Adventist Churches in Maryland Discuss the State’s Same-sex Marriage Initiative: Maryland Adventists are struggling with how to respond to a state ballot measure that if passed could permit marriage of two partners of the same sex. Two Adventist-sponsored events with well-known speakers are scheduled this Sabbath (October 6)....

Adventist Bible Scholars Annual Meeting to Focus on Ordination: Two large Adventist theological groups will gather next month in Chicago, where the topic is (you guessed it!) ordination and may provide a preview of the issues that will be raised by theologians discussing the issue in preparation for the 2015 General Conference Session....

Union Conference Executive Committee Responds to Comments by General Conference Officers: Members of the Columbia Union Conference Executive Committee appear to favor church unity that comes when local unions are given powers of self-determination, under the overarching framework of the world church. They have so declared in a letter to General Conference officers....

Adventists Attending the Christian Community Development Association Form a Caucus: Adventists interested in networking with fellow members on matters of community development are urged to join a caucus of church members that formed last week in Minneapolis at the annual conference of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA). Learn how....

Current Issues in the Adventist Church Will Be Discussed at Spiritual Renaissance Weekend: A year-end weekend retreat on the California coast south of the Bay Area will feature presentations by a direct descendent of Ellen G. White; study of issues in the church related to women in ministry and other contemporary issues....

Loma Linda University Medical Center CEO Named to Top 100 Women in Health Care:
Ruthita J. Fike, chief executive officer of Loma Linda University Medical Center, has been included in a list of the top 100 women hospital and health system leaders in the US.

**Visa Issued to a Foreign Adventist Church Worker for the First Time by a Gulf State:** A historical milestone was reached recently when the United Arab Emirates granted its first-ever visa to an Adventist Church worker from abroad to officially minister in the country.

**Two Adventist Pastors in Africa are Accused in Unrelated Criminal Cases:** A bizarre charge of trafficking in human blood has placed a high-ranking Adventist official behind bars in Togo, and unrelated charges of brokering a rice deal gone bad has led to the imprisonment of a 65-year old Adventist minister in Ghana.

### OPINION

**Squeaky Wheels:** The Church prohibits its members from ingesting illicit drugs, using tobacco, or drinking alcohol. But since scientists now see obesity as an even more insidious danger, blogger Mark Gutman wonders if we should start screening our baptismal candidates for excess body fat—well, sort of....

**Why Do Things Evolve?:** How often we decry the obstinancy of evolutionists who insist on a Godless and pointless universe. But blogger Jack Hoehn says that Genesis and Darwin actually agree on a remarkable number of areas....

**Dr. David Wilbur: Power and Illusion: Religion and Human Need. Part 2:** Many Adventists appeal to the church's rapid numerical growth as proof positive of its legitimate remnant among all Christian faiths. Not so fast, says blogger Ervin Taylor in his continuing book review....

**The Standard Deal:** Did the thief to the right of Jesus on the cross get a "special deal" from the Master—instant salvation and no requirement for good works to verify his sincerity? No, says columnist Preston Foster. It's the same deal Jesus offers us all....

**Yes, We Must Circumcise Creation:** Blogger Stephen Foster believes the Sabbath is a weekly reaffirmation of belief in the Creator and in His creation, and is a necessary precursor to belief in a Creator who promises to come back to earth to re-create His own, in the clouds of glory....

**Considering Blamelessness and Vindication:** Devotional writer Debbonnaire Kovacs prays her way through Psalm 26....

### Subscribers' Bonus Features
The Household of Christ Doesn't Need the House: Chicago's "Epic" congregation will organize as an Adventist church October 20 without a church building, or any immediate plans to own one. The times, they are a-changin'.... (Available only to subscribers.)
Adventist Churches in Maryland Discuss the State’s Same-sex Marriage Initiative

Submitted: Oct 4, 2012
By AT News Team

In November voters in the state of Maryland will be asked to vote on a measure that would permit marriage between two partners of the same sex. There are more than 40,000 members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the state, although at least 10 percent of these are likely not of voting age.

This Sabbath (October 5 and 6) two Adventist churches in the Washington DC area will be hosting presentations and discussions on the topic of homosexuality, according to Claude Steen, editor of an independent newsletter for pastors and educators on the needs of lesbian and gay church members. The ballot measure has sparked wide interest among Adventists.

The new documentary *Seventh-Gay Adventists* will be shown at 6:30 p.m. Friday at the Capital Memorial Church in Washington DC. The film will be followed by a panel discussion with several Adventists from a variety of professions and viewpoints. The meeting is part of the regular First Friday series organized by Adventist young adults in the metropolitan area where the denomination’s world headquarters is located.

The question of how Adventists should respond to that ballot initiative is part of the focus of a day-long forum on Saturday at the Spencerville Church. At 11:15 a.m. Bill Knott, editor of the *Adventist Review* will preach and in the afternoon a panel will present the denomination’s traditional position on homosexuality. The event is being organized by Nicholas Miller, a lawyer and a faculty member in the seminary at Andrews University. He is also one of the editors of the nearly 600-page book published in August by Andrews University Press entitled *Homosexuality, Marriage, and the Church*. The event will defend Adventist doctrine and explore the threat to religious liberty posed by changing societal attitudes towards homosexuality.

