practice, sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults, and other sexual perversions, and the remarriage of a divorced person, except of the spouse who has remained faithful to the marriage vow in a divorce for adultery or for sexual perversions.
5. Physical violence, including violence within the family.
6. Fraud or willful misrepresentation in business.
7. Disorderly conduct which brings reproach upon the church.
8. Adhering to or taking part in a divisive or disloyal movement or organization. (See p. 190.)
9. Persistent refusal to recognize properly constituted church authority or to submit to the order and discipline of the church.
10. The use, manufacture, or sale of alcoholic beverages.
11. The use, manufacture, or sale of tobacco in any of its forms for human consumption.
12. The misuse of, or trafficking in, narcotics or other drugs.

The church cannot afford to deal lightly with such sins nor permit personal considerations to affect its actions. It must register its decisive and emphatic disapproval of the sins of fornication, adultery, all acts of moral indiscretion, and other grievous sins.
Living the Dream

Submitted: Nov 15, 2012
By Katelyn Pauls

People tell me not to waste my time on earth away,
“It will happen so much faster than you think,” they say.
I didn’t believe what they said, I’m young and in a rush.
I have so many hopes and dreams, I want to do so much.
I’m counting days and months and years, until I live my dream.
Although, I’m never getting any closer, so it seems.
Then, with a start, one day I opened up my eyes.
I realized my dream has come and caught me by surprise.
It’s nothing big, no great big plan, no perfect time or place.
It’s just the little things that put a smile on my face.
Like sunsets and cookies and students having fun,
Early morning bike rides and a hammock in the sun.
So while I’m down here on this earth and life is happening fast,
I vow to make the most of it because “this too shall pass.”

I was inspired this week to slow down and smell the roses. I’m too busy counting the days until I can go home and pursue my dreams. Then one day I was riding my bike to school and realized that my dream was to live and work in a foreign country as a missionary. That is exactly what I’ve been doing this year! And I almost missed it because I was too busy “getting ready” to do exactly that later in life. I always thought I had to have more money, more time or be older. I almost missed all of the opportunities that God is giving me this year to be a witness. I want to take advantage of everything God gives me this year. The little things I’m letting pass me by are the things that I’m sure I want to remember the most. I vow to keep my eyes open and my mind willing to receive whatever God has for me.
Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

This passage could be divided into two sections: the “sinces” and the “let us’s.” Obviously the “sinces” must be first understood. The writer is stating two connected major premises:

1. “We have confidence to enter the holy place.” We could (people often do) spend all day on the theology just in this first half sentence. Let’s just accept the basic assertion of this author, that Jesus inaugurated a new and living way through the veil and into the house of God by giving His flesh and dying for us.

2. “We have a great priest.” In other places, this great priest is described more fully; for instance, as knowing our weaknesses because He experienced them. Here, it is simply stated, and clearly intended to be a source of comfort and confidence.

As a result of, or in acknowledgement of these two connected realities, the author suggests a whole list of “let us’s.” I thought it would be nice to take a closer look at them.

A. “Let us draw near.” The description is a heartwarming one. Imagine having, all in the same moment, a sincere heart, full assurance of faith, a clean heart despite unarguable past evil consciences, and a pure body! Because, says the author of Hebrews, Jesus has made the way through His own sincerity, faith, cleanliness, and purity, this is possible. So come! Please come, entreats the epistle, speaking, as do all true prophets, for Christ Himself.

B. “Let us hold fast.” Amen! I’ve done the coming near part. It always feels like such a miracle, but it often doesn’t last. (Like Mark Twain saying, “It’s easy to stop smoking. I’ve done it a thousand times!”) When it doesn’t last, it’s usually because I haven’t held fast, insisting without wavering on clinging to my hope. Why? Because I’m faithful? No, because He is. That word “fast,” by the way, is not often used in common speech anymore. It comes from the same root as “fasten,” and means hang on like velcro, like glue, like bolts with solid nuts. Don’t let go!

C. “Let us consider how to stimulate one another...” to argument? To anger? To division and controversy? Not exactly. To love, good deeds, and encouragement. Especially now. Especially as “you see the day drawing near.” I do see that. I hope for that.
Amen, come Lord Jesus!
They don’t listen to me (though they should -- if you want to expand your market share, you listen to customers that don’t buy from you), but conservative Republicans have a hopeful future. Alas, change is required to inherit it.

Sadly, I doubt that they will embrace the opportunity.

I teach Political Science. My students are, primarily, relatively affluent African Americans and Latinos. Most, but not all of them are Seventh Day Adventists. This means they, generally, have progressive politics, but conservative folkways and personal ethics.

They voted for Obama. They also like Ron Paul.

Their affinity with Mr. Obama is obvious: African Americans and, increasingly, Latinos are reliable Democratic voters. These students also fit the profile of other parts of the Obama coalition: young, highly educated, from (mostly) “blue” states, and politically liberal.

However, they are not quite as liberal as their parents or me.

