### NEWS

**Adventist Leader Says He Did Not Endorse Ugandan Death Penalty for Gays:** News reports from Uganda insist that the highest-ranking Adventist leader in east-central Africa supports an anti-homosexual law that contains provisions for executing those convicted. Has the Church indeed changed its longstanding opposition to this draconian legislation?....

**The Ten Top Adventist News Stories of 2012:** The *Adventist Today* news team generated more than 200 headline stories this year, chief among them the saga of several unions' decisions to recognize the gift of ordained pastoral ministry in the lives of dozens of Adventist female pastors. Two-thousand-twelve is going down in the history of the church as an exceptional and fascinating news year and may well be cited historically right alongside 1844, 1862, 1888, 1901, and 1980....

### OPINION

**One Goal at a Time:** Columnist Mark Gutman believers our New Years resolutions would meet with greater success if we remembered some simple advice given more than two centuries ago by Benjamin Franklin....

**Theological Feet of Clay:** Blogger Andy Hanson marvels at the tendency in the Church to drift closer and closer to a creedal statement, despite the Church's founders' progressive disdain for all such creeds....

**Dr. David Wilbur: Power and Illusion: Religion and Human Need. Part 6:** It has been said that the devil seems to work hardest to pervert that which is noblest and best in the human experience. Blogger Ervin Taylor focuses on some of the ways evil has corrupted and co-opted religion in human history....
**Love and Praise!:** Devotional writer Debbonnaire Kovacs attempts to distill all the joyful, praiseful lectionary readings for this Advent week into one glorious swallow of love and thanksgiving....

**Finding My Way:** Where should we turn when we lose our inner cool and the spiritual virtues of the Holy Spirit seem to have taken a long Alaska trek above the Arctic Circle? Blogger Harry Banks found himself recently in just such a situation and finds consolation in being able to tell us how he succeeded in vanquishing a spirit of fear and uncertainty....

**SUBSCRIBERS' BONUS FEATURES**

**Nick Zork on Worship, Part Three:** Author Zork wonders why some of the most prominent forms of song in the Bible (Laments and Protests) are so completely lacking in today's world of Christian worship. Does this absence of form cause the Almighty to appear emotionally disconnected from modern man's suffering and grief?... (available to subscribers only)

**The Christmas Story:** Modern psychologist Phil Harker looks poetically at the age-old story of Christmas in context of our desire to have the mind of Christ....

*A Weekly Newsletter from atoday.org*

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Adventist Leader Says He Did Not Endorse Ugandan Death Penalty for Gays

Submitted: Dec 24, 2012
By AT News Team

Reports in newspapers in Uganda “took the liberty to extend my statements to suggest what I did not say or imply,” said Pastor Blasius Ruguri, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East-Central Africa, in a news release from the official Adventist News Network (ANN) on Friday (Dec. 21). Since 2009 there has been a bill under consideration in the Ugandan parliament that would make homosexuality illegal and includes the death penalty. “I have never seen that bill,” Ruguri states in the ANN report.

Ruguri was quoted earlier last week in New Vision, which bills itself as “Uganda’s leading daily,” as endorsing the bill. He was in Uganda to inaugurate a new local conference, installing the conference president and dedicating the conference office. Three members of parliament were present for the occasion, including one representing Yoweri Museveni, the nation’s president. They announced grants to help fund the construction of the conference office.

The newspaper reported that “Ruguri … said the church supports the government in the fight against homosexuality and corruption.” It quoted him: “Our stand is ‘zero tolerance’ to this vice and to western influence on this crucial issue because God says no to it. We are together with the President and the Speaker [of parliament] and we fully support the Anti-Homosexuality Bill. I call upon all religious ministers, all Ugandans, and all Africans to say no to Homosexuality. Let us stand for our sovereignty as Ugandans and as God fearing people even [if] the heavens fall.”

“Mine was a general statement to disapprove of homosexual practice,” Ruguri stated in the ANN release. “Our church is a ministry of mercy and as a minister in the Seventh-day Adventist Church I cannot condemn homosexuals to death or to hell.”

Spectrum, the journal of the largest organization of Adventist academics, published excerpts from the New Vision newspaper story a few days ago, including a photo of Ruguri with General Conference (GC) President Ted Wilson standing behind him, although the photo is not from the events in Uganda and was evidently taken some time ago. On Friday it reported the ANN statement, but expressed reservations as to its intent. “Ruguri might want to work on his communication skills since he appears to have misled another report from a different newspaper on the same day,” Spectrum said. It published excerpts from The Daily Monitor quoting Ruguri, “As the SDA, we stand by you (Ugandans) in solidarity against homosexuality even when some countries are threatening to cut aid to you.”

On Sunday (Dec. 23) two news publications serving the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community in the United States welcomed the ANN statement, reporting that Ruguri
“has repudiated quotes attributed to him by Uganda’s state owned media” (Gayapolis.com) and “opposes Uganda anti-gay bill” (Gay Star News). The Ugandan newspaper had “yet to take down or correct their article,” Gay Star News stated, but the nation’s parliament failed again to bring the bill to vote before it took a Christmas vacation.

