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Adventists Respond to Connecticut Massacre of 20 First-graders

By AT News Team

Friday as word spread about the tragic gunning down of 20 first-graders at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Adventists began to respond. In the early afternoon Pastor Michael Fortune, senior pastor of the First Seventh-day Adventist Church of Toledo, Ohio, decided to set aside the sermon he had planned for the next day. Instead he decided to pick a few appropriate hymns to sing and invite the congregation to pray and share their personal testimonies. This would do more to help people deal with their feelings than anything he could say in a sermon.

“There really are no good answers to something like this,” a Maryland pastor told Adventist Today. “If you say it is a sign of the times, then you make God sound like He doesn’t really care about the pain and loss involved. If you lay out a logical theology of evil, you are ignoring the fact that evil defies logic because it is evil. If you say the world is getting worse and worse, and this is why Adventists are looking to the return of Jesus, then you make us sound arrogant and insensitive; we are using tragedy to toot our horn.”

“This is the season we sing ‘Come, O Come Emanuel’ and Emanuel means God with us,” said a Florida pastor. “The best we can do at a time like this is do what God did; be with people—sit silently and suffer with people. It is not the appropriate moment to confidently proclaim answers. It is the right time to carry a cross.”

The officers and department heads of the denomination’s North American Division were in a retreat on Friday. As soon as they heard of the mass shooting, they went to their knees and spent time in prayer. “Our hearts ache over yet another senseless shooting within the past few weeks,” said Pastor Dan Jackson, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America on Friday mid-day. “We pray that God’s Spirit will break through the ghastly shadow of death to bring comfort and support to those who are grieving and broken.”

The suburban Havre de Grace Church, “a small congregation comprised almost entirely of immigrants from Haiti” was visited by a television crew from Fox Channel 5 in Baltimore on Sabbath morning. “Parents in a small rented chapel seemed to be holding onto their children a little more closely than usual,” reported John Henrehan. “And maybe praying a little harder than usual.”

“We need to stand up with those who are experiencing this kind of evil, this terrible situation,” said Pastor Rodney Charitable. “And stand by them to let them know, even in this situation, there is hope because Jesus still loves them.”

“My heart goes out to those families,” said his wife Grace, a Registered Nurse. “And I say, ‘God, please help them.’ That’s all I can say, ‘God please help them.’ I mean, what could you say to somebody like this?”

Rocky Twyman, an Adventist Church member well known in the Washington-Baltimore region as an activist, happened to be the guest speaker for the day and called on the congregation to turn
their sorrow and frustration into demands for stricter controls on firearms. The denomination has been on record since July of 1990 seeking greater restrictions on gun sales. (See the statement here: [http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main-stat4.html](http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main-stat4.html).

Hundreds of Adventist churches on Sabbath and over the last few days have opened their doors for special prayer vigils, at least one starting on Friday night. The Philipsburg, New Jersey, Church hosted a community prayer service from 5 to 10 p.m. Monday, according to Lehigh Valley Live.

The official Adventist News Network (ANN) issued a statement on December 15 with the condolences of Pastor Ted Wilson, president of the General Conference (GC), from Germany, where he was participating in a youth congress. “The tragic killing of young children and others … fills us with … enormous sadness,” he stated. “We share our profound sympathy … with the families who suffer such terrible loss.”

Pastor Ryan Bell, senior pastor of the Hollywood Church, helped organize an Interfaith Prayer Vigil to End Gun Violence which is scheduled for Friday at Los Angeles City Hall. “Every day in America 87 people die from gun violence,” he stated on behalf of the Abrahamic Faiths Peace Initiative. “Help us send a message to President Obama and our local, state and Federal legislators that we urgently need an assault weapons ban and background checks for all gun buyers.”

With sickening irony an Adventist pastor in Minnesota shot his granddaughter the Monday night before the Connecticut tragedy (December 10) thinking she was an intruder. The Star Tribune reports that Pastor Stanley Wilkinson, pastor of the Rochester, Minnesota, Church, told police that he heard someone outside his home. “When he saw a figure at their patio door, he … fired two rounds, hitting the person once. That person turned out to be his [16-year-old] granddaughter [who] he thought … was sleeping upstairs.”

The pastor “had a plan on how he would use his gun if an intruder ever came to his home,” reporter Pam Louwagie writes in a copyrighted story. “He and his wife would hole up in the bedroom and call 911, using the gun only to let an intruder know there was someone in the house.”

“Even if you have a plan for an emergency, you don’t know what you’ll do out of fear,” Wilkinson told the reporter in an interview he agreed to do to help others learn from his story. “You get so frightened and … everything happens so quick … you just don’t know what you’ll do.”

“Rochester police released a 911 transcript of the call from the house, with the pastor’s wife begging for help in saving her granddaughter,” the Star Tribune reported. “According to the transcript, the woman told a dispatcher, ‘there was an intruder, my husband thought there was an intruder, here it’s our granddaughter … she’s been shot, please! … She’s bleeding, bleeding bad!’ … explaining to the dispatcher that the girl was bleeding from the chest.”

The teenager was rushed to the hospital with a wound in the upper torso and is expected to
survive. Wilkinson had seen a news report about a burglary in the community just before he went to bed that evening. “I had a plan but I didn’t follow the plan,” he told the newspaper. “I thought somebody was breaking into my house; it just scared us to death.”
Spiritual Retreats for People Disengaged from Church to Start in January

Submitted: Dec 19, 2012
By AT News Team

“More and more people describe themselves as ‘unaffiliated and unattached’ in terms of religion,” reflects Gregory Nelson, a life coach who once was senior pastor of the Collegeview Seventh-day Adventist Church on the campus of Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska. “Former Adventists I am meeting feel this way too.”

His conversations with many “who have disengaged from attending church but are still hungering for meaningful ways to develop and build their spiritual lives” has led him to announce a series of weekend retreats starting January 25-26, 2013. Each is limited to a group of 20 people and more information is available at http://gregorypnelson.com/Retreats.php.

“It’s a bit more tricky for them on a cultural level, since many of their connections from the past still remain, and they still love sharing the stories of Adventist life—even if only to laugh and smile about it,” Nelson told Adventist Today. “Like cultural Jews, there are definitely cultural Adventists, no longer embracing all the fundamental doctrines but still feeling warmth about their cultural connections.” And they are “trying to navigate their way through the vast plethora of options out there.”

Nelson explained that “these retreats will give them the space to evaluate and reflect upon what they feel they need to let go of considering where they’re at … and how to honor that in a respectful, healthy way, and then to consider how to innovate a faith and spiritual life that brings them to a place of greater wholeness, peace, joy, contentment and compassion for the world.”