Like many college students, Ron Paul’s message of freedom and small government is attractive to them. These kids expect to be in the upper income brackets -- and soon (I don’t doubt them). The notion of increasingly progressive taxes doesn’t make them happy. Although, in the near term, my students may benefit from affirmative action (for which they see no “stigma”), they know that it is going away. More than their boomer parents, these students are sanguine about that. They see the solution to many of the problems that they care about (i.e., jobs, education, family structure, crime) as having market-based or other traditionally conservative features.

The problem for Republicans? These students do not like the conservative social agenda. Reading my informal, unscientific poll, I see certain surprising (and sometimes disconcerting) trends. They are, generally, against abortion, but are pro-choice. They are anti-drug use, but for the legalization of pot. They are against gay marriage, but in favor of marriage equality and gay rights. They are for school choice, but for separation of church and state. In short, they are progressive libertarians.

The traditional Republican social agenda is, in their eyes, a big government, personally intrusive one. Using the government to enforce or shape a Christian world-view, is, to them, a vestigial and more than slightly ominous theocratic threat. The unsubtle remarks about rape and abortion by unsuccessful Senate candidates Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock re-enforced this view.
The recent election detonated the much feared “demographic time bomb.” If Republicans are to be viable in the polls (particularly in presidential election years), they need to consider broadening their base thereby becoming more inclusive. Conservatives could accomplish this without sacrificing their ideals. They simply have to internalize the words of their icon: “Government isn’t the solution, it’s the problem.”

Except, ironically, the non-Tea Party base of the party, the Republicans seem to like big government -- when it is employed to accomplish their social agenda. Thankfully, at least for now, theocracies remain unpopular.

A small government, pro-freedom agenda is attractive to young people (Ron Paul is a rock-star on many college campuses). Conservatives have won on many issues, particularly drugs, abortion, welfare, and taxes. The public has moved in their direction on all of these matters. They could close the sale by taking their own advice: let private centers of influence (i.e., churches, social advocates) continue to persuade individuals to make smart and moral choices. Campaign on minimalist government, low taxes, and personal freedom. There’s a large and diverse market for that platform.

Of course, I am playing someone else’s cards for them. I might be wrong. However, it seems to me conservatives have the right cards, but often overplay their hand. Kenny Rogers was right: you gotta know when to fold ‘em.
Aesthetics and Intelligent Design: Beauty and the Personhood of God

Submitted: Nov 13, 2012
By Bernard Brandstater

The theory of intelligent design can seem incomplete. It leaves undefined the identity and nature of the designer. We usually see design as an initial step toward a good end product, whether it’s a cell phone or a cathedral. But where did the design come from? It implies purposeful thought, so we must enquire about its origin. Does the quality of design tell us something about the character of its source? If the intelligence resides in a person, what kind of person might it be? And if the intelligence we are contemplating is vast, even godlike, what does design tell us about the personhood of that God?

In seeking answers, I will review what intelligent design theory tells us. But I will go further in search of its ultimate source—what lies behind the design we see. I propose that the undefined ingredient is huge: it is the artistry and the personhood of God.

Beginnings of a Revolution
The movement we know as intelligent design offers a paradigm shift in the world’s view of science. It claims that intelligence and design are necessary to produce our Earth and its life. For many it has religious implications. The movement started in the early ’90s, and the fireball who started it was Phillip Johnson, professor of law at University of California, Berkeley. About 1990, while on sabbatical leave in Oxford, Johnson read an intriguing book by New Zealand scientist Michael Denton, titled Evolution: a Theory in Crisis. Weighing the evidences, Johnson saw that Darwinian evolution, though embraced throughout the world of science, was supported by evidence that was surprisingly feeble. So he wrote a questioning book titled Darwin on Trial.

The book was provocative. It aroused a barrage of disagreement among scholars, intensified by the author’s prestige as an honored law professor. Soon a cluster of young enthusiasts gathered around Johnson. Some of them were motivated by religious leanings, with a feeling that God should find a defensible place somewhere in the history of mankind. But the evidences they uncovered and their reasoning rested not on sacred writings, but on solid data and logic.

They held conferences. In 1994 I joined with some of them at Queens College at Cambridge University. They were gathered, with Johnson as their leader, at the C.S. Lewis Foundation’s Summer Institute. Most of them were young scholars, names that have become well known in recent times: William Dembski, Paul Nelson, Stephen Meyer, Jonathan Wells, and others. I was sitting with them around a big table, a hungry listener. It was fun to be among such heady company. Their papers and their arguments were new and engaging, and to a Christian like me they were faith-affirming. It was good to feel intellectually respectable as a Bible-adhering Christian. In the air I felt palpable excitement. These men were on a roll, gathering momentum in a project they believed in. They were showing there has to be some kind of designer-God in the cosmos, after decades in which Darwin’s evolution had largely excluded him.