A similar incident occurred in 2010 when Pastor John Kakembo, president of the Adventist denomination in Uganda, was reported by Spectrum to have endorsed the same bill. The next day the GC communication department issued a statement opposing the bill. Adventist Today published an opinion piece urging readers to encourage church leaders to speak out against the proposed law.

“Relationships between church and state are complicated in developing nations where there is a strong Christian majority,” a former missionary told Adventist Today. “American Evangelicals have gone to Uganda and stirred the pot on this issue.” The Adventist Church also has a complex communication task in maintaining the dual positions of teaching against homosexual behavior and advocating respect for people regardless of their sexual orientation, an Adventist theologian pointed out. “It is fraught with opportunity for misunderstanding.”
The Ten Top Adventist News Stories of 2012

Submitted: Dec 27, 2012
By AT News Team

Adventist Today published more than 225 news stories this past year to provide an independent record of the Adventist community, unfettered by promotional goals and institutional interests. A number of these were controversial. Some resulted in a large number of comments and correspondence, as well as occasional internal debate among our journalists and the policy-makers at Adventist Today. There were even times when other publications made our reporting part of the news itself.

Picking ten of these stories as the most important for 2012 is a difficult task. The most important events or trends are not always the most interesting or debatable. Feel free to nominate you own additions or replacements for these ten in the “Comments” section at the end of this article.

1. Six union conferences in North America and Europe took a stand to end gender discrimination in ordination to the gospel ministry. At least two of these unions have already seen the ordination of women clergy and it has come to light that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in China has been doing so since the 1980s.

The year began on an inauspicious note related to this issue; the North American Division (NAD) officers notified the members of their governing body that they would not publish a policy repeatedly voted by significant majorities over the previous three years, due to a ruling by the General Conference (GC) legal office that the body lacked then-necessary authority. The policy E 60 had been revised to permit women with credentials as Commissioned Ministers to be elected conference presidents.

In early March the Mid-America Union Conference executive committee voted to support the ordination of women but did not take steps to immediately implement that position. In April retired GC President Jan Paulsen told the GC executive committee that he wished the issue had been settled during the 11 years he served as the denomination's global leader. “The Spirit is ready to lead us where we, for various reasons, are reluctant to go,” he told the denomination’s top leaders.

On April 22-23 during a regular constituency meeting, the delegates to the North German Union Conference voted by a two-thirds majority to approve the ordination of women pastors in its territory. July 29 delegates to a special constituency session of the Columbia Union Conference in the United States voted four out of five by secret ballot to immediately authorize ordinations without gender discrimination. On August 19 the delegates to a special constituency session in the Pacific Union Conference voted the same thing by the same overwhelming majority. On both
occasions Pastor Ted Wilson, current GC president, made a personal appeal to the delegates to not adopt the new policy.

Since that time the union conferences in the Netherlands and Norway have voted the same policies. As a result there are now three union conferences in North America and three in Europe clearly on record. It is likely that others will eventually join them, even if they do not go so far as to implement the policy along with the scores of women who have been ordained or issued the credentials of an ordained minister in view of their having previously had a “laying on of hands” when they were commissioned.

The GC officers issued a statement expressing their view that these actions were regrettable and not valid. Rumors flew about possible sanctions that the GC might put in place against these union conferences. *Adventist Today* published analysis by former GC officers and well-known Adventist theologians. There was extensive debate among many of our readers about “unity versus uniformity” and the role of women in the church. At the annual meeting of the GC executive committee in October the three hours of discussion were respectful and no sanctions were applied or suggested in the draft distributed to the committee members. A month earlier, Bill Knott, editor of the *Adventist Review* had announced that the “general paper” of the denomination would again open its pages to the topic of women’s ordination after decades of silence.

2. **CBS television star Angus T. Jones joins the Adventist Church and kicks up a media storm because of critical remarks about his own show.** The best paid child actor in Hollywood turned 18 in the last year and started attending Valley Crossroads Seventh-day Adventist Church in Los Angeles. He was baptized and made friends in the largely African American congregation, and somehow connected with Chris Hudson from Alabama, the leader of an independent ministry that produces YouTube videos under the label *Forerunner Chronicles*. Jones’ pastor told an *Adventist Today* source that he did not know where Hudson came from or why he taped an interview with Jones, and a number of Adventist ministers in California expressed concern about Hudson’s agenda. The video included comments by Jones about his embarrassment over the raunchy content of *Two and a Half Men*, and this immediately bounced around the Hollywood blogosphere and national entertainment press. Within a couple of days Jones apologized to his cast mates and the story disappeared, but not before Adventist faith received a lot of prime time attention, including large portions that were not factual.

