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Adventist Evangelist Leo Schreven is Dead; Directed a Ministry for Business Professionals: Leo Schreven was known for his creativity and intensity in sharing the gospel with the non-Adventist public. The death of the 51-year-old evangelist from the North American scene shocked especially those not aware of his battle with depression....

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OPINION

Where Would Jesus Spend Christmas?: What would Jesus do if he were celebrating his birthday with us this year in person? Columnist Kendra Perry believes he would spend it in a way that would help others—and that so should we....

"Handel-ing" Creation: Much has been written in recent Adventist Today issues and blogs on questions of life's origins, and here one of those prominent voices, Blogger Jack Hoehn, reflects on the impact The Messiah oratorio has had on his understanding of the Creator's work, the Great Controversy, and the Plan of Salvation....

Dr. David Wilbur: Power and Illusion: Religion and Human Need. Part 5: Why do religious organizations that claim to base their principles on the Bible often fragment into
dozens, hundreds, and even thousands of strident, disagreeable sects, each claiming to possess ultimate truth? The answers, says Blogger Ervin Taylor, are found in changing times and changing language.

**Advent Two—Preparation:** Devotional blogger Debbonnaire Kovacs studies those who prepared for the arrival of Jesus and His parents in Bethlehem, at the first Advent, and how we should prepare for Advent 2.

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**SUBSCRIBERS' BONUS FEATURE**

**Beltsville, MD, Church Social Services Branch Office Offers a Hand Up, not a Handout:**
An Adventist church in Maryland has joined forces with the local Department of Social Services to successfully provide food, job-hunting help, and one-on-one counseling for those in need.

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Independent Lay Evangelist faces Accusations of Anti-Semitism after Speaking in Germany

Submitted: Dec 2, 2012
By AT News Team

Walter Veith, a former zoology professor from South Africa who operates an Adventist independent ministry based in British Columbia, has been investigated by police in Germany in the aftermath of a recent speaking appointment there. Prosecutors are considering whether or not to charge him with making anti-Semitic remarks and incitement against the government, he has told supporters in a statement being shared among Adventist pastors on Facebook.

“I am not … an Anti Semite,” he stated in an open letter to “Dear Brethren in Germany.” He said that “any form of racism is abhorrent to me” and that he has been “an ardent campaigner against racist injustice all my life,” referencing without specifics his background in South Africa.

Veith said that he presented a lecture on Daniel 11 and “the purpose of the lecture was to show that literal Israel (both physically and theologically) can in no way represent the ‘spiritual Israel’ of the Bible.” He points out that German is not his first language and that there is the possibility that he misused language or was misunderstood. He said “belittling remarks such as ‘gelbes Tuchlein’ stem from my linguistic inadequacy … not from malicious intent.”

The Biblical Research Institute (BRI), the official group of Bible scholars at the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, published an article in its newsletter in January 2008 critiquing Veith’s position that only the King James Version and related translations are reliable. “He arrives at this position partly because of certain conspiracy theories which he espouses rather than on the basis of a study of the original Greek manuscripts,” the article stated.

Veith is entangled in a “dark fantasy world” reported Spectrum, the journal of the largest organization of Adventist academics, a year ago. His presentations “blend nutritional advice and traditional Adventist apocalyptic” with “myth that has considerably less logic than a Dan Brown novel and a great deal more creepiness.” He is popular with many Adventists because he defends creationism and has a dramatic personal testimony about his conversion from atheism.
Pastor Leo Schreven, an ordained Seventh-day Adventist minister and president of All Power Seminars, is reported to have died on Sabbath, December 1. This has been announced in an Email by Pastor Stephen Carlile, senior pastor of the South Tulsa (Oklahoma) Adventist Fellowship, and on Schreven’s Facebook page.

Schreven was an evangelist for the denomination for nearly three decades and then organized an independent ministry in 1998 based on his vision for reaching secular professional and business people. He “began to feel a calling that was much broader than serving in one particular denomination,” he explained in a September 2012 commentary on Outwardbranch.com. He “felt called to serve the entire body of Christ, recognizing God has his people in all denominations.”