If you know someone or are yourself “at a stage in your spirituality where you’re having a difficult time connecting to traditional church anymore, and yet you deeply hunger for a meaningful spiritual life that makes a contemporary difference,” then Nelson’s retreats may be what you need. He will offer a series of three retreats over the coming year in the Bay Area with three Webinars in between. He is also open to providing the same retreats in other places if there are 20 people willing to participate.
Very Few Adventist Preachers Will Address the End of the World on December 22

Submitted: Dec 20, 2012
By AT News Team

Despite the public attention given to apocalyptic themes this week, a survey of sermon topics on a random sample of Seventh-day Adventist Church web sites shows that few pastors plan to speak about the end of the world this Sabbath (December 22, 2012). When the Sabbath begins on Friday night, December 21, it will be the day that the Mayan long-count calendar ends and about which many cataclysmic predictions have been published, although almost none by conventional Christians.

Unexpectedly harsh weather events, the economic uncertainty and political tensions, two predictions of the rapture by fundamentalist radio evangelist Harold Camping, even Roman Catholic discussion of the prophecies of Saint Malachy, and certainly the series of mass shootings in the United States recently have all contributed to unprecedented attention to the end of the world. Major movies and novels, television programs and magazine writers have at various times touched on the subject which in recent decades was often left entirely to Adventist evangelists.

One in four Americans told the respected Ipsos polling company earlier in 2012 that they believe the world will come to an end “during my lifetime.” Worldwide the same response came from only 14 percent of randomly-selected respondents. The really surprising thing in 2012 has been the increased interest among secular people in this topic.

The largest number of Adventist churches in North America (73 percent) will focus on Christmas this Sabbath. Many will have musical celebrations of one kind or another and very little preaching. The most common plan is some mix of singing Christmas carols, reading the Christmas story from the Gospels and performances by musicians.

Only four percent of the sermon topics found by Adventist Today in its survey of church web sites related to apocalyptic themes such as the end of the world, or the second coming of Christ or signs of the times. An equal number of churches—but not the same congregations—planned to have communion on this Sabbath nearest to Christmas. About one in five churches planned on a wide variety of other topics which cannot be clustered under any specific category.

Children singing, youth choirs, guest musicians and banquets of various kinds were all planned for “Christmas Sabbath,” a term widely used. Some asked people to come for breakfast instead of stay for lunch. Some churches have announced all day programs with concerts and drama in the afternoon until sundown. Others will have a Christmas play during the worship hour.

“There does not seem to be even the debate about whether or not we should acknowledge Christmas that I remember as a child,” a middle-aged, second-generation pastor told Adventist Today. “It is simply expected.” A number of the churches that announced Christmas programs on their web sites are those with a reputation for being particularly conservative.
Only one pastor has announced a sermon that appears to deal directly with the shooting deaths of 20 school children and six of their teachers in Newtown, Connecticut. But many of the announced topics were actually posted prior to that event. “Even if the focus is on Christmas,” another pastor told Adventist Today, “I think most preachers will work in a reference to what happened there. It is a trauma to your people even if they live thousands of miles away. You have to speak to it or you really are failing them.”

Adventists join other Christians this weekend remembering the arrival of the promised Messiah in the form of a child and thinking about how fragile life is in this world, especially for children. “It is a time of pain and hope,” a New Jersey pastor with families still displaced from Hurricane Sandy, told Adventist Today.
Andrews University Ranked Number 11 among “Overperforming” Schools

Submitted: Dec 20, 2012
By AT News Team

U.S. News & World Report ranked Andrews University (AU) number 11 on its list of “Overperforming Colleges and Universities in the Nation.” This concept measures the degree to which an institution’s overall position in the rankings exceeds or falls short of its undergraduate academic reputation rank. The magazines “Best Colleges of 2013” include the first-ever analysis of schools that are overperforming or underperforming their undergraduate academic reputations in terms of their overall rankings.

“This report appears to support the reality that small private and Christian institutions can—and often do—offer an environment of excellence and nurturing where students thrive and succeed, often beyond what might be expected,” said Dr. Andrea Luxton, AU provost. “However, it is also difficult for smaller institutions to find the resources to communicate that value widely, which inevitably leads to an underestimation of their value. As far as Andrews is concerned, this report recognizes that our quality programs are very competitive with some of the best institutions in the nation.”

The schools that ranked high in this analysis, including AU, performed well in key academic metrics such as selective admissions, financial and faculty resources, alumni giving, and graduation and retention rates. AU was the only Adventist institution rated as an overperforming university.

The top 15 overperforming schools in the list include in rank order: (1) Adelphi University, N.Y.; (2) Ashland University, Ohio; (3) University of St. Thomas, Minn.; (4) Stevens Institute of Technology, N.J.; (5) St. Mary’s University of Minnesota; (6) Azusa Pacific University, Calif.; (7) Edgewood College, Wis.; (8) University of Tulsa, Okla.; (9) Yeshiva University, N.Y.; (10) Biola University, Calif.; (11) Andrews University; (12) St. John Fisher College, N.Y.; (13) South Carolina State University; (14) University of La Verne, Calif.; and (15) Maryville University of St. Louis, Mo.

Earlier this year, AU was included in other rankings published by the news magazine. With a diversity index of 73, it tied for fourth rank in Campus Ethnic Diversity and with 13 percent of its students from outside the U.S., it tied for ninth rank in Most International Students.

Andrews University is operated by the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and provides graduate school programs that supply key personnel for the denomination around the world. Founded in 1874, it is located in a rural area just north of the state line in Michigan near South Bend, Indiana.
The False Burden of Time

Submitted: Dec 19, 2012
By Jack Hoehn

John Bunyan’s Christian starts his journey to the Celestial Kingdom with a huge burden, like an overweight backpack on his shoulders. This burden is so heavy and unbalanced that it threatens to tip Christian off the Way at any moment and into the deadly, foul Slough of Despair.

I suspect some of us carry a like burden, but unlike the common burden of guilt and sin that all Christians have been freed from at the cross, this burden we have picked up is “The Burden of Time,” especially deep time, long time.

Here is what the “Burden of Time” feels like. We live in the world of beauty and ugliness. We see the births of lovely children, and we see the deaths of equally lovely children. We thrill to true love and sob about sexual exploitation and abuse. And during moments of pain, suffering, tragedy, loss, disease, crime, and death we cry out with those suffering souls under Revelation’s altar, “How long, Lord, How long?”

We are burdened by the time creation is groaning. The Young-Earth-Creationist is burdened by 6,000 years of sin’s reign, and all the consequences we see in the present scheme of life.