3. **Adventists play key roles on both sides of Papua New Guinea (PNG) political crisis.** A constitutional crisis in this Pacific island nation erupted in December 2011 and continued into January 2012. In fact, it has not been formally settled to this day, although a de facto solution is in place. Sir Michael Somare was the first prime minister after PNG ended its colonial status and served again later. In mid-2011 he left the country for medical care overseas and was in the
hospital for months. The parliament elected a younger man, Peter O’Neill as the new prime minister. Late in 2011 Somare was again in better health and returned to PNG, expecting to resume his rule. The parliament did not agree, so Somare took his case to the Supreme Court which decided in his favor. The parliament met again as specified in the nation’s constitution and fulfilled the articles specifying how a prime minister may be replaced, again replacing Somare with O’Neill. On January 26 there was a confrontation among officers at the nation’s military headquarters, but reason prevailed and O’Neill is leading the government despite Somare’s continued claims.

The deputy prime minister in O’Neill’s government, Belden Namah, is an Adventist. So is O’Neill’s chief of staff, Ben Micah. On the other side, eight of Somare’s cabinet members are Adventists. A total of 15 members of parliament are members of the Adventist Church. The membership of the denomination in PNG is over 250,000 but three times as many told census takers that they are Adventists. This is about 10 percent of the population or 25 times the percentage of Adventists in the US population.

4. Lake Union Conference issues a warning that Adventists should not give speaking appointments or other opportunities to once noted theologian Samuel K. Pipim. In May of 2011 he admitted to sexual misconduct, resigned from the Adventist ministry and was removed from church membership. Almost precisely a year later he sought rebaptism and was employed by an independent ministry where he wrote a book and conducted a blog. One of his victims gave permission to her counselor to be interviewed and tell her side of the story, and Adventist Today published the interview on June 7. By early September a support group for victims of clergy sexual abuse, The Hope of Survivors, was raising questions about how Pipim’s case was being handled and expressing concerns about his contacts with young adults and possible presence at events sponsored by Generation of Youth for Christ (GYC), an independent Adventist organization he helped to found. He had admitted that there was more than one victim of his sexual misconduct. Because Pipim has been a major voice against women’s ordination, accusations were being made by some who agree with him on that issue that the questions about his behavior were meant to silence him. In mid-September the Lake Union Conference together with the Michigan Conference sent a letter to Adventist leaders stating that “because of our expanded knowledge of [his] moral failures we strongly advise our colleagues … to not support Samuel Pipim’s ministry such as speaking appointments, the use of his materials or any ministry activity.” He has taught that the Bible precludes women from leadership in the home or in the church.

5. An anonymous group hacked unpublished Ellen G. White materials which they threatened to release, and the White Estate filed a lawsuit in Federal Court to stop them. A web site appeared in late March with the announced intention of releasing digital versions of unpublished White manuscripts. Courthouse News Service reported August 22 that the White Estate had filed
for an injunction against Brendan Knudson for hacking a web site that housed unpublished materials. A week later, *Adventist Today* was sent a news release from a group calling itself “SDAanonymous” and claiming responsibility for hacking a secret web site maintained by the White Estate. The group claimed that a decision was made by the Estate at some point between 1995 and 2001 to release all of the previously unpublished letters and manuscripts by White in the form of a CD-ROM and that this set of digital files was ready for publication in 2002. The group claimed that an employee of the White Estate first revealed to them the online location of the full collection of unpublished materials and that it accessed these through a backdoor, not through breaking into the server. The litigation has evidently not progressed because Knudson is not an American citizen or a resident in a nation that recognizes American law on this point. No additional materials have been released on the group’s web site.

6. **The latest census says that the Adventist Church is the largest denomination in Jamaica and growing.** The Caribbean nation released data earlier this fall from its most recent census reporting the religious preferences of its citizens and about 12 percent told census-takers they were Seventh-day Adventists. This is 124 percent of the official membership figures for the Jamaica Union Conference, a larger number than can be explained by the unbaptized children of members. Jamaica has one of the proportionately largest Adventist communities of any nation on the globe. It is growing at a rate of 1.5 percent per year, about the same as the growth rate of the denomination in North America.

7. **Herbert Blomstedt, the noted symphony orchestra conductor and an Adventist, was honored in June by the King of Sweden.** The Seraphim Medal is the highest honor in the Scandinavian nation. King Carl Gustaf 16 has only awarded to 12 individuals since 1973. The last time was in 2008 when it was given to Sture Linner, a United Nations diplomat and scholar. No Adventist has achieved greater stature in music and the arts than has Blomstedt. He is Sweden’s most successful conductor. He first performed in 1954 as conductor of the Royal Philharmonic. Over the years he has served as the conductor of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, the Danish and Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestras, and the Dresdner Staatskapelle in Germany.

8. **Turmoil in the world headquarters of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) resulted in a change of leadership.** In June *Adventist Today* discovered that Dr. Rudi Maier, the president of ADRA, had been asked by Pastor Ted Wilson, GC president, and Pastor Geoffrey Mbwana, chairman of the ADRA board, to resign. He felt they were unfairly taking sides in some staff tensions he could manage and a special meeting of the ADRA board was hurriedly convened. After hearing from Maier, it voted to fire him, although not all board members agreed. The *Adventist Review* reported that the internal conflicts went back to early 2011 when there was some downsizing of the ADRA staff. (*Adventist Today* published a detailed analysis of the situation in its print edition in September.) In early October, the ADRA board appointed Jonathan Duffy, the director of ADRA Australia, as the new president. He has a
background in public health, has built an excellent ADRA organization in the South Pacific and
done ground-breaking work helping communities deal with at-risk behavior among young
people.