The weekend represents a departure for Adventist churches in that what has long been a taboo subject will be openly discussed. Daneen Akers, who with her husband Stephen Eyer, produced the film *Seventh-Gay Adventists*, said that the documentary “follows the stories of three gay and lesbian Adventists as they struggle to be true to themselves and their faith. This intersection of faith and sexuality is at the core of many political, religious, and family conversations today, and the film offers viewers the opportunity to experience the spiritual journey of a gay person of faith. [It] isn't about changing anyone's beliefs; it's just about listening to a demographic that is talked about and at but seldom within our church.”

Capitol Memorial Church is located at 3150 Chesapeake Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20008. More information on the Friday evening meeting is available on the Facebook page of Metro Area Adventist Young Adults: [http://www.facebook.com/pages/MAAYA-Ministry-First-Fridays/279997310352](http://www.facebook.com/pages/MAAYA-Ministry-First-Fridays/279997310352)

Spencerville Church is located at 16325 New Hampshire Avenue, Silver Spring, MD 20905. More information about the symposium on Sabbath is at: [http://www.spencervillesda.org/](http://www.spencervillesda.org/)
Adventist Bible Scholars Annual Meeting to Focus on Ordination

Submitted: Oct 1, 2012
By AT News Team

Each year the Seventh-day Adventists who are religion professors at colleges and universities gather for an annual joint meeting of their two professional organizations, the Adventist Theological Society (ATS) and the Adventist Society for Religious Studies (ASRS). This year the meeting will convene November 15 through 17 in Chicago just prior to the annual meeting of the related major academic groups, the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) and the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Given the current debate in the denomination, perhaps it is not surprise that the focus of this year’s meeting is ordination.

The keynote address will be “A Short History of Ordination” by Darius Jankiewicz from Andrews University. He has made a presentation on the same topic at several places recently and one of those can be viewed on line at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScKb3teILmI

Leo Ranzolin, Jr., from Pacific Union College, will present “The Case for Women’s Ordination: The Trajectory of an Egalitarian Ethic in the Pauline Letters.” John Brunt, senior pastor of the Azure Hills Church near Loma Linda and former dean of the School of Religion at Walla Walla University, will discuss a paper entitled “Does the New Testament Contain a Clear Practice of Ordination for Ministry?” A paper on “The Vatican’s Rejection of Women’s Ordination” will be read by Kessia R. Bennett from Andrews University. Theodore Levterov from Loma Linda University will present a paper entitled, “Principles of Ordination in the Early Seventh-day Adventist Church.”

There will be a panel discussion on “the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary’s Statement on Ordination” chaired by Edwin Reynolds from Southern Adventist University who was recently named as one of the members of the North American Division (NAD) study committee on the theology of ordination. The other panelists will include Denis Fortin, the dean of the seminary; Nick Miller and Teresa Reeve from Andrews University; Kendra Haloviak Valentine from La Sierra University, who is also a member of the NAD committee; and Zdravko Plantak, chairman of the religion department at Washington Adventist University. This discussion may provide a preview of the internal debates in the NAD committee.

Other presentations on the ordination theme will include “Your Daughters Shall Prophesy” by Bev Beem from Walla Walla University and Ginger Harwood from La Sierra University; “The Anglican Journey to Equality in Ministry” by Gilbert Valentine, the noted historian of the Adventist movement from La Sierra University; “Women’s Ordination as a Threat to Church Unity” by Mark Carr from Loma Linda University; “Images of Power, the Image of God and a Kingdom of Priests” by Jean Sheldon from Pacific Union College; “An Exegesis of Genesis 3:16 in the Light of Genesis 4:7 and 3:15” by Jacques Doukhan from Andrews University; and a paper presenting a Biblical conciliation for the Adventist debate on ordination by Bruce Boyd from Canadian University College.

ATS is generally known as the more conservative of the two Adventist scholarly groups.
requiring of its members a statement of faith similar to that of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). Of the two presidential addresses on Friday evening, November 16, the presentation by ATS president Stephen Bauer from Southern Adventist University is the only one during the meeting to depart from the ordination theme. He will speak on “Creation and Kenosis.” The ASRS president, John Reeve from Andrews University, will address “Ordination and Priesthood.”

Sabbath morning the scholars will worship with the North Shore Church in Chicago. The meeting also includes ten sectional meetings and smaller groups with specialized concerns.

Adventist Today has not been able to get any information on when and if these papers will be published for a wider audience. There have been one or two joint publishing projects in the past in which a book resulted from one of these annual meetings and ATS often publishes papers presented by its members in its journal.
Union Conference Executive Committee Responds to Comments by General Conference Officers

Submitted: Oct 4, 2012
By AT News Team

Last week the executive committee of the Columbia Union Conference voted a response to the comments released by the General Conference (GC) officers following the four to one vote of the union’s constituency delegates in July to end gender discrimination in ordination to the gospel ministry. The statement was released in the last 48 hours.

Acknowledging “the concerns and questions” raised by the constituency action, and expressing regret “that some have misunderstood our motives and intentions,” the union conference leaders expressed their “unwavering … solidarity with our worldwide church family in faith, belief, doctrine and mission.” Appealing for understanding, the elected governing body of the eight-state region said, “We were compelled to act on our conscience … because we believe it will and already is having a positive impact on our churches, ministries and mission; we believe it is morally and ethically right; we believe that God calls whom He chooses and our responsibility and privilege is to fully recognize His proven calls; we want to see new generations of members unabashedly engage in the mission of our church and … hasten the promised return of Christ.”