He created an approach modeled after motivational speakers called All Power Seminars, “a Bible-based seminar for personal growth, success and achievement” designed to help participants “learn to live up to your full potential.” His was about the only widely-visible Adventist outreach which focused on the interest many people have in becoming wealthy.

The web site for All Power Seminars offers a variety of goal-setting worksheets on finances, health, relationships and emotions, as well as DVDs and other materials by Schreven. It includes testimonials from people who say that his instruction helped them lose weight, advance their careers, get out of debt, etc.

Earlier he had tried other controversial and non-traditional tactics in evangelism. He would offer $1,000 to anyone in a community where he was preaching who could produce a Bible text declaring that the Sabbath had been changed from Saturday to Sunday. He once paid students (not members of the church) at a university in Canada to attend his evangelism event.

He was known for his rapid-fire delivery and use of humor in his presentations. The All Power ministry is headquartered in Salem, Oregon. Schreven lived with his family in Kettle Falls, Washington. Only 51, he died unexpectedly and is survived by his wife Tamara Fields Schreven,
their daughter Cierra; his parents Leonardus and Johanna Schreven; his brothers John and Herman, sister Ella and their spouses and children. The family will hold a private funeral.

Calling the news shocking, Pastor Carlile said, “Leo has been a huge part of [the Tulsa congregation] over the last 13 years. He has held Prophecy Seminars, All Power Seminars and has been our television ministry lead speaker for over seven years. … Leo was a friend of mine as well; we were able to talk often and share what was happening in our ministries. … We … remember his wife Tamara as well as his little girl, Cierra in our prayers.”

The South Tulsa Adventist Fellowship has been profiled as a church growth success story among Adventist pastors. It has had an exceptional record of accessions among native-born local residents.
Adventist Religion Scholars Convene in the Midwest

Submitted: Dec 4, 2012
By AT News Team

The division between the conservative and moderate wings of Adventist religion scholars was evident as they convened for several days of annual meetings in Milwaukee and Chicago just prior to Thanksgiving. But there was ongoing conversation and more interchange than in the years immediately following the 1989 departure of the conservative Adventist Theological Society (ATS) from the Adventist Society of Religious Studies (ASRS), which predated ATS for decades.

Following its usual procedure, ATS met as an adjunct to the larger, interdenominational Evangelical Theological Society that met this year in Milwaukee. ATS again produced its own papers on the ETS topic for the year—“Creation” in 2012.

Also following established practice, ASRS met as an adjunct to the Society of Biblical Literature that convened at the huge McCormick Place convention center in Chicago. ASRS scholars met for a day and a half focusing on ordination. Adventist theologians are nearly unanimous in supporting ordination for women clergy in divisions of the world church that so choose. One panel was devoted to the “Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary’s Statement on Ordination” and all the papers presented were pro-ordination. Some of the titles were “Divided Anthropology: An Ontological Look at the Vatican’s Rejection of Women’s Ordination” by Kessia Reyne Bennett of Andrews University (AU) and “The Case for Women’s Ordination: the Trajectory of an Egalitarian Ethic in the Pauline Letters” by Leo Ranzolin, Jr., of Pacific Union College.

A busload of graduate students from the seminary at Andrews University traveled to Milwaukee for a day of sessions with ATS and then on to Chicago to attend a day’s meetings with ASRS, culminating in a joint Friday night dinner at a downtown Chicago hotel where some 175 scholars heard the two society’s presidential lectures—one on the creation theme and the other on ordination. Other than bacon chips adorning the salad and largely eaten before red-faced organizers made an oblique apology, the ATS and ASRS presidential lectures were followed by a polite question-and-answer session.

On Sabbath morning the two societies met in separate Adventist churches, with the seminary bus taking the students to the ATS venue. Tom Shepherd, director of a program that includes nearly 100 religion PhD students at AU, has raised $60,000 from AU, Loma Linda University (LLU), the General Conference and an anonymous donor for his students to attend these annual religion meetings.

“It’s healthy for conservatives and liberals to meet together, and it’s happening,” said Shepherd.