9. **Well-known Hollywood couple publicly state that they will follow the moral teachings of the**
**Adventist Church.** DeVon Franklin is an executive at Columbia Pictures/Sony, one of the major
studios in the Hollywood cinema industry, and an outspoken Seventh-day Adventist. In the
spring he became engaged to the popular 30-year-old actress and model Meagan Good, who told
newspapers, fan magazines and television reporter Robin Leach that they would defer sexual
activity until after the wedding because of Franklin’s faith. Asked what it was like to spend her
life with a man of such religious conviction, Good told Leach, “I’ve always been very spiritual. I
love God with all my heart. I think sometimes people get a little confused because of characters
that I’ve played.” The wedding was in the summer and a major media event.

10. **Adventist universities open two new medical schools in Nigeria and Peru.** In June the
Benjamin S. Carson School of Medicine was inaugurated at Babcock University in Lagos,
Nigeria; and in September the School of Medicine at Peruvian Union University was opened.
This brings the number of medical schools being operated at universities affiliated with the
Adventist Church around the world to total of five. The other three are at Montemorelos
University in Mexico, River Plate Adventist University in Argentina, and Loma Linda University
in the United States. Both Nigeria and Peru are nations where the World Health Organization
reports a major need for more physicians.

The *Adventist Today* news team selected these ten stories as most significant because of their
high visibility beyond the Adventist community or because they are indicators of key trends
within the Adventist movement. Clearly our readers may have other opinions.
One Goal at a Time

Submitted: Dec 23, 2012
By Mark Gutman

In 1726, 20-year-old Benjamin Franklin put together a list of 13 virtues (e.g., temperance, silence, order). He planned to focus on one virtue at a time, slowly mastering each one until he would eventually “live without committing any fault at any time” (The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, see chapter 8). I think Ben was onto a principle that has been overlooked. We do better by working on changing one habit at a time than we do by trying to change several (or even a few) at the same time.

On December 31, 2011, the Sabbath School class I attend had a New Year’s Eve party. At the party we were given a slip of paper and asked to write a New Year’s resolution on it. The leader collected the slips of paper and redistributed them through the class to be read out loud. I had been considering a resolution, but this provided a sudden spark. I wrote that I would spend five minutes a day reading Tony Schwartz’s book Be Excellent at Anything. I’ve succeeded in keeping that resolution. Having committed to the class that I would spend those five minutes a day provided motivation even on days I would just as soon have skipped reading.

Reading that book has led to other steps. I began reading a book that dealt with emotional health. That turned into an additional five-minute-per-day habit that I have kept up. That led to another habit that’s been continued, which led to another habit . . . . The Schwartz reading has led to other habits I wouldn’t have predicted last December 31.

About three years ago I read The Power of Less, by Leo Babauta. Babauta explains that a few years earlier, “I was over my head in debt. . . . I was overweight and unhealthy. I was eating fried and fatty and salty and greasy foods every day, I wasn’t exercising, and I was a smoker. . . . “(introduction, page x). He decided to simplify. He quit smoking. That was his whole focus for a while. He explains that “Beating that barrier helped inspire me to new goals and habits, and I used the same method on each one: I’d focus all of my energy and attention on that one challenge, and the barriers would break down (ibid).” Later on the page he lists several accomplishments he’s achieved by focusing on one goal at a time.
As I read his book three years ago, I was inspired to make several changes at once. I quickly made a list of at least six items I needed to start or stop doing. And they all looked so important that I didn’t think it made sense to put off working on any of them. Guess what? When I picked up his book again this year, I realized that I hadn’t accomplished a single one of the important items that I thought a few years ago were too important to wait to work on. Even then, it wasn’t picking up his book that motivated me to change a habit at a time. What seemed to make the difference for me was that I kept reading Schwartz’s book, and it began to set me thinking more seriously about improvements to my life.

Babauta counsels to “Do only one habit at a time. . . . Trust me – I’ve tried both ways many times, and in my experience there is a 100 percent rate of failure for forming multiple habits at once, and a 50 to 80 percent rate of success if you do just one habit at a time – depending on whether you follow the rest of these rules” (page 36; he then lists five more simple rules).

At that New Year’s Eve party, I wasn’t thinking about working on other habits during 2012. I only focused on one, which I had told the class I would do. But focus on that one has led to major progress, one improvement at a time. The habit I’m focusing on this month I just decided to do on the first day of this month. When I realize that a habit of mine is causing problems, I tackle it for a month (or plan to tackle it in a future month). If I want to relapse then, I can, but I may have learned that the new habit is worth the effort.