The statement points out that the Columbia Union leaders are not pressuring other unions to go along with their position. “We accept, respect and understand that practicing inclusive ministerial ordination would not work well in all parts of the world and … we in no way wish to force others to take this step.” It simply pleads for others who may disagree to “understand our need and the opportunity it provides us to grow God’s kingdom in our part of the vineyard.”

Such public statements both from the GC officers and the union conference leadership are unprecedented in recent decades. With rare exception in the early 1980s, such disagreements have been discussed privately by denominational administrators and policy-makers.

“If those who disagree around the world cannot provide some room for Adventists in areas of the world such as this one to ordain women pastors, then this could become a serious disruption of denominational unity,” a retired church administrator told Adventist Today. “This is a simple plea of the type that has been made on many, many occasions with less publicity. ‘Please let us handle this in our own way.’ We really cannot have a global church with such multicultural diversity as we have unless we are prepared to provide this kind of latitude and understanding.”

Others, especially certain independent ministries and more conservative voices, fear that if the GC permits flexibility on the issue of ordination it will result in pressure to give in on more fundamental standards. “Where do we draw the line?” asked a retired Bible teacher who sent an Email to Adventist Today.
Adventists Attending the Christian Community Development Association Form a Caucus

Submitted: Oct 4, 2012
By AT News Team

The Seventh-day Adventists attending the 2012 annual conference of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) in Minneapolis last week met and formed an Adventist caucus. They are establishing a Facebook page to continue to stay in touch and share stories from their projects around the United States.

The CCDA annual event has become a major connection point for Evangelicals and other Christians involved in community development and urban ministries. Key speakers included Tony Campolo, the well-known sociologist at Eastern University; John Perkins who helped found CCDA and directed a community-based ministry in the Mississippi delta for many years; and Shane Claiborne, the author and activist.

The Adventist gathering was convened by Charity Garcia, a PhD student at Andrews University and a leader in the Harbor of Hope ministry in Benton Harbor, Michigan. The meeting included pastors and community organizers from California and the Midwest. Information from previous years indicates that very likely two or three dozen Adventists attend the CCDA annual conferences and many are unaware that other Adventists are involved.

“We talked about [starting a] dialogue about Christian community development within an Adventist context,” Garcia told Adventist Today, “Most likely we will schedule a lunch for our group next year in New Orleans,” where the 2013 CCDA conference will convene.

Adventists interested in more information will be put in contact with Garcia through Adventist Today. They can post a comment here asking to be put in contact or write directly to the Adventist Today email address and make the request. Be sure to include your full name and an email address.
Current Issues in the Adventist Church Will Be Discussed at Spiritual Renaissance Weekend

Submitted: Oct 2, 2012
By AT News Team

Stanley Patterson, the author of the cover story on “kingly power” in the most recent paper edition of Adventist Today, will be one of the speakers at the Spiritual Renaissance Retreat, December 28-31, in the Monterey-Carmel region of California. The event will include a session exploring what happens next on the ordination issue in 2012.

Other speakers will include Charles White who will share a unique family perspective on this great-grandmother, Adventist founder Ellen White. Also, Charles Scriven, president of Kettering College and current presiding officer of the Association of Adventist Forums, and his wife, Dr. Becky Wang, a physician and administrator at Kettering Medical Center.

Pastor Jim Pedersen, president of the Northern California Conference, will participate in a question and answer session in which participants can ask a conference president “anything you want.” Other topics on the agenda include “Physics and the Dilemma of the Adventist Church” and “Leading by Humility or Arrogance.”

This is year 19 for this event organized by John Hughson, associate pastor at the Pacific Union College Church, in collaboration with Adventist Today and the Adventist Forum. “This is the best year end ‘get-away’ there is,” says Hughson. “Come to this unique family retreat for thought, insight and renewal. It is inspiration for a life that matters at its best.”

Readers who are interested in more information may contact Hughson by phone at 707-965-7297, or fax 707-965-6774, or E-mail at jhughson@puc.edu. There is also information at this web address: www.srrmonterey.com.
Loma Linda University Medical Center CEO Named to Top 100 Women in Health Care

Submitted: Oct 4, 2012
By AT News Team

The respected health care trade journal *Becker's Hospital Review* has named Ruthita J. Fike, Chief Executive Officer of Loma Linda University Medical Center to its 2012 list of the top 100 women hospital and health system leaders. This recognizes her standing among the top health care administrators in the nation.

“These 100 women demonstrate outstanding leadership within the hospital and healthcare industry,” the journal editors said. Fike and the others “were chosen based on a wide range of management and leadership skills, including oversight of hospital or health system operations, financial turnarounds and quality improvement initiatives.” The journal does not permit individuals to get on the list by paying a membership fee or something similar.

Fike is also executive vice president for hospital affairs at the university. She assumed her responsibilities in 2004. She was formerly executive vice president of operations and support services for Centura Health in Colorado. From 1996 to 2002, she was CEO of Porter Adventist Hospital in Denver and Littleton Adventist Hospital.
Visa Issued to a Foreign Adventist Church Worker for the First Time by a Gulf State

Submitted: Oct 2, 2012
By Adventist News Network (ANN)

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has given a residence visa to a foreign Seventh-day Adventist Church employee, the first time that country or any nation in the denomination’s Gulf Field has offered the church such recognition. The move follows the acceptance of the official registration of the church by the Ruler’s Court of Ras Al Khaimah, one of the seven emirates that make up the UAE.