In an interview with Adventist Today, Shepherd also stated that many scholars hold dual memberships, that a spectrum of theological views are found in both societies, and that the two groups exist because scholars want to be honest.
In a discussion of these meetings at LLU’s School of Religion, Dave Larson observed that the major reason for ATS’s original formation was the ASRS refusal to be more inclusive of conservative viewpoints. Woody Whidden, recently retired AU professor of religion and a leading conservative voice, told Adventist Today that he joins with the “progressive Adventist theologians on almost all social justice issues, but I worry about the direction of their theology regarding the core of Seventh-day Adventism—the Investigative Judgment, Second Coming, and blood atonement. I personally am for real, historic Adventism, with an evangelical twist.”

If ATS is theologically conservative, there is an ultra conservative group that identifies themselves as possessing Last Generation Theology. Herbert Douglass, Doug Bachelor, and Kevin Paulsen represent this emphasis. Among current AU seminary professors, perhaps only Fernando Canale is in this camp, according to knowledgeable sources. However, several doctoral students at AU are understandably in this waning school of perfectionist thinking in Adventism.

While the most conservative thinking may be in decline among Adventist theologians, a group of dedicated Adventist thinkers from Europe and America have recently formed a new scholarly group—the Society of Adventist Philosophers (SAP), and have just concluded their third annual daylong session. On the day that ATS met in Milwaukee, this new group of about 30 Adventist scholars met in a lecture hall at Chicago’s DePaul University, where they heard papers on the theme “Foundationalism and its Discontents.” Postmodern themes were freely discussed in an open and unapologetically Adventist framework.

Professor Nancey Murphy, a philosophical theologian at Fuller Theological Seminary, delivered a keynote address, “Modern Epistemology and the Possibility of Theology.” Several young Adventists graduate students and recent graduates, many of whom are studying or teaching at non-Adventist colleges or universities, formed the SAP three years ago. The quality of the presentations has significantly improved each year, and now equals those given at ASRS sessions.

The three Adventist scholarly societies purposely meet during the two days prior to the Society of Biblical Literature/American Academy of Religion that convenes 10,000 to 12,000 religion scholars during the week prior to Thanksgiving each year. Their presence in this largest gathering of religion scholars continues to be important both for Adventists and the larger academic community.
Where Would Jesus Spend Christmas?

Submitted: Dec 5, 2012
By Kendra Perry

If you visit Bethlehem today, to see the place where Jesus was born, you will find the Church of the Nativity. Inside the church, you will find a shrine. The shrine looks, to me, mostly like a marble fireplace, and it is surrounded by priests and incense and richly embroidered cloths. As you come down the steps to the shrine, a priest will intone, “Born here, laid in a manger here,” so that you will know where the appropriate place is to direct your worship.

If you look carefully as your tour bus is leaving the Church of the Nativity, you may be able to see a cave in a nearby hillside. Caves like this served as animal pens, or stables, for residents of the area for many centuries. It was in a cave like this that Jesus was probably born. If you are lucky, your hand will be steady enough and your bus will be on a straightaway so that you can snap a picture as you drive by.

But that’s how the first Christmas was, too. Priests, a temple, kingly palaces in Jerusalem looking for the Messiah, and he shows up somewhere else entirely. Somewhere unexpected, subversive.

Where did Jesus spend Christmas?

Not in a church. Not with the priests. Not even in his earthly home, much less his heavenly one. His extended family was nowhere to be found.

Instead, Jesus spent Christmas in a cave with a hard-packed dirt floor. He was found among the poor, the outcast, the needy. He had sent joy ahead to people who needed joy: shepherds, pagan astrologers. And those who had just heard the good news of his arrival for the first time became the improvised family with whom he spent that first Christmas.

How did Jesus spend his Christmas? His only gift was himself: immortal, omnipotent divinity wrapped in a six pound, eight ounce package that peed, pooped, and cried. But it was the gift that would bring freedom.
We can engage in theological debates about the historicity of the account of Jesus’ birth, or whether or not it happened in December (probably not), or the origin of various Christmas customs (pagan, most likely). But in the end, these debates serve only as flimsy defenses against the demands placed on our lives by the central message of the season’s central story: God Almighty clothed himself in the flesh of humility and came to earth for me.