I’m reminded of Aaron’s lame explanation to Moses about a golden calf Aaron had sculpted: “They gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf” (Exodus 32:24, NIV)! We have trouble believing that Aaron actually expected Moses to believe such a line, so why do we hope to work the way Aaron said he did? No need for elaborate planning or sculpturing – just watch the marvelous results occur quickly, the way the quick weight loss or moneymaking schemes promise. We pile up a list of things we want to do while we let our focus scatter so widely that we accomplish little. You’re only going to end up with a (golden) calf if you work for it.
For 2013 or just for next month, you don’t need to make up a list of resolutions. Or at least not a pack that you’re going to start on January 1. Because if you make such a list, what does Babauta say? “100 percent rate of failure.” Randy Roberts, Loma Linda University church pastor, quotes a verse:

“Last year I made a list of things that I resolved to do.
I’ll use that list again this year; it’s still as good as new.”

A resolution list can be simple. List several habits you’d like to start or stop. But then choose just one. Use Babauta’s rules:
#1. Choose an easy goal. “If you think you can exercise for thirty minutes a day, choose ten minutes – making it super easy is one of the best ways to ensure you’ll succeed” (page 37).
#2. Choose something measurable.
#3. Be consistent (same time every day).
#4. Report daily.
#5. Keep a positive attitude. “Expect setbacks now and then, but just note them and move on” (ibid).

I recommend that you start where I did. Make your first goal to read the Tony Schwartz book (or similar) five minutes a day, and tell others your new plan. It will probably lead you to other goals suited to your situation. If you commit to reading it five minutes a day, it won’t take much of your time but it will keep making an impression. I look forward to 2013!

You can work on starting (or stopping) a new habit any time. You don’t have to wait for the end of a month. Start on one the first day you read this. Maybe you can start another one at the beginning of the next month. If you’re not interested in continuous improvement, work the way that Aaron told Moses he worked (which was, “I did almost nothing.”). Or make a list of six changes you’re going to make in the next month. But if you want to make steady noticeable progress, commit to making one doable change at a time.
The June 24, 2010 *Adventist Review* lists 24 General Conference Departments and 9 General Conference institutions. The accomplishments of these entities are remarkable. However, this impressive organizational edifice has theological feet of clay.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was begun as a progressive movement, idealistic in its belief in present truth and committed to fearlessly following theological truth wherever it led. Hence the emphasis on Bible study and an abhorrence of creedal statements.

Initially, Advent believers believed that the Heavenly portals had been closed to nonbelievers. Consequently, personal preparation for translation was doctrine. Then the Great Disappointment of 1844 required that that doctrinal teaching be revised.

These revised beliefs were hammered into Adventist theology by our church fathers in 23 sessions in which ideas of a number of religious denominations were discussed and incorporated into a systematic dogma that became the statement of beliefs upon which the Seventh-day Adventist Church was founded in 1863. (It is important to note that, by choice, Ellen White was not a member of this group.)

These early Seventh-day Adventist believers believed, taught, and preached that the Second Coming was imminent and would be preceded by the Great Tribulation described in Revelation. Consequently, Ellen White, along with church leaders, believed that two years of religious education beyond high school was all that was required to prepare believers to become effective evangelists.

Talk of secular college or university training was discouraged because time was short. The notion of educational accreditation, along with buying things on long-term credit, demonstrated a lack of faith. The saving message of Present Truth was uncomplicated, and the biblical support for that message was based on authoritative key texts that were easy to memorize and present. Believe it, act according to that belief, and prepare to meet Jesus in the air.

World War One was the Apocalypse. Poison gas, tanks, airplanes, and the machine gun were the ultimate weapons of war and clearly signaled the approaching End of Time. When Jesus didn't arrive after the war ended, it was time to again revise Adventist theology.

The 20th century was the century of missionaries and mission fields. Even World War II didn't
seriously renew the apocalyptic language of the previous World War. "Once burned, twice shy."
The Adventist Church had discovered the "world field," and there was work to be done. The
guiding theological idea became, "Jesus will come again when the Adventist brand of the Gospel
has been preached to all the world".

Along with the discovery of the "world field" and stubborn heathen religious practices, came the
realization that the "medical work" and education were effective "entering wedges" for Adventist
mission work. And since Adventists had been preaching the Health Message for 30 years and
Ellen White had given the go-ahead for the creation of an accredited School of Medicine in
Loma Linda, California, it was no longer seen as exhibiting a "lack of faith" if Adventist parents
wanted their kids to have a college education that would equip them to quickly and efficiently
"finish the work" as preachers, medical professionals, teachers, and conference workers.

And if Adventist parents were footing the bill, they wanted this tertiary education to be in
Adventist colleges. It was also important that these colleges be officially recognized as legitimate
institutions of higher learning in the states in which they existed. That meant accreditation. That
meant at least a foundational liberal arts curriculum. That meant that the Adventist students
attending these schools would be exposed to at least a smattering of secular literature, science,
philosophy, and history.

"Katie, bar the door!"

Up until this time, only lip service had been paid to Ellen White's statements about the value of
critical thinking as opposed to "thinking other men's thoughts". Now, Adventists were
developing a taste for biblical scholarship and scientific research in fields like geology and
biology and physics and anthropology. When this happened, it became apparent to a few shrewd
Adventist leaders that it was again time to revise Adventist theology.