Science comes to the Long-Term-Creationist and greatly multiplies the chronology of creation by revealing that the universe began not 6,000 years ago but 13.7 or 13.8 Billion years ago! Many of us feel this is intolerable. If we try to imagine the great controversy between good and evil going on for this long, we are overwhelmed and in dismay cry out, “No, it is impossible for a good God to permit evil for such a long period of time. I can hardly bear the evil I have seen in my time. Don’t make me believe this has been going on for billions of years.” The burden of time seems unbearable. Yet here are the facts:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Creation Day</th>
<th>Scripture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universe Created</td>
<td>13.7±.1 BYA (Billion Years Ago)</td>
<td>Before Creation Days</td>
<td>“In the Beginning God Created the Heavens and the Earth”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun and Earth Created</td>
<td>4.5662±0.0001 BYA</td>
<td>Creation Day 1</td>
<td>“Formless and void and water was upon the face of the deep”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxygen created by photosynthesizing bacteria</td>
<td>3.5 billion BYA till it rose above 10% O2 205 MYA (Million Years Ago)</td>
<td>Creation Day 2</td>
<td>“let there be a firmament… and God called the firmament sky”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land masses created and plants created</td>
<td>2.25 BYA continental land mass growth peaks. 635 to 580 MYA first complex plants.</td>
<td>Creation Day 3</td>
<td>“Let dry land appear” “Let the earth bring forth plants bearing seed”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of nearby supernova eruptions, dense molecular clouds, gamma-ray bursts, galaxy merging events, cosmic bombardment of earth</td>
<td>Cosmic events subside about 562 MYA</td>
<td>Creation Day 4</td>
<td>“He made a greater light” (4.56 BYA) He made a lesser light to rule the night”(4.36 BYA)[1] “He made the stars also” (Stable 0.562 BYA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filling seas with life, then birds and dinosaurs</td>
<td>543 MYA Cambrian explosion</td>
<td>Creation Day 5</td>
<td>“Let the waters teem with living creatures and let birds fly”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filling land with creatures</td>
<td>200 MYA Jurassic period</td>
<td>Creation Day 6</td>
<td>“Let the land produce living creatures”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Humans appear</td>
<td>190,000-60,000 years ago.</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Let us make man in our image”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cessation of new creations since modern humans appear, we mostly lose species.</td>
<td>Since Adam till now no new kinds of creatures or plants</td>
<td>Creation Day 7</td>
<td>“And God rested”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Advent Hope That Time is Short
A few of us have been living for nearly a hundred years, others for 70 years, some for 30 years, and even teen-agers at times are overcome with the burden of time in this imperfect world. If we are honest most of us have wondered why we are still waiting 2,000 years after the resurrection for the “soon return” of the Christ. Isn’t it about time for Jesus to return?

Adventism offered relief to Christendom from this burden of time, and excited our spiritual forbearers with a date for the end of time, and then with anticipation that the burden would be lifted within the life time of those listening to Ellen White’s sermon, and then our evangelists and Revelation Seminars fan our hopes into at least a temporarily renewed expectation that soon
“time shall be no longer.”

To be asked to bear the burden of 6,000 years of a reign of sin and death is bad enough, to have to bear the burden of 4.8 billion years of the same reign seems impossible. We all must surely slip into the foul Slough of Despair if science is correct and life has been slogging on with such impossible-to-comprehend eons of time.

How Long Have You Been Waiting?
How long have we been waiting for Jesus to come again? 2,000 years? How long have we had to live with death and tears and suffering? 6,000 years? 6,000,000 years? 4,800,000,000 years? And how many years can your God let you suffer, before you cease to believe that your God is truly good, kind, merciful? Let’s be honest. I have had many Adventists suggest to me that they might be able to permit God to allow sin to run its course for 6,000 years, but much longer than that would frankly make them questions that kind of God’s character. “I can’t believe in a God like that,” is sort of how it gets expressed.

The burden of deep time, of long ages, or a progressive creation over millions or billions of years is an unbearable burden for many Adventists, and they refuse to accept the possibility of a long chronology.

Lay Your Burdens Down!
The good news is that I have come to believe that the “Burden of Time” is a burden we need to gladly lay down (along with our personal burdens of guilt, shame, and sin) at the foot of the cross. The Sin Bearer is also the Time Bearer, and at His Cross all burdens including the Burden of Time, roll away.

God in mercy has made provision for the burden of the length of the great controversy. No one, not one human, not one man or woman or child, has ever had to wait for Jesus, has ever had to bear the burden of suffering and woe, longer than one lifetime!

You have waited for the Second Coming exactly as many years as you have lived, and not one second longer. You have had to watch good and evil in conflict; you have had to suffer those consequences, exactly as long as every other human. One lifetime at most, and often – thank God – only a minority part of that lifetime has been burdened by pain, suffering, and despair.

You have not been waiting for Jesus to return for 2,000 years! We all have waited the same relatively short period of time, one lifetime.

Your share of the suffering in this life is exactly the same as every other human’s share of the suffering in this life, one lifetime.

Elohim decreed long ago a command that all have perfectly obeyed. “Man must not be allowed to live forever.” No one does, do they? And after death Adventists know you are not hanging around watching the game. The Adventist soul sleeps, unconscious of the passage of time be it days, weeks, months, years, or eons of deep time.
It is not “mankind” or “the church” or “the human race” who has suffered long. Because each human, each church member, all the races have been given an identical share of time to bear. One lifetime. No more, no less.

Hasn’t God Shown You Good During Your Short Time?
Have you found God in general good to you, during your life so far? Has God kept his promise that you will not be tested above what you are able to bear, but will always provide a way of escape from these trials? If so then bear your share of time, your share of trouble, your share of suffering bravely but hopefully. And remember that even if this world has had life on it for 6 thousand, 6 million, or 4.8 billion years, no one has ever had to suffer or bear the burden of conflict during that life for more than one lifetime.

There is Only One who is a Long-term Sufferer
Yahweh-Elohim is named “long-suffering”. You and I and every other human who has lived are all short-suffering.

So it may be a fair question to ask why you or I have to suffer a little or a lot for 60 or 70 or 99 years, but it is not fair for us to assume the burden of deep time, and hold this against Yahweh-Elohim.

“How can a loving God permit suffering to go on for so long?” is a question only God can answer. If God has chosen to take 13.7 billion years to prepare this stage for human life, that is His problem, not ours. No creature, no plant, no animal, no human has suffered more than one lifetime.