Leading Voices in Intelligent Design
The early voices were joined by many others, including some lecturers I have heard: Michael
Behe, Jay Richards, Guillermo Gonzales, Richard Sternberg, David Klinghoffer, Casey Luskin, Douglas Axe, and others. With voice and pen, they forcefully combated the dogmatic atheism of today’s mainstream science. Their books are a rich, thought-stretching read for enquiring minds. My list does not include some stalwart defenders of Bible-based creation. They support design, but they also quote sacred texts as authority, whereas intelligent design purists try to stay strictly with objective science. Among creationists there are differences of opinion about the processes, how an intelligent God actually brought the cosmos and its life into being. These differing opinions can sound speculative and do not sit easily alongside today’s empiric science. So intelligent designers seek to maintain objective rigor and deal on equal terms with other academics.

After Some Years, Where Are We?
Where has intelligent design taken us in the past 20 years? The debates about origins of life in planet Earth have been transformed. Fine-tuning in the physical universe is a mind-numbing but unexplained reality. Probability theory has cast immense doubt on a chance beginning of life. Improbabilities in physics and chemistry rule out many chance mechanisms of species variation and the appearance of new life forms. The principle of irreducible complexity has been applied persuasively by Behe. Recent advances in analyzing DNA and epigenomic cell functioning have made a powerful molecular case for intelligent design. And information theory has joined the chorus. Most thought leaders among elites, like the National Science Foundation, still voice atheism or agnosticism. Yet some hard thinkers, such as philosopher Sir Antony Flew, are admitting openness to some version of intelligent design. Unrelieved mechanistic naturalism is increasingly seen as problematic.

Among Christian believers these are great advances, and we must salute our intelligent design colleagues. Thanks to them, it is now easier to be an intellectually fulfilled Christian. We are enabled to see God’s fingerprints in nature and to take heart in resisting the arrogant godlessness of a scientism that seeks to rule our culture.

Searching Beyond Design
Intelligent design can be searched further. In it I am convinced we can find something awesome: the personhood of God revealed in the beauty of his creation. As usually argued, design theory wins its case by default, speaking from the negative side. It follows Karl Popper: if we cannot prove a theory is correct, we may still prove that its opposite is false. If we have no demonstrable proof that God created, we can nevertheless show that the opposite is false: chance cannot produce our complex universe and its life. There must exist the opposite of chance, an intelligent designer. Darwin is falsified.

But intelligent design theory stops there. Design alone says little about a Creator who is a person with thoughts and feelings, with taste and purpose. It fails to complete the majestic story. It does not identify the source of all things, the Judeo-Christian Creator God who is revealed in the Bible, the personal God whom multitudes worship. Intelligent design theorists don’t talk much about creation. Yet it is this final chapter in mankind’s story that is the animating, exciting part that has significance for us. For all its strengths, design theory fails to identify and embrace the personal God who overshadows my worldview and my daily life.

This limitation of intelligent design theory is intentional, a deliberate policy. In the early years of
intelligent design, its founding father, Phillip Johnson, was my houseguest when he came to lecture at Loma Linda University. I asked him this question: You prove the necessity of intelligence and design in the cosmos, so why don’t you finish the job and speak of a divine fabricator, a Creator?

Johnson’s answer was direct, and it made sense. Science has not advanced far enough, he said, to allow us to characterize a Creator. What kind of person is he? We cannot tell. That big question can wait. First we must show that evolution by chance does not work, and we in intelligent design have done that. Due to our efforts, Darwin is in trouble today, and many scientists are quietly leaving him. There’s a second reason why design theorists hold back from discussing Creation. We could get stuck in endless arguments about the interpretation of data, and what’s right and what’s wrong in the Bible story. It’s a minefield. Creation advocates will not reach agreement, and we would waste energy in family quarrels between believers, whether they are Christians or Jews or Muslims. We prefer to be inclusive. There’s room for all of us in the big tent. The real adversary, the issue in today’s world, is not the how of Creation. Rather, it is the Enlightenment run amok: it’s postmodernism, bored indifference, agnosticism, or outright disbelief. People either ignore God or else they reject him.

Compelling Evidence in Nature
Johnson was partly right, but in one important respect I think he was dead wrong. It’s not true that we don’t know enough about God to discern his character. Apostle Paul says it clearly in Romans 1:20-21 (NLV): “From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky and all that God made. They can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God. Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship him.”

Paul is adamant: any thinking person who observes the world and what’s in it, yet does not believe, has no excuse. These are hard words. The evidence in nature, Paul insists, is compelling. For years I puzzled over that verse. What was in Paul’s mind? What is it in the natural world that speaks irresistibly of a Creator God? If you can’t see it, he says, you are without excuse.

But I say: If you can’t see it, better look again. For many observers, complexity alone is sufficient evidence. We can see it in the awesome intricacy within a living cell. But beyond complexity, we can add a further feature in nature that uniquely reveals the person of the Creator: its aesthetic quality, its beauty. The presence of manifest beauty in our world reveals not chaos, but purposeful design. There is more in nature than complexity. Beauty points to artistry in the designer and to the kind of person he is.

Beauty As Evidence
Without God, naturalist theories don’t work. They require chance mechanisms that do not exist in nature. And since chance can’t do it, by default there must be a designer. This is a victory for theists, but it’s scarcely a resounding one. Many thoughtful persons seek something more—a god who is a real, approachable person, worthy of worship, a god who receives and responds to our devotion. That’s exactly what beauty gives us: not merely a falsifying of chance mechanisms, but fingerprints of a real person. It reveals the aesthetic purpose of an artist-Creator. It points to a cosmos that is intentional, from a thinking person who has style and taste.
I find it helpful to think of beauty as the signature of God, his unique identifier.