Jessie Colegado, originally from the Philippines, became an official employee of the church in UAE upon receiving his visa on September 16. Colegado is secretary-treasurer of the Gulf Field, based in Ras Al Khaimah. Previously, workers had to obtain visas for the Persian Gulf nation under the auspices of another organization.

Church officials said the new status will make it easier to get visas for other church workers and to import religious literature for use by members. "This will make our work in the United Arab Emirates easier than it has been in the past,” said Homer Trecartin, president of the denomination’s Greater Middle East Union, based in Beirut, Lebanon. The Gulf Field is a unit of the union and includes along with the UAE, the countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The UAE is the only one of these nations where the denomination is officially recognized.

Gulf Field President Michael Collins said the Adventist Church is active and growing in many places. The field has roughly 1,100 members from more than 35 nations. Many members are expatriate workers from Southeast Asia and Africa, Collins said. The church has been active in some parts of the region for over 30 years, endeavoring to help the community with health and education projects. “The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a strong commitment to community building and making a difference in the lives of people who have great needs,” said Mike Ryan, a vice president of the General Conference.

Last year, the denomination consolidated work in the Middle East and North Africa to create the Greater Middle East Union (GMEU). The union reports directly to the Adventist Church headquarters instead of one of the 13 world divisions. The GMEU covers 21 countries and includes nearly 500 million people. The Adventist Church in the union has approximately 3,000 member and 50 pastors.
Two Adventist Pastors in Africa are Accused in Unrelated Criminal Cases

Submitted: Oct 3, 2012
By AT News Team

It is rare that a Seventh-day Adventist minister is prosecuted on criminal charges that have nothing to do with religious issues. In the last few days two such cases have surfaced. A pastor in Togo has been jailed for murder and a pastor in Ghana is wanted for fraud.

Lawyers and human rights advocates say that Pastor Antonio dos Anjos Monteiro was arrested in Togo more than six months ago on spurious charges, according to the Adventist News Network (ANN). He was implicated along with two others in an alleged blood trafficking network. The accuser had earlier confessed to the murder of some 20 young girls, claiming he worked for a criminal ring that trafficked human blood. The man had met Monteiro when the pastor previously ministered to him.

Pastor Monteiro is a native of Cape Verde and has served since 2009 as Sabbath School and Personal Ministries director for the Sahel Union Mission with headquarters in Lome, Togo. Even though a police search of Monteiro’s home and local church headquarters failed to turn up evidence, local newspapers earlier this year published inflammatory photos depicting containers of blood alongside stories detailing the allegations against Monteiro.

“The suggestion that an Adventist pastor would hire someone to murder young girls and then traffic their blood is bizarre, fanciful and false,” said Todd McFarland, an associate general counsel in the Office of General Counsel at Adventist world church headquarters. Public pressure to solve last year’s string of murders, however, continues to thwart Monteiro’s release and exoneration, McFarland said. Church leaders have met with government officials to expedite the case.

Monteiro’s lawyer is very hopeful. The pastor was initially held in solitary confinement for 14 days and has since been transferred to the Civil Prison of Lome, where pre-trial detainees are held together with convicted felons. John Graz, General Conference director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty traveled to Togo and told ANN that despite deplorable prison conditions, Monteiro remains “optimistic and in good health.”

Last week a bench warrant was issued in Tema, Ghana, for Pastor Emmanuel A. Kunadu for alleged involvement in a fraudulent rice deal. The 65-year-old Adventist minister has been accused of brokering a deal between a general goods merchant and a woman who was looking for a buyer for her imported rice. He is accused of taking payment from the merchant but failing to give the supplier a full accounting for the funds. He has “gone into hiding,” The Daily Guide, a Ghana newspaper reports.

There are more than 5,300 Adventist church members in Togo out of population of six million. There are 375,000 church members in Ghana out a population of 25 million. The denomination operates Glei Adventist Eye Hospital in Togo, two hospitals and several community clinics in Ghana, as well as a college and three secondary schools.
I have always tended to see the worst health “sin” as smoking. Next worst probably and right close behind smoking is a tie between alcohol and “no-no” drugs. I guess I’ve gotten my hierarchy from the church manual, which rates those particular problems as bad enough to merit church discipline (or to prevent acquiring membership). I didn’t see much drinking or drugging when I was growing up, so I guess that’s why I thought smoking was worst.

A church certainly has the right to set standards. People have benefited because the church discourages certain activities and provides programs to help people quit smoking or drinking. But why are some harmful behaviors allowed, while others aren’t? Some health rule violations rate as F, but others can be considered as C or D, so that your particular health style may not make the honor roll but at least you pass.

Maybe the church manual guidelines cover the most serious health problems. But perhaps it’s time to revise or modify the rankings. “Two RAND researchers, health economist Roland Sturm and psychiatrist Kenneth Wells examined the comparative effects of obesity, smoking, heavy drinking, and poverty on chronic health conditions and health expenditures. Their finding: Obesity is the most serious problem. It is linked to a big increase in chronic health conditions and significantly higher health expenditures. And it affects more people than smoking, heavy drinking, or poverty.” (http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB4549/index1.html.) The RAND article quoted goes on to describe the problem in more detail, but the point is that obesity is hurting us (at least the U.S.) more than smoking.
Because smoking has been recognized as a problem even in the secular world, all kinds of measures have been taken to limit it. “. . . increased education, access control (including smoking bans in many buildings nationwide), taxation, better enforcement of laws relating to minors, curbs on advertising, and increased clinical attention, have resulted in decreased rates for both smoking and drinking (ibid).” The squeaky wheel gets the grease. And the grease seems to be helping. Why not apply that same grease to some other areas that are hurting us physically, as well as mentally and spiritually?