The Question of the Chronology of Creation Should not be Biased by the False Burden of Time
The question of the chronology of creation should not be biased by a false assumption that only a short-term creation story is good for the character of God, and that a long-term creation story is against His character. It may be against our preference, but the so-called Burden of Time is a false and unnecessary burden. It is not one, thank God, we must bear.

Ellen White gives a fascinating insight when she discusses Adam’s attitude to death. “Though the sentence of death pronounced upon him by His Maker had at first appeared terrible, yet after beholding for nearly a thousand years the results of sin, he felt that it was merciful (of) God to bring to an end a life of suffering and sorrow.” In a severe mercy the length of man’s life has since the flood been even further shortened.

We are flesh, weak, mortal, and time bound. The Creator is Spirit and not time bound. The chronology of creation is not what we think it should be, the chronology of creation is what it is. We can argue about the dates, but we should not dismiss them because we unnecessarily feel burdened by the long ages science has revealed.

“All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. the grass withers, and the flower falls off, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.”
1Public Domain, non commercial use.

2Revelation 6:10.

3I use astronomer Hugh Ross’s “Why the Universe is the Way It Is?” (Baker Books, 2008) as a major source for this brief outline of creation time. (The correspondence to Creation Days is my own suggestion, however.) Please read Dr. Ross’s book for detailed discussions on the reasons why this universe needs such a long time to become what it is today, a place suitable for advanced life and civilization. See especially chapter 3 of his book.

4Lawrence Livermore National Library, 8/17/2011, Moon and Earth may be younger than originally thought, Anne M Stark, LLNL, (925) 422-9799.

5Genesis 3:22.

6Exodus 34:6, KJV.

7Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets, page 82.

81 Peter 1:24-25, in modern English says “You very short time. Christ, the Word, very long time.”
A Call for Patience

Submitted: Dec 17, 2012
By Lawrence Downing

I do not know Reinder Burinsma, PhD. I’ve neither seen him nor heard him speak. I did once send him an email stating my appreciation for an Adventist Review article he wrote. I did not hear back from him, so am unsure if he ever received it. I know little about him beyond the information provided in the article he wrote that is the subject of this post: He is retired but currently serves as president of the Belgian-Luxembourg Conference in Brussels, Belgium.

I want to make clear that I do not have Dr. Bruinsma’s permission to write what follows. I hope that should he read it he will not be distressed by my attempt to convey his ideas.

The article referenced above by Dr. Bruinsma appears in the December 2012 Ministry, an international journal published for pastors by the Ministerial Association of the General Conference. In the article, written under the title “Creating a climate for the discovery of truth: A perspective on doctrinal development,” is a reasoned and sensible response to issues currently stirring up the Adventist world. My guess is that few church members, other than pastors, read Ministry. I’d like a wider audience to have access to his observations and suggestions for they would, I believe, result in a fundamental shift in attitude, should what he suggests be adopted. This blog will not reach a significantly wider audience, but it is a medium I can access. Here goes.

In the first paragraph of his article Bruinsma addresses “this increasing combative atmosphere” that plagues the church. His evidence: the harsh interchanges he reads on various Adventist web sites, both left and right wing, which cause him irritation. Questions multiply: “What is happening? Where does this increasing combative atmosphere come from? How should we deal with issues that concern us? Where will this ultimately lead?” He gets more specific as he identifies one of the issues that prompts current discussions: origins. The subject of origins takes him to the proposal to reword fundamental belief number 6, the statement on Adventist understanding of creation.

He addresses the current discussions in the church as people examine the relationship between science and religion. He points out that Adventists are not alone in this conversation. Different denominations have come to different conclusions as they consider the question of how to view evolution.

The Adventist Church, he reminds the reader, has adopted and defended a literal understanding of the Genesis creation account. Bruinsma acknowledges that some Adventists have expressed reservations about a literal six-day creation. These people are more comfortable with a form of theistic evolution. This view, they believe, provides a means to reconcile science and the Bible account. (I appreciated that he made no moral or theological judgments. He states the obvious and moves on.)

Adding complexity to the science/religion discussion is the proposal from some within the
Adventist Church “to close any possible ‘loopholes’.” This will be accomplished by including language such as “‘recent,’ and ‘six literal’ days of 24 hours, which were ‘contiguous’—thus precluding any kind of ‘gap theory,’ or interpretation of the ‘six days’ as longer periods.” The catalyst for these proposed changes may lie with reports that professors in certain Adventist universities may not be as “Adventist” as some wish. Bruinsma sees a potential for trouble in this reaction. It may be a precursor for an “…escalation of the difficulties within the Adventist educational system. Questions of the responsible use of academic freedom, denominational control over school curriculum, procedures for dealing with conflict, the need for balance, linked with total transparency, and—most of all—the question of how to adequately define what the church considers as sound teaching.” This is a significant issue at stake: our individual and collective pursuit of Truth.

The pursuit of Truth raises significant questions in Bruinsma’s mind. He centers on two: (1) “How essential is it to refine doctrinal statements even further? (2) How necessary is it for the Church to arrive at a position on every important issue and, in particular, on the correct understanding of the details of the Creation story?” Bruinsma’s answers to these questions are instructive. There is not room enough in this forum to set out his responses. I will make an exception for answer No.5. Think of it as “Bruinsma’s Fifth.”

“The Adventist Church has ... always been critical of other religious communities that have allowed the traditions of the past to guide present thinking, and even more so, of systems that rely on a magisterum to make final pronouncements. Are we in danger of doing the same? Again, a need for balance must be maintained. The church must most certainly guide and protect doctrinal developments, but at the same time the church needs to take care not to institutionalize the development of the thinking of its thought leaders and not to bureaucratically try to restrict the search for truth. The discovery of truth is, I believe, not primarily through committees, institutions, and other administrative processes. Spiritual convictions do not result only from majority votes in annual councils and General Conference sessions. ... Maybe our leaders should feel less pressured to intervene expeditiously and force the process along, and be more patient and expect more from the working of the Holy Spirit.”

In his concluding paragraphs, Bruinsma holds out for patience as a viable response to issues that have potential to disrupt a system or organization. Patience, Bruinsma affirms, is not a sign of weakness. It is one of the fruits of the Spirit, Gal. 5:22. Effective leadership, he posits, does not demand that firm positions be taken and defended, come what may. Polarization and controversy are not the marks of a nurturing and mature leadership style and will not benefit the body of believers. A better way is to encourage and demonstrate genuine dialogue and work toward a deeper understanding of particular truths. He acknowledges that there is risk in this approach. It is important, therefore, that resources be available to the membership to provide a background for meaningful discussion and deeper study in God’s Word. “But in the end,” writes Bruinsma, “it is more risky to rely on hasty administrative processes that result in winners and losers, than to exercise patience and rely on the workings of the Spirit.” This sentence concludes the article.