When I sign my name on a document, my signature identifies me; it has meaning and authority. It is evidence that I am an intelligent, deliberative person. It says that I am placing my identity, my judgment, and my intentions there on paper for all to see. Further, the content of the document I sign, and even the flourish in my writing style, says something about my nature, my taste, and my purposes. I am a living person whom you can get to know. Likewise beauty, in its diverse forms, is also evidence. It identifies a great First Cause, a Creator who is a thinking, deliberative person. Beauty is more than an impersonal force. It shows that in planet Earth the Creator has placed his identity for all to see. And through the content of his work and the manner of its display, he has revealed some of his nature, his taste, his purposes—in effect, his personhood. It is made available to our senses so we may feel the force of his persona and even have a relationship with him. It brings God near.

Can We Define Beauty?
Philosophers love beauty, but they don’t easily define it. The ancient Greek philosophers and the Church Fathers upheld three ideals that we should pursue: goodness, truth, and beauty. The Bible speaks of “the beauty of holiness.” Closer to our time, Sir Isaac Newton wrote of the solar system: “This most beautiful System of the Sun, Planets and Comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being.” In the 20th century, a Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, wrote volumes developing a theology of aesthetics, about God and beauty. For me, Balthasar is a rich read, but not an easy one. Alfred Lord Whitehead, mathematician, philosopher, and cosmologist, declared that ultimate reality consists of the achievement of beauty, and he wrote of its two dimensions: harmony and intensity. We could add many recent writers on beauty. I have explored and profited from Thomas Dubay, Daniel Treier, and Harry Poe. And plenty of poets have added their unique music.

For our purpose we should set aside abstract musings and attempt a definition. Beauty is a quality of existence, of being, in patterns we perceive in nature and in ourselves. It has distinctive properties, which different observers can recognize confidently. At the same time, it leaves room for differences in our taste and preferences. Observers experience beauty through their senses and through their minds, within their physical and mental capacities. Beauty satisfies and gives pleasure. Its constituents seem right to us; they fit coherently together within their proper context. Beauty comes to our awareness usually from an outside source, but it may also come from within our own minds, our own creative inventiveness.

Different Kinds of Beauty
Beauty is commonly visual: colors, patterns, arrangements, and proportions that appear beautiful when they fit together agreeably. In part, beauty is certainly subjective—truly in the eye of the beholder. But it is not wholly imagined, existing only in our heads. There is an objective entity external to us, and it evokes similar responses in different observers. The wavelengths of light we observe are outside of us; they arise from physical entities and consist of measurable radiation. Colors of a rainbow evoke our pleasurable response, but the physical radiation exists independent of our minds. Beautiful patterns remain, even when we are not watching. Thomas Gray’s magnificent Elegy says it well:
Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear.
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

We may say much the same about auditory beauty, the sounds that may please or excite us.

How amazing it is that vibrations in the air around us can be arranged into patterns that delight us! And it’s equally amazing that we find ourselves equipped with astonishing mechanisms for hearing: eardrum, ossicles, cochlea, and nerve pathways that bring sound to our consciousness. There’s great variety in music. Whether it’s Bach or bluegrass, music well-performed gives us pleasure. And audible speech and comely language make human community possible, social life that we can enjoy. These vibrations in the air around us, including natural birdsong, exist in patterns that have order and meaning. They must come from intentional thought.

We must consider also the beauties of touch and taste and smell. My pleasurable response is in my senses and in my mind, but the beauty’s source lies in the thing itself, in the chemical properties of whatever I am tasting or smelling. Those molecules interact with my receptors to convey to my awareness subtle differences of flavor and aroma: distinctive varieties of apple or the unique bouquet of fine perfume. Their pleasing interactions could not have appeared by a natural selection that cared only for survival fitness, nor could they be invented within my mind.

There is yet another beauty of a different kind: patterns of thought and imagination derived from the creative minds of men and women. We can create our own beauty. Fine poetry is an arrangement of words that fit decorously together. It comes from mind and purpose, never from accident. I may write the lines myself, and then take pleasure in what I have myself created, its rhythm and its sonority. Beethoven could enjoy in his mind the beauty of his own compositions, even after he was deaf and could hear nothing. I enjoy in anticipation my own piano improvisations, even before I touch the keys. Logic and rhetoric were beautiful to the ancient Greeks and Romans. An elegant mathematical equation can be beautiful, experts say. In its own special context it provides beautifully coherent, satisfying answers. The same may be said for a ballet choreography or a software algorithm. These patterns are beautiful ideas. They may be expressed and communicated through material means: voice, or print, or a software program—whatever we choose as a vehicle. But their content and meaning, their order, exists independently, whether recorded or not, as patterns of ideas and thought that critic-author David Berlinski lyrically calls “the ineffable inimitable.” Our creations may be gloriously beautiful, though in dull technical prose they could be described simply as information.