Confronted with love like that, what is our only reasonable response? Worship. And, forgive me, worship leaders of the world, but not the stained-glass-swelling-organ kind. No, not even the lifted-hands-shredding-guitar kind (though those certainly do have their place, and I’m sure we’ll get to enjoy plenty of them throughout all eternity).

No, our only reasonable response is worship that brings the self-sacrificing love of Christ to yet another human being.

How did we get from the hard-packed floor of a Bethlehem cave to the gift-wrap-strewn floor of an American living room? And what steps can we take to move back?

Here are some ideas, from the radical to the low-key.

RADICAL: Dispense with the family gift exchange altogether. In its place, dedicate the money to something from ADRA’s Really Useful Gift Catalog (http://giftcatalog.adra.org/) and the time to serving a meal to the less fortunate in your community on Christmas Day.

MEDIUM: Give items from ADRA’s Really Useful Gift Catalog (http://giftcatalog.adra.org/) alongside a small, thoughtful personal gift. For example, if someone in your family is a teacher, gift them a nice pen along with textbooks for a student in Madagascar (http://giftcatalog.adra.org/catalog/purchase-textbooks-for-primary-school-student-madagascar)

When friends or relatives ask you what you’d like as a gift, mention something from the catalog.

LOW-KEY: Go for the traditional gift exchange, but choose your gifts from empowering projects like Punjammies, where pajamas are made by and help provide income for women rescued from human trafficking.

I have to be honest; this challenges me as much as I hope it challenges you. It isn’t easy to look consumerism in the face, to say, “Let there be less,” and to really make it happen. It isn’t easy to ask your family to do something different than everyone else.

But this year, let’s look for Jesus on that less-traveled road. I think that’s where he’ll be.
I just spent two hours at our University Church for a full presentation of Handel’s *Messiah*. This wonderful creation of English Christianity in 1742 was done professionally by our community’s symphony orchestra and a quality chorus with professional soloists and our New York Jewish conductor. It was splendidly done and one of the best ways to celebrate Christmas I can imagine. It was a community event and opening our Adventist church to our community was also a great pleasure. They paid for tickets to get into an Adventist church! (How I wish what we offered every week was valuable enough that people would gladly pay for tickets to get in!)

The lyrics of *The Messiah* are all scriptural texts. As I listened to all 53 sections of Handel’s inspired music by orchestra, choir, tenor, baritone, alto, and soprano voices, I was surprised to note how much the Scriptures had echoes of story of the Great Controversy in Creation.

**COMFORT YE**

The first message is the Tenor’s opening declaration, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people!” This is later supported by the soprano angel who “said unto them: Fear Not!” And the chorus will remind us, “His yoke is easy, and His burden is light.” This message spoke to my heart: Relax Jack, don’t get uptight over the length of Creation Days, the age of the earth, the extent or duration of the flood, it will all be all right! The “Prince of Peace” shall rule in this controversy. Creation and history is what it is, not what we thought it was, not as we think it should be. What is true will be true.

“Hallelujah, the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth for ever and ever.” Set next to the time of “forever and ever” our chronology questions of 6 x 24 hours=144 hours; 6 x 1,000 years; 6 x creation ages, stages, eons; or even science’s 4.7 billion years of life on earth shrink, and shrink, and shrink again. “Comfort ye” that whatever is will be okay. Fear not, shepherds.

**THE LORD MIGHTY IN BATTLE**

God in controversy with evil is surely revealed by these Christmas scriptures. The “King of Glory” is clearly at war. Has this war been since Adam’s fall or did the Great Controversy antecede Eve and Adam’s choices? “The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle” clearly has enemies. Who are those “kings of the earth” which “rulers take counsel together against the Lord”? Is this Obama and Sennacharib and Pharaohs or is this also Lucifer and his hosts? Worthy Lambs are slain, Jerusalem is in “warfare,” earth has many “crooked” and “rough places” that need to be made straight. God has to “shake the heavens” and He also will “shake the earth, the sea, and the dry land.” Did this shaking start before or after He made mankind in his own image?