Lack of exercise contributes to overweight, and also to lack of fitness regardless of weight, but exercise deficiency is still way down the list. The words “exercise” and “fitness” do not appear in the church manual. As long as you don’t smoke, drink, or do drugs, you can sit on a couch all day and stuff yourself at no risk to church membership.
How about time wasted on the internet? Recently I started posting a book report each week on Facebook, trying to provide something more than the “I played a game” reports and other trivia that are becoming more frequent on that site. Overeating and lack of exercise and spending a lot of time browsing or playing games online are part of the same package that is considered OK because it isn’t as bad as smoking.

How about getting too little sleep? The book *Be Excellent at Anything*, by Tony Schwartz, has led me to change my sleep habits, so that I aim to have my light out by 10:00 most nights. On page 57, Schwartz writes, “No single behavior, we’ve come to believe, more fundamentally influences our effectiveness in waking life than sleep. . . . William Dement, the widely acknowledged dean of sleep researchers, argues that sleep may well be more critical to our well-being than diet, exercise, and even heredity.” Lack of sleep affects driving, working, just plain thinking, and, of course, spirituality. So if we’re going to discipline people who can’t quit smoking, why don’t we discipline people who don’t get enough sleep? “We’ll be happy to baptize you, brother, as soon as you can report to us that you’re getting at least seven hours of sleep each night.” “Sister, we see the bags under your eyes, and we need to warn you that we may have to disfellowship you if you don’t start getting more sleep.”

My health habits are far from perfect, but I have never smoked, drunk an alcoholic beverage, taken a no-no drug, or even eaten meat. I don’t advocate doing any of those things. Loosening of health standards is not progress. I’m referring to the problem of failing to notice our own deficiencies because we are focusing on other people who have officially “bad” habits. Even people who aren’t overweight can have lousy diets or be physically unfit. And to realize how hard it is for others to change bad habits, we only need to pay attention to our own struggles to change.

If we were willing to point out the problems with and make help available for other habits the
way we’ve done with smoking, people might be more motivated to work on other behavior changes. But when we single out a few problem behaviors (three, to be exact) and say virtually nothing about others, we help reinforce the idea that those other behaviors are unimportant matters. We’ll help people quit smoking so they can join the church, but we haven’t made a priority of helping with other health struggles.

Work at getting enough sleep, and you might think more clearly to eat better. Think of your weight, and you might be more interested in exercise and eating. Think of exercise, and you might shut off the computer (or television) more. Tackling one area often leads to tackling a second and then a third area. What seemed like a huge task gets taken care of one habit at a time. (See The Power of Less, by Leo Babauta. The whole book is about focusing on goals, one at a time. See also Be Excellent at Anything, p. 38.) Work on good health habits the way some motivated people work on quitting smoking.

We don’t need sermons or articles that tell how bad we are because of the way we eat, sleep, or use our time. More than two-thirds of smokers say they want to quit, but few actually succeed, according to a new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (http://healthland.time.com/2011/11/11/most-smokers-want-to-quit-but-few-use-the-best-strategies/). That sentence can probably have the words “smokers” and “quit” replaced by “overweight people” and “lose weight” or “couch potatoes” “get more exercise” and . . . . You can fill the blanks with your own relevant words.

We can improve in problem areas. Like smokers who have to quit several times before they quit for good, we may have ups and downs before we finally stop a damaging habit or start a healthful one. In The Willpower Instinct, Kelly McGonigal describes how we are often set up for failure at reaching a goal despite our best intentions. But if we’re as motivated to change as we want smokers to be if they’re going to join our church, we’ll keep looking for better ways to accomplish our goals. How about using the buddy system, used by the Five-Day Plan to Stop Smoking? Find someone else who’s sharing your struggles, and help each other tackle them.

We’re not healthy just because we avoid three bad behaviors. Let’s help each other with exercise, healthful eating, sleeping, use of time, and other healthful practices that can improve the quality of life for us and those around us.
Evolution in the Life to Come

So how long would you be satisfied with a perfect but static life in the world to come?

Pastor Art Harms once told me a little story to help me comprehend eternity. "During eternity a little sparrow living in New York wants to visit San Francisco, so every 1,000 years he flies from the Atlantic to the Pacific and back again. On the way he stops and rests on the top of the highest peak he can find in the Rockies. By the time he has worn down that mountain flat, eternity will have just begun."

So how many years of the same perfect garden, the same perfect animals, the same perfect mountains, the same perfect fruits, the same perfect vegetables can you stand? How many thousands of years would you enjoy eternity without change, variety, adaptation, alteration, novelty? Does not eternal life mean eternal change and growth and adaptation? Would not a perfect world need perfect adjustment, adaptation, change, novelty, to keep it interesting? I don’t see how you can really believe in eternal life, unless you also believe in eternal, godly change, or as we might call it, godly-evolution?

Therefore I think we are in danger of blasphemy when we say flat out that “evolution is evil”. I think things evolve because they were created capable of evolution. Things adapt, change, evolve, become different and more interesting or able to survive new challenges because the Creator made that possible. God, as I see it, is the originator of evolution.