If it were in my power I would require administrators to post this article on their refrigerator door and read it every day for a week—and then implement what they have read! Any errors or misstatements in the above post are mine alone.
Tragedies happen all the time, though few in North America are as large-scale and horrific as last week’s school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. No matter who was involved or when it happened, this would have grabbed headlines simply because it’s one of the worst mass murders in U.S. history. But there’s something about tragedies right before Christmas, especially if they involve children that awakens in us an additional sense of moral outrage.

We cling, against all evidence, to a belief that Christmas ought to be a time of happy, untroubled innocence, that we all ought to be our best selves and that nothing terrible should happen for a few charmed weeks. When something awful does happen — whether it’s a mass murder that draws the world’s attention, or a local house fire that kills a family with children right before the holidays — compounded with our natural and appropriate grief is a feeling that Christmas itself has been violated.

We hear a lot about putting Christ back into Christmas but not much, in my experience, about putting Herod’s massacre of the innocents back into Christmas. Cozy Nativity scenes make it too easy to forget that God came in human form into a world full of violence and evil, into an occupied country under military rule, into a town soon to be the site of a horrific slaughter of young children. That slaughter was carried out not by a single evil madman — or rather, carried out by a single evil madman with all the power of the State at his command.

The true incarnational teaching of Christmas is that Jesus was born not only into this world, but because of this world. Because of human evil and terrible things that happen even though they should not.

Once upon a time the Christian church had a period of four weeks of fasting and reflection leading up to the celebration of Christ’s birth, four weeks of reflecting on exactly these terrible things and realizing how deep is our personal need, and this world’s need, of a Savior. It was called Advent and we are now about three-quarters of the way through it. In popular culture, Christmas has been retained but Advent has been abandoned, which means that even the most earnest Christ-centered Christians are often celebrating the coming of a Savior into a dark world without pausing to glance at the darkness or appreciate how truly dark it is. The blare of our Christmas lights has abolished the darkness of Advent so thoroughly that we are extra-shocked when terrible things continue to happen in the weeks before Christmas, just as they do all year long.

I’m on record (in my Adventist Today column last Christmas, among other places) as taking a very pluralistic approach to winter holidays. Celebrate whatever you want, in whatever way is meaningful to you; wish me Happy Holidays or Season’s Greetings or Merry Christmas as it
pleases you; string up your coloured bulbs to celebrate the fact that light comes in the midst of darkness whether or not you share my particular religious beliefs. I have no interest in dictating how, when, or what anyone else should celebrate at this time of year. But for me, the Incarnation matters for the most orthodox of Christian reasons. Any belief system that claims that sin is not real or dangerous, that humans are all essentially good and not really in need of any saving, is not a belief system I can sign on for. I believe that sin is real, evil is real, that we need a Savior and that Jesus was that Savior. That’s my creed.

That said, we Christians have a lot to answer for in our claim that Jesus really did bring light into the world’s darkness. Because — hey, it’s still pretty dark in here, isn’t it? Events like the Newtown shooting confront us with that unavoidable fact. Obviously there are a lot more good humans than bad ones in the most obvious sense — for every mad gunman who walks into a school and starts shooting kids, there are millions of teachers who show up to schools every day to help and love and care for kids. But the problem of human evil is so persistent and intractable, and so entrenched into the systems of our society, that we can’t treat it as a single aberration. We can cry over a single incident of violence and hatred, but once we start piling up all the reasons we have to cry, we get overwhelmed pretty quickly.

Jesus’ own Jewish nation at His own time examined His (and His followers’) claim that He was the Messiah, the promised Deliverer, and the majority of them said, “This getting-crucified business is not what we expect of a Messiah. We’ll wait for someone who can really deliver us from evil.” So they waited for a true Messiah — who still hasn’t shown up.

As for those who believed Jesus’ claims, they said, “The first advent was only the forerunner — He’ll be back to establish a just and peaceful kingdom.” Two thousand years later, we’re still waiting.

Some Christians have shifted the focus from Jesus’ literal Second Advent to our call to establish His Kingdom here on earth, by working under the power of His Spirit to create a more peaceful, just world here and now. But to be honest, that’s not working out so well either.

No matter what our beliefs about Jesus-as-Messiah, we have to confess that God has not yet fulfilled the promise of Christmas. You can blame Him or you can blame us, but either way, this is still a dark world, filled with tremendous suffering. If Advent does not recognize this darkness, then Christmas is meaningless. It’s just stringing up coloured lights in the face of the kind of violence that leads someone to bring an assault weapon into an elementary-school classroom, and saying, “Look! The lights are so pretty! Ignore the massacre!” Christmas is about hope, but the very essence of the concept of hope is that if we are hoping, something must be wrong. We must not have what we want — a peaceful, just world, safety for our children — if we are still hoping to be saved.

None of the responses people have to tragedies like this are wrong. It’s good to argue about gun control and treatment for mental illness — if our society is not debating these things we are not engaging with the realities of suffering. It’s good to hug your kids a little tighter the night after a tragedy; to be grateful for what you have. It’s good — essential, even — to think of and pray for those who have suffered unimaginable losses. It’s good to be angry at those who commit evil
deeds. It’s good to focus on the positive where you can, on heroic teachers and rescue workers and people who bring light in the midst of darkness.

As Christians, tragedies like this should make us humble, because we claim to have The Light yet so much darkness remains. Advent should make us humble. It commemorates not only the thousands of years before Jesus, when the world waited for a Savior, but all the waiting we have done since then. Our pagan ancestors waited in the darkness of winter and celebrated the return of the light. We wait in the darkness of a sinful world and await a promise that has been given but not completely fulfilled. This year we have been reminded, in the midst of the Advent season, how real that darkness is.

Deliver us from evil.
The family room in our last house was 28 feet high. I bought a Christmas tree that was only seven feet high. It looked really small, but I didn’t want to pay $85 for three more lousy feet. So I paid $23 for my little short tree. Nancy decorated it. Did a great job considering it was such a short tree. She used white lights. (Did you know that WAY-FM conducted a survey and people use white lights four-to-one over colored lights – that made me feel better) Two whole strings of lights were left over because the tree was so small. She put crafty little ornaments all over it. (Looks like there’s a million of them cause our tree is so short) Some of the ornaments even had our grandkids pictures on them. They’re right in the middle so you can see them real good.