An attempt was made, but it was crushed. Before 1980, Adventist beliefs were informally
"summarized" in 1889 and again in 1914. In 1980, 27 official statements of belief were defended
as The Truth, not withstanding the words of the authors that they had not written Seventh-day
Adventist Believe "to serve as a creed a statement of beliefs set in theological concrete". (A 28th
statement of belief was added in 2005.) Although it became apparent that some of these beliefs
could not be supported either by existing biblical scholarship or scientific inquiry, Adventist
leaders decided that evidence could be discovered that would vindicate church dogma.

What was needed was literary and historical proof that the book of Daniel was not a historical
novel; scientific proof that the earth was created about 6 to 10 thousand years ago in six literal 24
hour days, and that Noah's flood was a factual account of a universal event that destroyed all but
eight humans and every animal not on board a wooden boat 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45
feet high. To accomplish this task, the Biblical Research Institute and the Geoscience Research Institute were commissioned.

Responsible theologians and scientists quit or were fired for raising legitimate questions about the impossibility of their task. Those who chose to remain employed learned not to speak truth to power. In the case of the theologians employed by the Biblical Research Institute, no attempt has been made to equip church members to deal with questions concerning the literal interpretation of key doctrinal passages of the Bible, particularly those found in the Old Testament. The scientists employed by the Geoscience Institute continue to equivocate about the age of Earth; a literal six-day creation that involved the sun, moon, and stars; the universal flood; the geologic column; dinosaurs; tectonic plates; microbial and parasitic life; and an ancient ecological cycle based on death and regeneration.

This failure to confront the issues raised by modern biblical scholarship and scientific inquiry has left the Adventist Church in a precarious situation. The progressive institution founded by the fathers and mother of the Church, whose personal integrity was a test of leadership and that an educated, rational defense of biblically based Truth was expected of every Adventist preacher, has found itself in a situation where the integrity of its leadership and the rationality of its theology have been seriously undermined.

Because of the Adventist Church's dogmatic position regarding some selective literal interpretations of biblical events and admonitions, educated Adventist young people, particularly graduates from Adventist colleges and universities, are leaving the Church in droves. Currently, the Institutes of Biblical Research and Geological Research do not assist Adventists in understanding the issues raised by modern scientific inquiry. Today, asking educated Adventists to support a religious organization that requires religious beliefs that fly in the face of reason and common sense is suicidal.

Let’s treasure our 28 doctrines. In their clumsy way they have prepared us to love, heal, and educate worldwide. This Gospel that Jesus lived and died to make real is the solid foundation upon which Christian Adventists can light up the world and glorify the Great God of the Universe. Let’s treasure the 28 as traditional beliefs, not distracting, petty, legalistic, and dogmatic assertions.
Dr. David Wilbur: Power and Illusion: Religion and Human Need. Part 6

Submitted: Dec 26, 2012
By Ervin Taylor

This is Part 6 of the summary of Dr. Wilbur’s book. 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.

Summary for Chapter 5: Religion’s Corruption and Abuse

*Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.*

Pascal

In the eternal struggle of good and evil that occupies much of human energy religion always claims to be on the side of the good. All powerful human institutions are of course at risk of being diverted to serve private interests in conflict with their announced goals. In my judgment, a religion is being corrupted when it is used in ways that decrease the quality of human life. The commentator Charles Kimball has suggested that religions gone or going bad often share some common characteristics such as claims of absolute truth, special knowledge of supernatural timing, insistence on “blind obedience,” ends justify means and the necessity of Holy War.

**Violence in the Traditions**

The Bible and the Qur’an are replete with violence by God himself or at his command. God’s people are repeatedly admonished to destroy various groups of unbelievers. The Bhagavad Ghita also presents a violent deity and a justification of violence when it is one’s “duty.” These models are helpful to those who would mobilize religion to support violence—for some supposedly good cause. Christianity or at least some believers have used these ideas to justify things like the Inquisition and destruction of the native peoples of the Americas.

**The Support of Hierarchy**

With our earliest recorded history we find religion supporting the ruling class in Egypt, Mesopotamia and China. These claims have continued through the millennia and are still found in some places. Religion has usually sought approval of the civil authorities and vice versa. Thus oppression by the state may and has often been supported by an entrenched religion—for instance Mussolini and Hitler had religious support including that of the
Catholic Church.

*The Suppression of Inquiry and Reason*

From Socrates to Galileo and beyond religious belief systems if they find themselves in disagreement with new information (mainly scientific) have a difficult time adjusting since they have claimed supernatural authority for their beliefs. The passage of time usually finds subsequent generations without all the emotional baggage of the past, able to making adjustments—and the church apologized for the Galileo episode.

*Religion and Terrorism*

*The worst atrocities have their source in the zealous pursuit of a sublime ideal that is believed to be so majestic, so magnificent, and so grand, that it is worthy of every sacrifice, every hardship, and every abomination.*  (Shadia B. Drury in the preface to *Terror and Civilization*)

Religions that seek to define one right belief system, such as Christianity and Islam, find it hard to control belief. Terrorism against those who don’t share the “right belief” is one way of trying to control this. In the last 30 years there have been strands of terrorism justified by Christians, Jews, Islamists and Sikhs. Promises of personal immortality may also facilitate recruitment of terrorists.