Which is not the same as saying the Darwinian or Neo-Darwinian or Post-Darwinian godless evolutionists are right. Much evidence suggests they are quite wrong in maintaining that evolution creates anything at all, except adaptations on already existing and designed life forms.

But let’s at least talk about where we can agree. Yes, scientists and creationists agree that things evolve. Let’s now talk about how and why they evolve, and what the limits of evolution are, instead of denying that evolution occurs and maintaining that evolutionists are stupid for believing it happens. Darwin discovered evolution, but he didn’t create it. God created the mechanisms for the possibility of evolution, as part of His intelligent design. I want credit for evolution back where it belongs.
Summary of Chapter 1: Introductory Comments and Concerns

“For the believer, when myth and reality meet, myth wins—being dream and hope”.

Religions are an important group of powerful human stories about the universe. They, like all human stories, are incomplete—never broad enough and deep enough to represent the reality of that complex and changing universe. They are also distorted by the human needs of those who construct them and those who retell them. Despite the risks and liabilities of such limited and distorted narratives, we do not give them up because human thriving seems to depend on what is shared. We also note that refinement in the fires of human experience may give common features to religions with very different claims about ultimate reality—for instance, the almost universal appearance among religious people of some form of prayer or appeal to the supernatural.

The above is lifted directly from the opening of the book. The importance of religion is then noted though few need convincing of this. A section is devoted to discussing the difference between public religion and some form of private religion often referred to as spirituality. People who avoid identification with an organized religion and even some atheists may claim an existential connection with the universe or report some deep ultimate concerns that they think of as spiritual. These are not the concerns of this book.

A naturalistic assumption in the study of religion is assumed and defended. Religions themselves do not offer public evidence that allow us to compare claims and apply our reason to observations of the religious world. Rational analysis of what we see and find in our world has proven to be the only universal route to useful truth even though it relies on fallible human reasoning, sometimes at least temporarily failing. The alternative of accepting truth claims based on authority, religious or otherwise, has created diversity and factions; sometimes anger and war.

Some religions have had great success gaining adherents and some people have come to think that this success is in some way an argument for the truth of the belief system offered by that religion. The reality is that this proves the usefulness of that religion’s beliefs in organizing the human world—how it meets human needs—and has nothing to do with claims about truth in terms of a deep understanding of either the natural or supernatural. Conflicting and bizarre claims of various religious groups demonstrate this disconnect.

All religions are treated in this text as a single class each trying to fill largely the same set of human needs in their followers. Some are more sophisticated than others and the older larger ones tend to have many strands the better to serve a range of human emotional and intellectual needs. These belief systems are supported by claims about the supernatural that can never be tested or disproved and this provides a certain continuity that can be claimed regardless of what happens in the real world.
My commentary is limited by being the observations of one man living for a short time in a largely Christian society—but intensely interested in the world around him. My personal religious journey included acculturation to a fundamentalist Seventh-day Adventism followed by gradually increasing skepticism first of that tradition and eventually after much study of all supernatural belief systems. In my old age I heard Yeats’ commentary that “man can embody the truth but he can never know the truth” and I thought that was a wonderful comment that could be directed at religion. I had come to realize that my believing friends were intelligent and sincere and that religion was very important to them. This book is my attempt to understand these observations. Religion remains an ideological tool of power and risk.
It is widely assumed that the Thief on the Cross (TOC) got a special deal.

The story of the TOC is often used to demonstrate what is assumed to be a unique case: a sinner, who realizes his dire circumstances, sincerely becomes convinced that Jesus is the Christ, asks for and receives salvation. Because of the immediacy of his salvation, the thief’s physical propinquity to Christ, the thief’s questionable motives (he was facing death -- within moments), and the symbolic importance of the story, many see the thief’s salvation as different from the norm.

It was not.

The salvation of the TOC was not an exceptional one (regarding the process of his salvation, not its price nor its importance). It was born of desperation, faith-based, freely given, immediate, unearned, and promised (Luke 23:42-43).

That’s the point. The thief’s salvation was the standard deal.

The thief did nothing to earn salvation. He simply admitted his guilt (Luke 23:43) -- and repented (meaning he “changed his mind”). The thief did not live to perform any good deeds or works to atone for his sins. He did, however, publicly declare his belief that Jesus was God (Luke 23:40-42) and, also, his Savior.

And he was saved.

The TOC received the same deal that every other sinner can access: salvation by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 3:22, Romans 3:24-26).

Salvation has been promised to those who believe in Christ and allow Him to be Lord of their lives (Romans 10:13, Acts 2:21). This is the work that Jesus, when asked about God’s requirements, specifically prescribed for us (John 6:29).

For unknown reasons (although we suspect vanity), we want to make salvation more complicated than this. We turn the “good news” into “hard news.” We want to see the thief on the cross an exceptional case, rather than “Salvation 101.” Some would rather (try to) earn their salvation than accept the free gift that it is.

Complexity is often confused for depth. Our salvation has been simply, though violently provided -- thru the blood of Jesus Christ.

That deal is available to all who believe.
Yes, We Must Circumcise Creation

Submitted: Oct 3, 2012
By Stephen Foster

This blog has evolved from a simple comment that I started to write in response to a statement by Stephen Ferguson on Jack Hoehn’s blog, “Must We Circumscribe Creation?” (So, am I now an evolutionist? See if you can determine where my intended comment ended and this blog begins.)