But of course, the crowning decoration, the best part of the whole tree, there in all of its glory, perched right on top of the highest bough (which is not very high), is the shining … cat. Cat? CAT? What is a cat doing on top of a Christmas tree? It’s a gray cat – a tall, very tall gray cat. (I suspect, so as to make the tree look not so short) And this cat has wings - angel wings, and a golden satin robe with evergreen branches around its neck. It’s an angel cat. Nancy tells me that the cat is in memory of Emma, who disappeared just before we left Miami. Now I don’t think Nancy has any trouble with her theology about cats & Angels. All I want to know is: “What happened to the star?"

Good question for all of us: “What happened to the Star?” Do any of us see it anymore? I’m not talking about the one on your tree, or the live Nativity at your church or atop the one at Times Square. I’m talking about the One that led the Wise Men to the Christ Child.

Matthew tells the story and how it led the Wise men to the stable in Bethlehem. One Christian Lawyer, Rick Larson, has done a very interesting study of the astronomy at the birth of Christ. He believes it was a natural astrological occurrence planned by God to lead the Wise Men to Jesus. Another Christian writer, Ellen White, believes that when the glorious display of light, recorded by Luke in the Gospels, faded from the multitude of angels who appeared to the shepherds, a small band of these angels remained and became the Star of Bethlehem. Far away in the east, the magi observed this distant band of angels, but there was no natural explanation for its existence. What was this amazing heavenly phenomenon? It was nowhere to be found on any of their charts. Led by the Holy Spirit, they searched the holy writings of the ancients, and there, an obscure Hebrew prophet by the name of Balaam, wrote these cryptic words in his fourth oracle, “A star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel”. Was this the promised King who would come to save all men – the deliverer they had discovered in their diligent search of the scriptures? As they pondered the meaning of all these things and continued
to observe the star, it began to move … toward Israel, and continued to do so until it stopped over Jerusalem – a journey that took perhaps a long as 2 years. They fully expected the entire city to be in a buzz about the birth of Israel’s long awaited Messiah/King. But alas, no one knew anything about it. So they enquired of King Herod. Constantly concerned that some rival king would try to take over his throne, Herod called in the priests and demanded that they tell Him where their Messiah was to be born. They quoted the Prophet Micah who declared: “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.” Micah 5:2. And so the Wise Men left the palace of the King whereupon the star again began to move and rested over the place where Jesus was. (Matthew 2:9). There they found the Christ Child and worshiped Him, giving Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Whether the star was a God-ordained astronomical event or a personalized arrangement of angels who led these faithful believers to the Christ-child is certainly not worth a debate to me, even though I prefer the latter. The more important issue is that the Wise Men saw the Star because they were looking for it. Or perhaps, more accurately, they were looking for God, Himself. To God, it’s all about a relationship. Look for it, you’ll find it!

HAVE YOU SEEN THE STAR? Do your skies on occasion light up in a blaze of glory like it did for the shepherds? Maybe God answers your prayer for healing or the stock market delivers you a windfall. Maybe you finally get a job or a raise that allows you to get a new car. But what if all that fades and you only see darkness and a faint little star a long ways away and years pass by like it did for the Wisemen? What happens then? Is it easy to discontinue your quest for Jesus when life is dark and the sky doesn’t explode with the song of the angels?

The journey is long and the night is dark and my doubts can obscure the star.

Discouragement and boredom and trials can make, my God seem ever so far, But may I never give up my quest for the child, who anxiously waits to see … The face of someone He looks for and loves … ’cause that “someone He loves” is me. (DW)

HAVE YOU SEEN THE STAR?

Like the song says, “Everyone is looking for someone. Everyone is searching for something.” That emptiness after a drink, or a high, or a cheap love affair; that gnawing down deep in your belly that you try to satisfy with junk food, drugs, or a movie; that craving for something more in your soul like a little more money in your bank account, a few more clients, a little more success – that may be your misplaced journey to find the star. Have you seen THAT star? It’s trying to lead you to Jesus – a relationship with the Christ child is the only thing that will satisfy you and finally give you peace.

Some of us even try to fill the emptiness we feel with church, service, obedience, spiritual
sacrifices, and a profound knowledge of the scriptures. But these things can’t fill the emptiness and really give your life meaning and peace. A real relationship with Jesus - the Christ Child - is the only thing that will satisfy. Jesus is trying to lead you to Him. **Have you seen THAT Star?**

Or perhaps you’ve got this theory – You’re a good person - good as anyone else. You don’t need church or religion. You do your best. If there is a God, wouldn’t that be good enough for Him? To me, the story of the Star settles that issue. The Magi weren’t Israelites, they were heathen, but God Himself implanted inside of them the desire to worship the King who created the heavens, whoever He was. It did not matter what denomination or religion He belonged to or where they had to go to find Him. They followed the Star trusting it would take them to the King. To them, it wasn’t about their wealth, hard work, gifts or goodness. They came because they wanted to see the Christ Child and worship Him. They didn’t know exactly what that meant, but inside of them something or someone beckoned them to follow the Star no matter how hard, or long, or difficult the journey. They expected nothing in return. They came only to give to Him, worship Him, and adore Him. What they discovered and received was the most marvelous gift of all the ages – a God who cared enough about them that He would send them their own personal star just so He could meet them. So whoever you are, He just wants to meet you. **HAVE YOU SEEN THE STAR?**

These three men must have been a curious sight as they entered Jerusalem in their “3-camel-stretch-limo”. Occasionally they stopped, rolled down the tinted glass windows and inquired: **“Where is He that is born King of the Jews, for we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him?”** Like we said, they fully expected everyone to be excited about the newborn King. King Herod calls in the priests to assist the magi in their search. But the priests were offended. They were not interested in being helpful to these “Heathen”. Besides, God would **never** have passed them by and revealed the arrival of the promised Messiah to perfect strangers. Only after Herod threatened them did they reveal that Bethlehem was to be the birthplace.

So why did God pass His chosen people by and reveal the birth of the long awaited Messiah to heathen, strangers, gentiles? These men were not the sons and daughters of Abraham. They didn’t have God’s law. They didn’t have “the Truth”. They didn’t belong to the right church. They were not the remnant. There is no way God would announce the most important event of the ages to heathen and pass them by. So the religious leaders concluded: **This could not be the promised Messiah!** The arrogance of the religious leaders refused to accept that God would work through sinners, heathen, strangers outside the true church. **So they never saw the star.**

How about us? Does God ever pass **us** by and reveal the Christ Child to a Mormon, Muslim, Baptist, or Hare Krishna. How about a Homeless person, prisoner, or a poor, pregnant, unmarried teenager? Do others see the Star and we do not? Do we rejoice when other churches or denominations experience revival and thousands are baptized into their faith? Are we thrilled that Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, or Rob Bell are so successful? Or do we conclude that these men are just “soft on sin?” Perhaps God is not “passing us by” so much as He is including others in His Salvation. What if the heathen or people of other churches and denominations come to us like the Wise Men came to Jerusalem? Would we join **them** and follow the star to Bethlehem to
worship the Christ Child? Or does God have to come to us first? Might we be guilty of rejecting the Christ Child just because God decided to use “sinners” or “heathen” to announce His arrival? If we worship our churches instead of the Christ Child, we may never see the star. HAVE YOU SEEN THE STAR?