*The Exploitation of Believers for Private Gain*

There are many religious organizations or ministries operating in North America and maybe elsewhere and providing a luxurious life style for their leaders justified by claims of divine blessings for the followers. Exposure of the arrogance and deceit of the leaders seems often to have little effect on their success. Religion’s usual support of hierarchy and demands for faith and belief along with rejection of skepticism poorly prepares people to evaluate scams, especially ones associated with clerical leadership.

Religions are powerful systems for manipulating the human world. They usually maintain the illusion that what they approve is approved by God and for our good. Led by corrupt or rigidly dogmatic leaders they may be used to make a hell on earth for those who disagree. Fundamentalist strands of religion seem most interested in power and one victim of fundamentalism (Salman Rushdie) says that fundamentalism isn’t about religion, it’s about power.

Comments (ET): It seems to me that the last suggestion of Dr. Wilbur quoting Salman Rushdie
to the effect that fundamentalist religions are not about religion, they are about power is especially insightful. The truth of such a statement is evident in so many decisions of institutionalized religious bodies over many hundreds of years. Obviously, the only institutional religious entity for which I have direct knowledge is the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. However, one reads about such institutional behavior in many much larger and older religious traditions as well. The Adventist illustration of such behavior can be read over and over again in its history.

For example, the elimination of John Harvey Kellogg as a major player in institutional Adventism in the early part of the 20th century was essentially all about power and had little to nothing to do with theology, even if the “cover story” given out to the ordinary Adventist lay person was that it was about pantheism.

Historically, most “theological” debates are really about who shall control the official “party line” of a given religious body. In Adventism, one reads the views of the dominant political establishment in the pages of the Adventist Review. Typically, the politically dominant party of the church takes control of the principal propaganda vehicle and its version of “truth” is the one published. One has been able to see this clearly very recently in what is and is not being published in the Adventist Review as a consequence of the “election” of Ted Wilson as GC President. Within six months of his coming to power, the number of right-wing voices suddenly increased in its pages.

Perhaps the most famous example in recent memory goes back several decades. It involved the responses of a majority of Adventist scholars in their general agreement with many of the views advanced by Desmond Ford at the Glacier View Conference. However, what was reported as happening at that meeting in the pages of the Adventist Review had little in common with the actual contents of the discussions. What was published was what the hierarchy who controlled the political system of the church at that time wanted the average Adventist to know about what had happened. The opinions of the majority of scholars attending that meeting were largely ignored in the “official” reports.
Love and Praise!

Submitted: Dec 26, 2012
By Debonnaire Kovacs

Advent Four, in which the Love Candle is lit, has passed, and so has the official celebration of the Birth itself (which, of course, didn’t happen anywhere near this time of year, but it's meaningful, certainly--light in the darkness!) I was out of commission, sick with a particularly virulent flu, so I couldn't say much about it, but I can't begin to express my appreciation of it!

Love is born on earth!

This week's lectionary texts are overflowing with praise.

Isaiah 61 starts off fairly quivering with excitement:
I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Then Psalm 147 chimes in:
Hallelujah!
How good it is to sing praises to our God! *
how pleasant it is to honor him with praise!

The LORD rebuilds Jerusalem; *
he gathers the exiles of Israel.

He heals the brokenhearted *
and binds up their wounds.

The Epistle (Gal. 3) proclaims:
When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

Finally, the Gospel (John 1) rounds out the joy with a passage that is featured in most people’s Favorites List:
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing
came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

And these are just snippets. If you want to fill out your own praises (especially if you are also finding some darkness and difficulties in your holidays) I encourage you to read the entire recommended passages for this week. One place to find them is lectionarypage.net. But don’t stop there, if you also need to lament. Be sure to read Nicholas Zork’s article in the Features section of this week’s Adventist Today.

And keep your chin up. Christ is born!
Finding my way ...

Submitted: Dec 23, 2012
By Harry Banks

A recent confrontation with my faith community has given me the opportunity to check my compass ...

Several years ago I ran across some guidelines for spiritual self-direction that gave practical inner criteria for spiritual self-appraisal. And from time to time I seem to walk a solitary journey which allows me the opportunity to revisit some of these cardinal points (you know those four principal directions you see in the compass rosette on maps).

So if you'd like I'll take you along with me as I review some of my life touchstones which have helped me through the several decades of my life.

Discernment

So in the middle of pressures, arguments, scripture quoting, true and false piety posturing all around me how can I discern whether I'm in the right spiritual place ... Hmmm ... OK so my buddy Adrian (sorry but I never actually met him) describes some things to look for when evaluating my spiritual self-direction.

He says: "There are ... moods and feeling that can reveal to us if our way of life is compatible or incompatible with our divine self-direction." I translate that to mean, Can I tell if the Holy Spirit is having a chance to be heard in my spiritual conversation with myself?

He goes on: "Signs of compatibility [to me that means signs of listening to the Holy Spirit] are moods of gentleness and peace, equanimity and humility, a peaceful determination, joy and resiliency."