The Big Question
This brings us to the next question: From where did these beautiful patterns appear? Is the purposeful intelligence outside of us, or is it from within? How can evolutionary theory, which excludes God and intelligent agency, account for their arrival?

What “first cause,” other than a purposeful mind, could cause them to appear? And further, how does evolution, which relies only on chance mechanisms, account for our possessing an ability to perceive and enjoy them? Here are two entities with no physical connection: the beautiful objects
or ideas, and our conscious capacity to appreciate them. How can chance explain their parallel but totally separate development throughout vast eons by increments of natural selection? We have a system of two distinct parts, and each part has no meaning without the other. Such a unified system had to be designed, and with a majestic purpose.

Strict naturalists have trouble here. If, as atheists declare, the cosmos came from random events in the emptiness of space, the widely postulated quantum fluctuation in a vacuum, plus an undirected Big Bang, the result should be chaos. So why is there order? Why is that order exceedingly complex, and why is some of it beautiful?

A Problem for Naturalism
In my view, this is a decisive question for which naturalists give no satisfying answer. It is a debate stopper. If living things developed through an unguided evolutionary process, as Darwin insisted, the mechanism for development must have been his vaunted natural selection. That was the core of Darwin’s theory: survival of the fit and extinction of the weak. But order that is beautiful cannot arise as an accident out of nowhere. And in Darwin’s world, neither can it survive. Neo-Darwinian theory rests wholly on survival usefulness, on toughness, not on loveliness or any perception of aesthetics. Evolution has no explanation either for beauty’s appearance or its survival.

We should pause to grasp the full weight of this. There are no mechanisms in raw matter to produce exquisite order by chance. Darwin had no way to explain either the origin or the survival of a delicate orchid in the jungle or the extravagant beauty of a peacock’s feathers. In Darwin’s world, we should be surrounded by life that is tough, ugly, functionally efficient but brutal and savagely competitive. Could we enjoy a world where Richard Dawkins’ selfish gene was in control?

So accounting for beauty is a problem for naturalists. The question has worried some atheists, who must find natural, mechanistic explanations. Steven Pinker, outspoken professor and atheist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, admitted this. He has referred to beautiful music as a puzzling gift and described it as “auditory cheesecake.” It enriches our lives, he said in Nature (March 2002), but it makes no contribution to survival.

An Explanation That Satisfies
My answer is close to Pinker’s. Beauty is indeed a gift, but for me it’s not a puzzling one. It could come only from a Great Giver, whom I identify as the Judeo-Christian God. For me that is the only feasible answer. Some questions do have only one answer, and this is one of them. The faces on Mount Rushmore could possibly have been carved by wind and rain. But intuitively we know they must be man-made, the product of thought and purpose. The same is true of beauty. Undirected chance mechanisms cannot carve beauty out of chaos. Beauty must have come from a purposeful designer-fabricator.

If there is another conclusion, I do not find it. To account for beauty requires belief in a purposeful God, and for me that is easier than finding unlikely mechanisms in a godless universe that lacks purposeful thought. Beauty can be seen as a gift from a Creator who, at the beginning, provided us human creatures with more than the basic necessities: an enriched existence. He put us in a world that fits together in beautiful ways that we can enjoy. Its qualities, many of them
magnificent, are embedded in the natural world. But in addition, he gave us a towering enhancement: he equipped us with vision, with intricate hearing, and with unfathomed mental processes that can perceive these beauties and find delight in them. On one hand is the beauty out there, and on the other hand is our ability to perceive and enjoy it. Again we see two distinct entities, fashioned separately by a purposeful Creator, and each needs the other in order to have meaning. It’s a two-part system whose unity must have been purposely designed.

The Purpose of Beauty
So may we ask what was God’s purpose? The words that I heard once in Washington, while inspecting the new Mormon Temple, still echo in my ears: “He created us that we might have joy.” Those words speak of a divine purpose that I can believe in: “that we might have joy.” These are weighty words, and over the years they have helped shape my worldview. The joy that beauty gives us is our intended inheritance. Beauty is a gift offered uniquely to us human creatures to enjoy and also to create. We must revel in it and celebrate.

God’s Unique Identity
God’s vast wisdom can be seen in the design that gives efficient functioning to the world and its life. He is a supremely clever designer. Beyond his wisdom, it was God’s creative power that brought his design into physical reality, giving it shape and life and movement. God’s wisdom and his power, inseparable in nature, show us his identity as engineer-Creator. His handiwork hangs together efficiently; it works well. That tells us who he is: the Ultimate Source, the Maker and Master of all.

That’s how God was identified in ancient times, amongst competing gods. That’s how the runaway Jonah, in a fierce ocean storm, identified the Hebrew God to his pagan shipmates: “the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land” (Jon. 1:9, KJV). Jonah’s God was supreme because he was the Creator. And that’s also how the Apostle Paul on Mars Hill identified the Unknown God for the pagan scholars in Athens: “God that made the world and all things therein” (Acts 17:24, KJV). Paul’s pre-eminent God was the Creator. No Greek god made such a claim. So among pagans, whether Phoenician seamen or Greek philosophers, the supreme deity was the Maker-God. Today it’s the same: the God who made us is the one who commands and deserves our worship.