**LAUGH HIM TO SCORN**
At the cross, the leadership of God’s church on earth “shoot out their lips and shake their heads.” Even the pastor/priests, the “sons of Levi” need to be purified. The Lord doesn’t come to the atheists, He suddenly comes “to His temple” to His church to purify it. May Adventism not repeat the sin of our spiritual forefathers who feel it is only the world that needs purification, refinement, correction for “He shall purify the sons of Levi.” Church, “the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee.” Then and only then shall “the Gentiles…come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.” An Adventist who says, “I have the truth, I see it all correctly,” is advised to buy eye ointment!

THY LIGHT IS COME

“Darkness” covers the earth, “gross darkness.” It is opposed by “great light.” As on Creation Day One, starting in darkness but ending in light, life was to “arise, shine, for they light is come.” Land appears on Creation Day Three, and people on Creation Day Six. But the land is still in “the shadow” and the people “walked in darkness” until the “great light” comes. I realize this may all be spiritual talk about a fallen world. But the imagery still reminds me of the Creation story of the first chapter of the gospel of John.

There the work of the Word “through [whom] all things were made” and “without Him nothing was made that has been made” is presented as “Light shining into darkness” which clearly is Day One of creation. However, darkness opposed by light is also present on Day Two, Day Three, Day Four, Day Five, and Day Six. For according to Genesis each Creation Day starts in darkness (“evening”) and ends in light “morning.” And according to John “the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overpowered it.” Ever since the fall of Adam, life has been a great controversy on earth between light and darkness. The geological records suggests to me that long before the creation of Adam light and darkness were still in conflict with each other, so it may be that Satan’s fall that began the Controversy of Light with the powers of Darkness is shown in the fossil record?

SURELY, SURELY, SURELY

The 24th section is so powerfully sung by the chorus, with the word “Surely” repeated three times, a forceful trinity of encouragement. It is sure that the Creator Lamb is worthy. He was slain from the Foundation of the Earth, but He is “the King of Glory.” Surely He is!

And “though worms shall destroy this body,” though since Adam “all humans die,” we shall be changed! Surely. The crooked shall be made straight, the rough places even, our sorrows and grief, the shame and spitting healed. Surely. “The trumpet shall sound,” the dead shall be raised. Surely.

No matter what your chronology of creation and life on earth, stand with me for the Hallelujah Chorus. For it is Surely. Surely. Surely!
Dr. David Wilbur: Power and Illusion: Religion and Human Need. Part 5

Submitted: Dec 5, 2012
By Ervin Taylor

This is part 5 of a discussion of Dr. Wilbur’s book which here considers his Chapter 4. It should be emphasized that all of the text in this series of blogs in bold font in the body of the text of the chapter summary has been kindly provided by Dr. Wilbur. If there are any of my own comments, they will follow in regular type.

*There is nothing permanent except change.*

Heraclitus

Religions claiming their origins in Divine action in the world seemed candidates for arriving perfected. Observation suggested evolving traditions so I needed an explanation for this.

*Resistance to Change*

The claims of a supernatural origin for a religious group may give the conservative a justification to resist change and to seek to return to some available description of the original. Thus most religions have a fundamentalist strand seeking the “pure vision” of the founders—sometimes forcefully.

*The Human Component*

Religions are virtual realities created to serve human purposes. They allow men to stand up and say they are speaking for “God” while in fact they remain men who have their own set of incentives which will shape their message in human ways.

*The Problems of Language*

Much of religious belief is founded on the interpretation of ancient documents such as the Bible and the Qur’an. The linguists tell us that we have a limited ability to get back to the original intent of these documents. The words change their meanings over time and the grammars also change. Evolving interpretations are quite possible and can lead to changes in beliefs or organizational schisms.

*The Many Voices*

The Bible contains the writings of many different people over a period of hundreds of years. Different writers had different concerns about both God and man. The messages of the Qur’an were supposedly given over a 22 year period when Mohammed’s political fortunes were quite varied. This may explain some of the seemingly contradictory recommendations there. Overall the documents of an established religion contain the
voices of many people with many visions of God. Selective emphasis can usually be used to support change.