The Priests could have seen it? God would have loved to have shown them the star. He could have led them to Jesus, just like He did the Magi. But their Messiah would never be born in a stinking stable. Their God would never be lying in a manger and He would never be born to an unwed mother. So they never saw the Star and they never met their Savior. HAVE YOU SEEN THE STAR?

God wants to lead us to the Christ Child today just as much as He did long ago. But we, just like the priests, can have our own ideas what He’s supposed to be like and where we’ll find Him. We’re not ready for the star to lead us to the back streets of Nashville or the Rescue Mission. The Child would never rip you off on the I-65 off-ramp claiming to be willing to work for food. He doesn’t look dirty or unshaven. He’s not a welfare widow with 2 illegitimate children. Certainly He wouldn’t be gay, or in prison for rape or murder – so we never meet the Savior and we never see the star. You see, it wouldn’t do any good. We’d never believe this child or that person was the Savior anyway. So there’d be no use for God to show us the Star? HAVE YOU SEEN THE STAR?

There were hundreds in Israel who never saw the Star – not because they were wicked or bad – they just weren’t looking for a real relationship with God. Maybe they were too busy or distracted. I don’t believe the Inn Keeper was bad. He actually tried to help. But what would he have done if he had known it was the long-awaited Messiah who wanted a real relationship with him right now as He was being born? You see, he could have seen the Star. but all he saw was that he had no room at the inn.

The merchant, hawking his wares in the streets, could have seen the Star but all he saw were dollar signs and the glimmer of candle light reflecting off the trinkets on his cart.

The housewife, tired and exhausted, could have seen the Star but all she saw were the dishes, still piled up in her sink and the dust collecting on her furniture. HAVE YOU SEEN THE STAR?

Like the Magi, is the quest for the King the passion of our lives, or frazzled and frustrated with life, do we live for fun-filled weekends to give our pathetic little lives some tidbit of meaning? Then, we just might miss the Star.

Are we weekend "Wisemen”? With our kingly garments cleaned and pressed, our camels waxed, washed and all gassed up for our weekly pilgrimage where we sort of “come and adore Him.” But when the sun sets Saturday night, do we set about to follow different stars, worship within different stables, kneel before different mangers, and bow before different Gods. DO WE SO QUICKLY FORGET THE STAR?

At this special time of the year do the blinking lights on our Christmas trees, the decorations on
our front lawn, and the dazzling lights of downtown, blind us to the Star and the relationship it leads us to? Have the ribbons and wrappings, the bells and bows, the toys and clothes, glorified the gifts the Wise men brought rather than a relationship with the child they worshipped? **CAN WE STILL SEE THE STAR AT ALL?**

The blinding light of the angels that set the skies of Bethlehem ablaze with the glory of God was never meant to be **obliterated** by the giant Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, awesome animated window displays in Macy’s department store, or lavish laser light shows at Disney World. God desires that His glory be **duplicated** in His people by the way they care for others - glory that obliterates the look of fear from the faces of humanity - fear of God’s disapproval or condemnation, fear from harm, hunger, abuse, or being alone. God wants His people to be consumed with the passion of sharing His love, acceptance and forgiveness to all men – whether black or white, rich or poor, bond or free, saint or sinner (and even use words if necessary). **ARE YOU BEGINNING TO SEE THE STAR?**

The night Jesus was born, an angel appeared to lowly shepherds and they were sore afraid. Why? Their picture of God! But the angel says: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy for **all people**. For unto YOU, [YOU! YOU!], is born this day. [Right now, it’s a fact], a Savior”. [Whoever you are, He has saved YOU.]

I believe it is extremely significant that this message was given to rough, common, unreligious shepherds who probably thought, “Surely he would never save me. You don’t know me like I know me. I smoke, I drink, I’m impure and I can’t stop – Sometimes I don’t even want to stop.” But the angel disagrees: “No, you don’t understand. This is the best part. I’ve got a sign for you, so you’ll know all I’ve said to you is true. Because of this sign, you’ll know

- That you don’t have to be afraid
- That this good news will bring you great joy.
- And this Savior is really yours.”

**Here’s the sign …**

It’ll be a baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, in a stable, lying in a manger. Not a palace nursery with a $5000 crib (Not just the rich or successful, anybody can come). It’s just a baby (Not some intimidating warrior or powerful, vengeful king). Yep, your Savior is just a baby (No one’s afraid of a baby). That’s your sign – so you know you don’t have to be afraid.”

Then the night sky exploded. 1000’s upon 1000’s and ten thousand times ten thousands of brilliant angels set the heavens ablaze and then became a star. And just like the shepherds, just like the wise men, it’s your star, YOUR very own star - so you’d know He wants **you** to come

Do you see the star now? Please see the star. Come rich & poor, Come saints & sinners, Come shepherds & Kings – come all ye who labor and are heavy laden. Follow the Star. The Baby Jesus, God of the universe, wants us. O Come let us adore Him.
A Chat with the First Recipient of Three Heart Transplants at LLUMC

Last week *Adventist Today* ran a report from Loma Linda University Medical Center about some past transplant patients who will be riding in the next Rose Bowl Parade. One of those transplant recipients really caught our eyes--Leilah Dowsari, only in her 20s now, has received three heart transplants. I decided to go after more of that story. Dowsari talked with AT this week.

She was born with hypoplastic left heart syndrome, a rare birth defect in which the mitral valve, left ventricle, aortic valve, and aorta do not develop completely. It is more common in males than in females, so baby Leilah was already an extraordinary person, though not in the ways her parents would have hoped!

The family was sent to Loma Linda “because that was the place to go,” says Dowsari. A heart was found, and the January 1986 surgery went well, but her parents were warned that this transplant might not work at all, and if it did, would likely be effective for only five years.