Here is the super-intelligence that is championed by intelligent design advocates. They are brilliant in analysis and argument, yet they are cautious theorists and do not go further to describe his person. They do not suggest who he is or what he is like. They usually decline a creationist label. For them, intelligent design remains a big tent that can accommodate a wide variety of people who may have different ideas about God.

Revealing the Designer’s Person
This is the point at which I part company with intelligent design advocates. Though I respect their rigorous science and their big tent inclusiveness, I believe it is possible to form an opinion about the designer’s persona. And the reason is that we have his signature. It is beauty. Beauty points beyond intelligence, beyond design, and even beyond power. What God brought into being tells us what kind of person he is, what is his taste and his nature.

So nature’s content and the flourishes in his signature reveal God’s style and his taste. He’s a
person, far beyond us in every respect, but nevertheless a person. And he has emotions. The Bible speaks of his mercy, his grief, his joy, and his anger. For his pleasure, he planted in the Garden not only fruit trees for food, but also fragrant flowers for sensory delight. And he made silver-toned songbirds with magnificent plumage, far beyond any process of mate attraction. For him efficient function was not enough. He gave us a rich enhancement: aesthetic pleasure. This is a divine experience, and we are privileged to share it. God takes pleasure in good, lovely things, and so can we. In the Bible we read that there will be “joy in heaven” (Luke 15:7, ASV). How can we humans understand sentient joy in persons of supahuman intelligence? His thoughts are not our thoughts. Yet when we delight in beauty, we are thinking some of his thoughts. We can resonate with him, sense his closeness, and speak with him up close and personal. His divine personhood comes through and engages mine. We become friends.

The Ultimate Gift: Aesthetic Joy
This sharing attribute of God is a wonder, a mystery. The Bible says it’s true: we are made “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4, KJV). Can we grasp the weight of this? Just as we enjoy sharing good things, so does he. He seeks our company in his aesthetic pleasure! He wants us to enjoy what he enjoys. Paul urges us: “whatsoever things are lovely, ... think on these things” (Phil. 4:8, KJV). God invites us to cultivate a taste like his, and by study and habitual choice we may come close to him. My response is astonished awe. This generous, sharing God is the one I must fear and adore and worship. I like the Bible’s picture of God walking with Adam and Eve in the Garden, pointing delightedly at the beauty all around. God the artist puts his signature there. And like Adam and Eve, we too can share in the joy of the divine Artist. It really is true: “He created us that we might have joy.”

Made in His Image
The Bible tells us we are made in the image of God. But what is this *imago dei*? In what way can frail, limited humankind be like God? Surely not in any physical resemblance, for God is not flesh and blood. It must be in the realm of mind. And if we dare to contemplate the mind of God, there can be no more wondrous *imago dei* than to possess some of God’s capacity for conceiving and delighting in beauty, and even creating it ourselves. It is an ultimate gift.

My philosopher friend John Mark Reynolds once described beauty to me as an idea in the mind of God. But that Godidea has been implanted in our minds also. You and I, too, can walk in the Garden with God. We can open our senses wide to exult in all the magnificence he has made. Our tastes, though limited, can be cultivated to be close to his. The full range of aesthetic pleasure—made by both God and man—has been opened to us. It includes the splendors of the cosmos, all observable nature, and also our man-made music, our art, and our dance. King David loved exuberant dance, and surely so does God. He savors what we create: our sculpture, our poetry and rhetoric, all of our exalted flights of inventive fancy. The ability to create resides in him, but he implanted some of it in us. He knows what’s featured at The Getty in Los Angeles as well as the Guggenheim in New York City, and he knows the music with which we worship him. He understands the good and also the not good. We too can discriminate. It’s all ours to explore, to evaluate, to enjoy, and to create.

The intelligent design movement has given us much. It has effectively challenged the sterile godlessness of modern science. But it stops short of revealing the person of a Creator who is wise and powerful and who shows supreme artistry. Before him we stand in awe. We can lift our
wonderment above the mechanics of Creation—the hard intricacies of particle physics, quantum gravity, string theory, and the mysteries of time. By all means we should wrestle with these entities to seek understanding. But let us also revel in the wonder, the beauty of it all.

God is a person, and we are invited to come close and know him. He is the ultimate engineer-Creator and also the supreme artist-Creator. As we delight in his aesthetic gifts, our artist-God will surely take pleasure in a flowering of joy amongst his creatures. Human joy itself will be seen as a thing of beauty, a part of his divine signature. And as he did at the end of those first Creation days, he will say, “It is very good.”

Bernard Brandstater, MB.BS, FRCA, is professor of anesthesiology at Loma Linda University in Loma Linda, California.

Teaching Braille through the Fundamental Beliefs

Submitted: Nov 14, 2012
By Dexter Thomas

Those with physical challenges such as blindness and deafness are often unreached by the church despite the fact that Seventh-day Adventists have a history of championing the cause of "the least of these." In November 2011 the denomination’s Pacific Union Conference gave a grant to the Freemont (California) Church for an educational ministry teaching Braille using the 28 Fundamental Beliefs.