*The Essential Plasticity of the Central Myth*

Almost all religious traditions of substantial antiquity and even some only 100-200 years old have evolved multiple strands. These each claim to be the correct interpretation for those who accept the central myth that anchors their tradition—and is claimed by all the strands. Christianity is a wonderful example of this, especially the group of Protestant sects all claiming to be based on the Bible but being quite divergent. Islam and Buddhism have been no less prolific in multiplying versions of their myths.

*Limitations on Religious Self Analysis*

In seeking power over their followers religions find it helpful to claim some form of divine source. They do not support psychological, sociological or anthropological studies to understand how the religion fills human needs. They also do not offer any grounds for comparing traditions beyond the impossible-to-evaluate claims of divine inspiration.

In the world of religion there is a persistent tension between the “remembered” supernatural past and the constantly changing present. This can be a source of fundamentalist backlash and also of creative evolution of the traditions. Religious leaders generally find it impossible to admit the human origins of their belief systems and therefore are usually unable to engage in a critical analysis of the roles of religion in human culture.
Advent Two--Preparation

Submitted: Dec 5, 2012
By Debbonnaire Kovacs

The second candle in the Advent wreath is called the Bethlehem Candle and the Preparation Candle. I find that intriguing. How does Bethlehem connect with preparation? Several answers come to mind.

How did Joseph and Mary prepare for the trip? It seems to me that they'd be so overwhelmed with the beauty and majesty and excitement of the angel's proclamation about Who this Baby Would Really Be that they could hardly think to pack! But . . . I've been overwhelmed by God's beauty and majesty and excitement quite a few times in my life, and I have to honestly admit, the glory fades in the face of day-to-day life. Or, as Jack Kornfeld (Ph. D., Buddhist monk, spiritual writer) puts it, "After the ecstasy, the laundry." So maybe they were more concerned with donkey feed and warm shoes and food for the journey (and worrying about backache, at 8 1/2 months along) than with Preparation for the Blessed Event. Still, when Mary tucked in the linen swaddling bands she'd spun and woven so carefully, I know she thought about that baby. I know she did!

How did Bethlehem prepare for the Visitation? Or did they, at all? The hostels and inns certainly bought extra food and hired extra hands, but that was because of the tax thing. I've often wondered, did the one who loaned them his stable say crossly, "Oh, fine, go to the cave, then! Share with the animals!" Or "Oh, dear, I wish I did have room! We have to do something! What about--well, we have the cave. . .? Will that do? I'm so sorry!" and offer help with the birthing? And in either case, what was the attitude afterwards, after the shepherds and their wild story?

How did the shepherds prepare? Were they really sitting around discussing the prophecies and wishing? What would it have been like to actually see and hear those angels? (I think I would have fainted.) And then, the journey, and the baby, who I'm sure looked just as wrinkly and unfinished and maybe funny-skulled as any other newborn. How strange! But they never forgot. I'm sure of that.

How did the angels prepare? Were they practicing their Hallelujahs? Eagerly hanging on God's words, waiting for the signal? How many were getting in each other's way hovering around that donkey and then over the stable? (Do angels get in each other's way? Or can a zillion really dance on the head of a pin?)
The Priceless Question:
How am I preparing today? For the celebration of Advent One: Which is higher on my radar--presents and parties and cookies (all good things, mind you) or devotion and caring and compassion and repentance? For Advent Two: Well, come to think of it, the comparisons are the same. Maybe not as many cookies or presents (though I don't know why) but the need for repentance and compassion and Hallelujahs is even greater, it seems to me.

He's coming! Pass it on!
Beltsville, MD, Church Social Services Branch Office Offers a Hand Up, not a Handout

Submitted: Dec 5, 2012
By Debonnaire Kovacs

On September 5, 2012, Pastor Glenn Holland, Associate Pastor of the Beltsville, MD, Seventh-day Adventist Church, reported through the Potomac Blogs that his church had just opened a branch office of the Department of Social Services, which would offer temporary cash assistance in emergencies, food stamps, and medical assistance. In that article (available at http://www.pcsda.org/Stories/social-services-branch-office.html), Holland had this to say:

“Our church wants to serve our community. Having an office at our site will be a useful benefit to the residents in this part of Prince George’s County. Traffic, long lines and distance to the Hyattsville office have created a substantial barrier to services in this part. More importantly, this service allows us to be positioned to form relationships with people in need near our church, which goes far beyond simply opening our doors to a government agency.”