The family moved back to the Middle East, but came over every year to go to LLUMC for checkups. In 2000, the doctors discovered that Dowsari had developed coronary artery disease, and put her up for another transplant. Again, a donor heart was found, and again, the surgery itself went well. However, this time Dowsari developed a host of problems, from stomach troubles to rejection episodes. Then they discovered toxoplasmosis in her blood, a parasitic disease usually contracted from cat feces; physicians concluded the heart donor had had the disease and had passed it on to Dowsari, via the donated heart. They started Dowsari on antibacterial medicines.

Dowsari says that since she was so young when she received her first heart, it was just “normal” to her. But she was now getting old enough to realize how much danger she was in and how difficult and frightening life as a transplant patient could be. Also, she had coronary artery disease yet again, and she became depressed.

Her doctor told her he was willing to perform a third transplant, but that the decision was up to her. Asked if she was frightened, Dowsari said, “Honestly, no, I wasn't scared; I was relieved that they were going to do another one, because I knew that gave me the best chance.”

So they began the wait again. On Mother's Day, 2003, after trying without success to get hold of Dowsari's mother, “a nurse was kind enough to come to the door and tell me they'd found a heart.”

Dowsari became the first recipient of three heart transplants at LLUMC. That surgery took 11 hours, but it went well, and so far, no troubles. Dowsari was actually able to attend her prom the day she was discharged, a few weeks after the surgery. Doctors told her to take it easy, and she did, delighted at the chance for a new life.

But the story doesn't end there.
At one point in her years of medical issues, Dowsari had received radiation and had been told she would be unable to conceive and bear children. At the time, she says, she was “okay with it. But as I got older, I really started wishing for a child of my own.”

When she met her boyfriend in 2007, she did use birth control, just in case. But in 2010 she stopped, just to see what would happen, and in December of that year, she learned she was pregnant. The doctors were worried, both about Dowsari and the baby. They juggled her meds and took away those not absolutely necessary. She went to the LLU high risk clinic, and from about 25 weeks on, she was in and out of the hospital. She was having severe headaches, a warning sign of pre-eclampsia, a blood pressure issue that is very dangerous in pregnancy and is more common in organ recipients. They kept telling her she didn't have it, but at 32 weeks they told her she did.

Dowsari received several blood transfusions; then, on Father's Day, delivered a son, Gabriel, who was 4 pounds, 11 ounces—a good weight for a premature baby. She got to hold him before he was sent to Neonatal Intensive Care “just in case.”

All Dowsari's problems have since gone away, and there have been no lasting effects on either mother or baby. Next year will be this heart's 10th anniversary, and besides riding the float, Dowsari tries any way she can to raise awareness and encourage organ donation.

Dowsari doesn't know yet what she wants to do as a career, but says she does photography as a hobby, and that may develop into a career. In the meantime, she has met two huge life goals many of us take for granted: she's alive, and she's a mother. “My transplants,” says Dowsari, “gave me the opportunity to become a mother like I always wanted. Now I try to do what I can to promote organ donation.” But for now, “Mom” is a big enough job.
Best Practices for Adventist Worship, Part 2

By Nicholas Zork

(Editorial Note: Recently, Best Practices for Adventist Worship* ran a series by Pastor Nicholas Zork with some new and interesting questions to ask about worship. AT has obtained permission to reprint them here. This is the second in the series. Debbonnaire Kovacs)

In the previous edition of Best Practices for Adventist Worship, I posed a series of questions along the lines of what worship does. Implicit in these questions was a central critique: at times our concern for effective communication in worship eclipses the importance of the worshiping community and true communion with God. In our understandable eagerness to communicate a message about God, we can overlook the priority the people who are gathered and the God who is present to meet us. Meaning starts to take precedence over meeting. Presentation becomes privileged over presence. And production values begin to trump pastoral sensitivity as we lead worshipers in what should be participatory prayer.

As a church musician and liturgist, I find myself tempted at times to plan worship as if it were a presentational event. But through repeated missteps, I am slowly learning an important principle: worship is not an artistic production-centered ministry in which we utilize people; it is a God-and people-centered ministry in which we utilize artistic production.

Here are three suggestions for how we might prioritize the "who" of worship--God and worshipers--over the "how" of communication and ritual artistry:

1) Think of ways to be physically present to one another in worship. As Marshal McLuhan famously asserted, "The medium is the message." If a worship experience is predominantly mediated by projection screens and amplified sound, to what degree are we truly present to one another? And what does the being digitally present to one another suggest about how God is present to us and how we are present to God? Plan moments where worshipers can tangibly interact. Even a simple physical greeting can enable participants to more fully embody the Body of Christ in worship.

2) When planning worship, consider relationships first and the artistic production second. Before beginning any worship planning session, think through the impact of the planning process itself on the leaders involved. Efficient ministry is not always effective ministry. For example, emails and text messages can be a quick way to get things done. But without the nuances of nonverbal communication, such efficiencies are often more than offset by the time it takes for relational damage to be undone. Whenever possible, meet face to face.

3) When meeting to plan worship, we must remember that we are discussing an encounter with a Holy God who is already present. Too often, we talk about God as though God isn't there -- as though God isn't listening to the conversation. We speak differently about someone--whether negatively or positively--when we know they're in the room. Perhaps if we planned worship with a greater sense of God's presence, we would be less cavalier in what we said, less confident in
what we intended to do, and more prayerfully expectant regarding what God might do. Perhaps if we planned worship with a greater sense of God's presence, we would worship with a greater sense of God's presence--the presence of the One who graciously meets us when we gather in Jesus' name.

*Many of you may already receive the email updates of various Best Practices newsletters put out by the North American Division. Here is their roundup:

The Best Practices family of email newsletters are produced by the North American Division Ministerial Association of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Look for Best Practices for Ministerial Directors on the first week of the month; Best Practices for Adventist Ministry on the second and fourth weeks of the month; Best Practices for Evangelism on the third week of the month; and Best Practices for Adventist Worship on the fifth week of the month. Go to www.nadministerial.org for more information.
The Beginning of the Mend

Submitted: Dec 19, 2012
By Debbonnaire Kovacs

The One spoke. “I AM unity and grace.
But you may choose.” So Me-First tore away,
And ripped a bloody gash in time and space.
A world crashed through and, blinded, wept for day.
The One spoke. “I AM with you, fractured race.”
A girl said yes, and felt a sudden shift,
As if stars stumbled in their measured pace
When their Creator stepped into the rift.
The One spoke. “I AM here.” A lightning trace
Of incandescent shock lit herdsmens’ eyes
As splendent strangers from another place
Exploded into song that un-told lies.
The torture eased; space-time slid back in place
Around His damply wrinkled newborn face.

Debbonnaire Kovacs, 2003