This ministry is important because many blind Americans do not read Braille due to the fact that they lost their sight as adults. As program director, I took the children’s version of the Fundamental Beliefs and created an abridged Braille version with Braille exercises as part of each chapter. With these materials blind individuals could improve their Braille literacy and at the same time learn Bible doctrines. I used the children’s version of the document because of its brevity and simplicity.

We advertised free Braille classes as a fun learning experience with food and fellowship. This is a key concept because the visually challenged tend to be highly isolated due to the mobility issues they face. Schools for the blind, the National Federation for the Blind, blind camp participants, and Lighthouse for the Blind were used as avenues for advertising and recruiting persons to attend our “Braille Hangout Club.” The food and fellowship not only attracted the visually challenged but also their caregivers and a number of Freemont Church members who helped create a warm, non-threatening environment for the class.

I was asked why learn Braille when so many services offer audio books and other listening materials. The fact is that listening to recordings is not reading. It does not teach sentence construction or spelling, etc. Reading Braille is essential to a blind individual’s literacy.

I have taught Braille classes at the Camp for the Blind and met many blind individuals who have been without sight for as long as 20 years and never learned to read Braille. “I never knew Braille was this easy, in fact it is easier than learning what I was previously taught,” said Mary during her first Braille lessons. Even sighted individuals have been excited to learn a new language that was simple and practical.

As the class progressed, I watched as hearts were turned, minds were changed and literacy among the blind increased. This unreached group related to the Adventist Church as people who cared for their well-being and education. Visually impaired individuals are use to persons rushing by them and feeling lonely in a sighted world. When we reach out to them we are able to bring confidence and assurance to them that there are still people in the world who care.

The Braille Fundamentals project placed our church in a compassionate ministry to an often-ignored community. When Christ said “the least of these,” He was talking about the blind, deaf, disabled and poor. My prayer is that such a ministry will spread to other places as churches partner with the disabled and their families to promote their wholeness and to give them a foretaste of the unconditional love and acceptance we will all experience in the Earth made new.
Dexter Thomas is Assistant Pastor at Beacon Light Seventh-day Adventist Church in Oakland, California. He can be reached by Email at: dex4jesus@sbcglobal.net or by phone at (256) 604-9369.
In 1998, when he began pastoring in Malaysia, Lawrence Francis probably couldn’t have imagine doing ministry in the US, let alone in the cab of a big farm tractor. Francis came to the States in 2006, and when he was called to his present four-church district in Nebraska (Beaver City, Broken Bow, Holdrege, and Kearney), he set himself a goal of visiting every home within two years.

“But things are different today than they used to be. These are mostly farmers and ranchers, and they are so busy, they never had time to visit with me. It just wasn’t working.” Francis didn’t set out to invent a new kind of friendship evangelism. When one of his ranchers said, “I have to be in the field,” he simply asked if he could come, too. The man seemed surprised, but Pastor Francis said he didn’t know anything about ranching and would like to learn. He wouldn’t slow the rancher down or get in his way.

For the next two hours, he shared a cab with the rancher. “We talked about all kinds of things. I learned all about combines and plowing and harvesting, and I got to know the man, too. I had a great time! But here’s the surprising thing: to this day, two years later, this man still tells me ‘You don’t know how meaningful, how important that meeting was.’” Francis thinks there was something bothering the rancher—something the pastor didn’t know (“and I don’t need to know”)—and the mere fact of human connection helped. The rancher, Francis reports, has moved from the periphery of the church to the center of the activity.

That was just the beginning. Francis has ridden in tractors, gone fishing, learned about livestock, even shot a gun and served in a restaurant. His outreach is not restricted to his members. He sometimes goes, for instance, to a local mall and sits with men in the waiting area while their wives shop. Most of the time the conversation is simple: “Are you from around here? What do you do?” Sometimes he likes to wear a shirt with an Adventist insignia on it, and they ask questions about that. And sometimes, when they learn he’s a pastor, they begin to share more sensitive things with him. He remembers one man telling him that his son had just died. Francis listened, showed his compassion, even shared Bible passages about the resurrection. When the man’s wife came back and he asked if he could pray with them, they said yes. “I may never meet them again. I just want to connect with people.”

When he first came to the area and was interviewed for his present position, he was taken to a local Thai restaurant. He likes that food and liked the restaurant, so he kept coming, and of course he made friends with the owners. Over time, they shared their financial difficulties with him, and the fact that they needed more help, but couldn’t afford it, so they kept all the work within the family. After that, Pastor Francis would go at peak times to eat, and if he saw them getting over-busy, he’d get up and start taking orders, serving food, and bussing tables. They were amazed and grateful, and the friendship was cemented. After hours, when the family ate together, he would sometimes stay and eat with them, and they would always invite him to pray, although they are Buddhist. The family continued to go more deeply into debt and he agreed, regretfully, with their recent decision to close the restaurant. Now, the woman cooks from home.
and delivers to other restaurants. They no longer live in Pastor Francis’ district, but the friendship continues and is still strong.