Stephen Ferguson:
What would be good is the Church to even explore the theological implications what IF evolution were true, leaving the actual science of origins to the scientists. Simply making it a taboo subject, which in effect is the status within the SDA Church now, is hardly helpful.

It is hardly helpful to whom Stephen? Why can’t you or I “explore the theological implications what IF evolution was true”? Why should the church explore this topic?

As I may have mentioned previously, it has now become apparent to me that Adventists who, for whatever reason(s), do not believe the Seventh-day part of Adventist theology—as relates to creation week—to be (literally) correct; likewise tend not to believe the Adventist part of Adventist theology—as relates to eschatological prophecy regarding Jesus Christ’s second advent—to be (literally) correct either.

Logically, one disbelief sequentially precedes the other. When you do not ‘buy’ the premise at the beginning of practically any book, you are unlikely to ‘buy’ the conclusion. The same is clearly true with Scripture.

This is also where Jack Hoehn’s reasonable and well written blog/premise breaks down theologically.

Here is dialogue that demonstrates how:

Stephen Ferguson:
I guess the important theological question is whether the [Seventh-day] Sabbath is merely a Jewish ceremony, like circumcision, and thus abrogated at the Cross, or a necessary part of true worship of Yahweh, like not having graven images or not worshipping other gods other than Yahweh Himself, in accordance with the historic creeds of Christianity? I would submit that Pauline Christianity, whilst abrogating circumcision, no more abrogates [the] Sabbath than it does the worship of other gods or creation of graven images. ——[Ed. Note: This appears to mean that Paul didn’t abrogate idol worship or graven images. We assume that what Stephen Ferguson meant was that Paul’s abrogation of circumcision had nothing to do with the Sabbath, just as that abrogation (of circumcision) has nothing to do with the worship of other gods or creation of graven images (both of which, like the Sabbath, are referenced in the Ten Commandments).]

Jack Hoehn:
Stephen,
Paul who vigorously opposed the imposition of the external circumcision on Gentile Christians continues to meet on Sabbaths with Gentiles even when expelled from the Synagogues. He finds and worships with Gentile Lydia on a Sabbath at a riverside place of prayer in Thessalonika. He has nothing to say about Sunday worship.

Jesus who has nothing to say about His circumcision has plenty to say about proper and improper [Seventh-day] Sabbath keeping. Sabbath reform, not Sabbath abrogation is a large part of His ministry.

Circumcision is not part of the 10 commandment moral law.

It seems to me that you only equate circumcision with [Seventh-day] Sabbath keeping when you are anti-Sabattarian?

Here Dr. Hoehn is, of course, correct. The thing is, the seventh-day Sabbath is—among other things—first and foremost a memorial of creation and of creation week. It is a weekly reminder—literally—of how, and by whose hands, we are.

This is why, somewhat further down on the thread of Dr. Hoehn’s blog, I wrote the following: Circumcision was ordained by God for apparently a spiritual identification purpose; but it had/has hygienic benefits that are universally applicable because God understands what He did and knows what He’s doing.

Something similar can also be said of the Sabbath’s purpose in the creation narrative. It was ordained for spiritual identification purposes (it essentially identifies the Personhood of God) but had/has memorial benefits that are universally applicable because God understands what He did in six days and knows that forgetting (not remembering) the Sabbath may result in unbelief in what He did—and how.

The reason for the Sabbath is to remind/remember what God claims to have done.

Is there any other reason for it?

Once we no longer believe what God claims to have done, and/or how He claims to have done it, then the Sabbath becomes, at best, an anachronistic irrelevance.

My admittedly limited observation has revealed that Adventists who don’t agree with the first Biblically provided reason for the Sabbath also do not agree with the prophetic eschatological implications of the Sabbath (and its observance) from an historical Protestant Seventh-day Adventist perspective. (These same individuals “agree” with Seventh-day Adventist culture but disagree with Seventh-day Adventist theology.)

If we can’t believe what God claims to have done in the beginning—or even that God claims to have done it—and this leads to disbelief in what God claims will happen in the future; why then should we believe what He has done for us in between?

This is why, in my view, it is certainly now necessary to identify creation; because if we don’t we may not believe whose we are, why we are His, or what He plans for us.

And when we do appropriately identify creation, the subsequent effects of belief are
serendipitously beneficial; just as medical science has apparently demonstrated is the case with anatomical circumcision.
Psalm 26, Today’s New International Version

with added commentary

1 Vindicate me, Lord, for I have led a blameless life; I have trusted in the Lord and have not faltered. 
   *Vindicate me through your grace alone, Lord,* for I have not been blameless, and I have faltered. . . but I have trusted you!

2 Test me, Lord, and try me, examine my heart and my mind; 
   *Because I will never understand myself until you do.*

3 for I have always been mindful of your unfailing love and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness. 
   *That much I can claim—I have been mindful to the best of my ability,* and learned early that there was no one to rely on but you.

4 I do not sit with the deceitful, nor do I associate with hypocrites. 
5 I abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked. 
   *I wonder what this really means? I myself, of course, have been guilty of deceit and hypocrisy,* though I have striven to avoid evil and wickedness. 
   *You yourself loved and sat with sinners. Does it mean not to assemble and sit in council to plan deceit and wickedness?*

6 I wash my hands in innocence, and go about your altar, Lord, 
   *and thank God I know where that cleansing innocence is to be found—in the righteousness of your Son!* 

7 proclaiming aloud your praise and telling of all your wonderful deeds. 
   *When I consider your love and care and deliverance,* I can’t stop praising you!