As the church neared the end of its first quarter in this service, Adventist Today called and asked how it was going. The answer to that question was that it’s going amazingly well and growing all the time, despite the fact that they have done almost no actual advertising or publicity. It simply grows by word of mouth, through referrals from a local health organization which does advocacy and referral, the Department of Social Services agents available in the branch office, and referrals from in the local clergy association, in which Holland is active.

“Networking with these pastors has been a huge advantage to me personally,” Holland adds. “Each church appreciates that other churches know about them and care.”

Then we asked, "What makes you different from other social services agencies?"

One of the things that makes this service a definite assistance to the government department is something called a “crisis counselor.” Crisis counselors, Holland is quick to explain, are not licensed counselors. They are church members, most of whom have had life crises of their own, who understand and can help someone work through their difficulties and find real solutions. The most important service they provide is listening, and often simply another viewpoint for thinking things through. They also offer to pray with each guest, and are rarely refused.

“I can’t say enough about our crisis counselors,” Holland says. “80% of the people who come are coming to see DSS agents. 30% of those are referred to our crisis counselors, because our people have much more time to spend with individuals than the DSS agents have.” He explained that often the people who are in need are the working poor and don’t actually qualify for government services. They just need a hand because of a temporary crisis. Beltsville church wants to make that a hand up, not a handout. Crisis counselors have the authority to spend a certain amount of money if they need to, and there is a food pantry where people can be given a punch card that entitles them to six months of food without further paperwork, to get them through a temporary crunch. After that, they can reapply, but crisis counselors will try to find them ways to get out of
the situation for good, so that they will not continue to need assistance. Some of the church’s offerings are “Financial Peace University” and “Jobs For Life.”

This is hugely encouraging to the people they help. They are not seen as helpless or as takers, just as people who are in trouble, and long-term ways to fix those troubles are always sought. Sometimes all that is necessary is another pair of eyes from outside a situation; for example, recently a stressed-out man who had lost his job in middle management left excited, because he hadn’t realized he could withdraw from his 401(k) for an emergency.

The church recently received a letter from a guest who was overcome with gratitude for the services she received. Holland has permission to share her letter, without her name. Here is an excerpt:

_I am writing you regarding the excellent and heartfelt support I received from your 7 Day Adventist community outreach office in September 2012. I have secured part time employment in the last week, and things are improving for me. But, when I first came to you I was at wit’s end and really needed the reassurance, financial support and wonderful advice given to me by your new unit. Words cannot adequately express my gratitude._

_It is a blessing and a delight that you are now opening your doors to the Beltsville community (and beyond) during this time of great economic upheaval in our country, and psychological pressure. Everyone I encountered at the outreach center (receptionist included) was not only warm, Christian and wonderful but professional, inspiring and enlightening._

_Special thank you to Mrs. Dorothy Muse. I have gotten a great response from the rewritten/updated resume she was kind enough to create for me. Also the praying in her office touched my soul and reaffirmed me and my belief in my walk with God. I enjoyed attending your church (Mrs. Muse invited me) and plan to visit again._

“People ask about our services—we don’t advertise that; they have to ask,” Holland added. “Then we say we meet on Saturday. Several have come several times; they like the services and like the people they meet.” In fact, the social services office gained a part-time volunteer nurse that way. She is not a member of their church, but is now on the community services board and has joined Pastor Holland’s growth group.

“Our Mission Statement,” says Holland, “is ‘to connect people with God, with each other, and with our community.’ The church has historically done well on one and two, but not so well on three.” Beltsville, MD aimed to change that. And they are.

Beltsville Church Website: [www.beltsville22.adventistchurchconnect.org](http://www.beltsville22.adventistchurchconnect.org)