One of his most moving stories involves an actual saved life. The pastor was at a nursing home, visiting one of his members. He noticed a family in the waiting room and felt urged to make contact with them. “How are you doing?” he asked them, and it came out that one of the men was distraught because his wife was dying. Francis knelt by the man to talk to him and listen to him. “It was 25 minutes—my knees were sore! But there wasn’t a chair nearby, and I couldn’t leave him,” says Francis.

Finally the man looked at Francis and asked, “Who are you, and what are you doing here?” Francis says, “These are all white people in my area, and here I am, looking like an Indian guy, coming from Malaysia!” He explained that he was a pastor, in the home to visit people.

“You visit people?” the other man exclaimed. “Would you visit my wife if I take her home?”

“Of course,” Pastor Francis assured him.

Through this, he came to know the man’s sister, and she told him she was extremely worried over her brother, because he insisted that when his wife died, he was going to shoot himself. So Francis would ask the man about what interested him, in an attempt to temporarily take his mind off his crisis, and also in the hopes of reminding him of better things about his life.

“I ended up going out and cutting wood with him. He taught me to use his chain saw. He thought it was amusing that a pastor would be interested in such things.” Lawrence Francis is interested in all kinds of things, but mostly he’s interested in people. He knew that helping this man retrieve his self-confidence would help him in other ways. Another interest the man had was guns. He was showing off his guns and said, “This one is still loaded.”

“Well, I didn’t want him to have a loaded gun in the house! So I said, ‘Hey, it’s been a long time since I shot a gun; let’s go out and you can show me how to shoot it.’” In fact, Francis had only once shot a gun, some years before, and of course the man had other guns and other ammunition; emptying this one gun would not prevent suicide by itself. But going out in the back yard and shooting may also have helped him relieve his feelings a little and regain some perspective.

When the wife died, Francis was asked to do the funeral. The head elder of their Methodist church liked his sermon so much that she invited Francis to join their church’s Bible study group. So he did, and he likes it so much he’s been an active member of the group ever since. In fact, the leader of that group was recently baptized as an Adventist, but still considers himself a Methodist and attends both churches. He has gotten his church to have a Saturday evening service. At this service, the pastor “practices her message on the 15-18 people who come, and then preaches that same message on Sunday morning,” says Francis.

Shortly after his new friend’s wife had died, Francis had to go to Malaysia to be with his own sick mother. She died a month later, but he was gone three months in all, and although he has kept contact, he hasn’t been able to see the man in person yet since he came back home a few months ago and began to try to catch up with his four churches. However, the man “is still alive
and is finding meaning in living,” to Pastor Francis’ relief and joy.

Just the day before this writing, another member of that church asked him to visit her in the hospital. She wants him to do her funeral, too, when the time comes. “I’m not here to make Methodists—or anyone else—into Adventists,” Pastor Francis says. And it seems they know it. No one appears to feel threatened—indeed, the other pastor may be grateful for a colleague’s helping hand.

“When you are yourself, without ulterior motives, you make an impression on them,” says Francis. “I’m not here to flatter or change them—I just want to connect. They’re not ‘targets’ or ‘interests’ or ‘converts.’ They’re simply my friends.”
**Talbingo Poem**

By Chris Barrett

This poem is the result of a Sabbath-day drive to our local Church camp yesterday. It was held in the beautiful Snowy Mountain town of Talbingo.

Worship was three tasks. We were to go outside, alone, in the bush and parkland around the facility and find a spot to sit quietly. I sat by a small creek, in a wooded gully, forested with trees, undergrowth, and blackberry vines. The creek flowed to Talbingo dam, part of the Snowy Mountains Hydro Scheme.

The first 5 minutes were to be spent eyes shut just listening to nature's sounds. The second 5 were to be eyes open observing nature. We were to write down what we heard, saw, and then what we sensed God saying to us through the surroundings.

At the conclusion of this we went inside, formed small groups, and shared what we had experienced. This was followed by 20 minutes to write a psalm/poem about what we experienced in the first segment.

Here is what I wrote and read out in the sharing that followed. The last line was hastily added to “save my soul” when I knew it could go public in the meeting. The leader had a rather puzzled look on his face after I read it, but another member later commented very positively on the poem.

There are changes I would now make with more time, but I've shared it here as was, in the shape the experience and time permitted it to reach. Much of our life is like that, always room to improve, shaped by the pressures of time, circumstances, and what we are at the moment. Unlike this poem, much that we do allows no change or “editing” afterwards. I had not given it a title, nor have I yet!

So, here it is:

I hear your sounds fill the air

Birds and breeze call from tree to tree

Breeze slides past and whispers everywhere

Natures form and shape in sound I see

Bird snaps up worm hunger sates
Life's cycle flows past my feet
Takes its journey to the lake
Rises to the air and falls as sleet

Nature's doing what nature does
Perfumed and beautiful in its green
Unforgiving harsh and cruel if crossed
It's path ahead its path we've seen...
Unless a God steps in with change!!

Chris Barrett