8 Lord, I love the house where you live, the place where your glory dwells. 
   *A shocking thought: I am “the house where you live”!* 
   *Do I love me? Really?*
Not selfishly or harshly or judgmentally, but **love** me, as you do?

9 Do not take away my soul along with sinners,
   my life with those who are bloodthirsty,
10 in whose hands are wicked schemes,
   whose right hands are full of bribes.
*Please, please don’t!*

11 I lead a blameless life;
   redeem me and be merciful to me.
*Obviously even the pre-Messianic psalmist knew the*
*blamelessness was only to be found in forgiveness and grace,*
*otherwise why ask for redemption? I do choose your blamelessness;*
*I do ask for and gratefully accept your mercy and redemption.*

12 My feet stand on level ground;
   in the great congregation I will praise the Lord.
*Ah! Level ground, at last! Found only at the foot of the cross, in your great mercy and love.*
**PRAISE THE LORD!!**
There’s a new church in Chicago that takes the definition of “church” as “a group of people embodying Christ’s life” so seriously that they don’t even have a building. Even their official church launching, celebration, and dedication, which will take place Saturday, October 20, at 10 am, will be held at a school auditorium, either borrowed or rented for the occasion. Most churches launch and dedicate facilities. This one is launching and dedicating its people, its plan, and its mission. On the website, www.epicwiredsda.com, here is how they describe themselves and their vision:

“Epic Church is a new gathering of followers of the Way, the Truth, and the Life: Jesus Christ. Our vision is to follow Christ in the city of Chicago and bring healing and restoration to the community. We share the message of love and compassion through art, music, acts of service and the teaching of the Word of God. Since we are new we are not confined to a physical building. Epic Church is an adaptable and dynamic community. We are on the move to follow God where He will lead us, in the meantime we would love to connect with you through Facebook or an upcoming Open House gathering. Visit the Open House section to learn more about this exciting worship experience.” The words Facebook and Open House, of course, are links. Their Contact Us page, too, says they gather in places from storefronts to rooftops to warehouses.

AT was unable to speak with the pastor, Andres Flores, by the time of this writing, so it is unclear whether Open Houses, as the Epic Church calls their gatherings, are weekly, regularly scheduled, or scattered. A recent one took place at a theater called The Den, in Chicago’s artsy Wicker Park neighborhood. The meeting began with gathering in the lounge for conversation and old-fashioned theater popcorn made in a vintage machine.

Then came worship time, in the theater, with a live band and a big screen. The theme of the evening was “Acceptance.” People offered prayer, read Bible passages, and told stories. There was Christian music, from popular and well-known songs to pieces written by those performing them.

An attendee described the end of the evening: “After the service we closed the night by enjoying sandwiches, snacks, and drinks in the lounge and reconnecting with friends and the new people we met. Our last open house was an incredible opportunity to meet new friends, worship God and experience acceptance and connection. It was truly an epic night!”

That theme, “acceptance,” is from the list of Core Values, which have their own page in the church’s attractive and user-friendly website. These Core Values include “acceptance, community, creativity, service, diversity, wholeness, and Sabbath.” That last term, for those who might not be familiar with it, is explained by saying, “In the midst of a world consumed by anxiety God says: Rest and live.”

The pastor, Andres Flores, is posting well-thought-out essays on each of these topics. In the one on “Diversity,” for instance, Pastor Flores describes two groups of believers in the early church [Acts 11]—those who found it less threatening to reach out only to their own Jewish community (which was dangerous enough!) and those who “began to speak to Greeks also.” He notes that as
a result great numbers of people turned to God, and the former enemy of the Way, the apostle Paul, was mentored by Barnabas.

“However,” notes the pastor, “the most amazing thing is that for the first time in the book of Acts the followers of Jesus receive the title ‘Christian.’ Christianity was identified by the city of Antioch as a diverse, multicultural and an accepting community of believers of Jesus Christ.” For Pastor Flores, “God’s image is too complex and beautiful to be understood from a single cultural perspective. As a diverse group of Jesus followers we learn from God through our shared experiences and journeys.” And so he believes that, “As individuals and as a collective, growth will be a natural consequence of being a diverse and accepting community, a modern Antioch in Chicago.”

This new church is using every technological means its target group uses—it has an active Facebook presence and is on several other social media outlets as well. On different pages within the website there are intriguing phrases like the following: “At Epic Church we are on a journey to embrace Jesus' personality, playfulness and grace. Join us during the month of October as we read the book of Mark and discover the authentic, human and divine Jesus.”

Epic Church reaches out to children with “an interactive and dynamic environment. At Epic Kids your child will belong to a ‘tribe’ and will embrace God's story in a collaborative learning space. Every child is epic and we love to see them grow their faith as they laugh, discover Jesus and embrace their creative abilities.”

They don’t just reach out to children’s creative abilities. They believe that “your abilities are valuable, a sacred gift from God.” What might be a call for membership in another church sounds more like an exciting job opening in this one: “Currently we are seeking for volunteers that are oriented to serve in the audio and visual arts, music and worship ministries and video production.” But if you have another gift or idea, they’d be glad to hear from you.

What is a church? Once upon a time, many would have described a building. Today most of us are well-trained to say a church is a group of people. Some of us are deep enough thinkers to add that a church is a group of people trying to embody Christ’s life. And some of us are seeking new and ever more challenging ways to live that out.