Then he goes for the contrast: "Signs of incompatibility [my interpretation, I ain't listening Godward worth a darn!] are the opposite moods of vehemence, agitation, excited partiality, exaltation, depression, discouragement, sadness and lack of quiet determination."

So whadayathink? Does that make sense to you? Well it did to me. So today I'm checking my inner conversation. Last night I was confused, begging God to let a little light shine through; Thinking I was "the only one in Israel" if you get the reference. This morning I'm actually able to pick up this blog which I had promised myself not to touch until there was a clear indication of positive Godward motivation. And upon checking, there is a mood of gentleness and peace and the rest of the list.
OK, OK. I know there are the you-can't-depend-on-mood-people out there, so let me just toss out a little thought crumb for them. So when the fruits of the spirit are described as "Love, Joy, Peace ..." do some of those sound like moods? Huh? Huh?

You don't have to agree with me but I'm thinking that sorta supports Adrian's criteria.

But I digress. My buddy Adrian doesn't stop there he even goes so far as to say that from his point of view there is only one "sure sign" that one is following the right way and that "is the permanence of profound inner peace and tranquil determination."

So the miracle has happened. As I write this blog that inner peace is showing itself. Now all I have to do is to see if I keep listening to God's best stuff well enough that it develops into that state of permanence.

**Disillusionment**

So why do I have trouble staying there? He suggests that the journey to "tranquil determination" is not an easy trip because it likely goes like this:

I have a deep longing for a relationship with an ultimate being.

Along the path I may transfer that yearning to relationships with teachers, sweethearts, clergy, or institutions.

After some time I may get caught up in a period of disillusionment when I realize these substitutes can't fill the place of the ultimate being. (I was pretty much there last night.)

But here comes the kicker: At this point I get to make a decision.

A. To hang on to the "grumbling, complaining and carping on the faults of everyone and everything."

Or …

B. To live through this negative period and rediscover the limited value in human relationships.
Gems

With plan B, Adrian says, the person "will be delighted to discover many gems of sparkling beauty in the gray mud of selfishness which spreads itself through everyday human life."

OK, sports fans ... I'm looking for those gems in the mud. Have you found any?

[Note: The quotes from Adrian van Kamm are from his books *Self Direction* (pages 416-417, 419) and *Religion and Personality* (page 153).]
Nick Zork on Worship, Part Three

Submitted: Dec 26, 2012
By Nicholas Zork

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:


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 third and finaly article.

You may share comments below, or on the facebook page listed above, or both.

**Psalms of Lament and Worship in a Stormy World**

*Save me, O God,*
*for the waters have come up to my neck.*
*I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold.*
*I have come into the deep waters;*
*the floods engulf me.*
*I am worn out calling for help;*
*my throat is parched.*
*My eyes fail,*
*looking for my God.*
*(Psalm 69:1-3 NIV)*

There are many things we might learn from Scripture's most significant liturgical resource -- the Book of Psalms. Over the past two weeks, I have grown to more fully appreciate one particular characteristic of biblical Psalms: the honesty with which these worship songs connect hope with present circumstances. It is difficult for me to read the opening lines of Psalm 69 without thinking of my neighbors in New York City, many of whom are just beginning a long and difficult recovery from Sandy's devastating winds and waters. The metaphorical language of Psalm 69 rings true in a way that resonates with the experience of literal "deep waters" in recent days. David's visceral lament -- with descriptions of a parched throat, failing eyes, and real threats to his life -- reveals a man in genuine need of rescue. And the rescue he seeks is not a disembodied experience of spiritual salvation but a rescue of spirit, mind, and body alike.

Toward the end of this Psalm, David is able to resound a note of genuine hope because of his faith in a God who is not distant from our struggles but truly "hears the needy." *(Psalm 69:33)*
Compare Psalm 69 to the words of a popular contemporary worship song -- one which I admit I have often appreciated:

*When the oceans rise and thunders roar*
*I will soar with You above the storm*
*Father You are king over the flood*
*I will be still and know You are God*
("Still")

What might these words mean to someone in the midst of an actual destructive storm and flood? Do we really serve a God who soars "above the storm," surveying our situation from afar? And is our hope really that we might join this God in a of place stillness above life's pain and suffering? How can this song give voice to the cries of those whose prayers for deliverance were not answered? Unlike Psalm 69, this song's stormy metaphors have a hopeful gloss that keeps them from resonating with the current situation.

Lament is the most common form in the Psalms, but laments like David's are almost completely absent from contemporary Christian worship. And without such language of discontent, without our protest to present circumstances, we risk inadvertently implying that God is distant, other-worldly, and unconcerned with our real struggles. Without honest lament about our spiritual and physical challenges, our songs of deliverance begin to suggest a longing for escape from a world God has abandoned rather than renewal of the world God loves.

I do not pretend to know all that God was doing as Sandy took the homes and lives of many on the East Coast. But I do know that God was not soaring "above the storm," assessing damage from a celestial VIP lounge. "The LORD hears the needy" because God is present with them in the midst and aftermath of storms; and we are called to join God there as well. So when we gather to sing, may we like David have the faith to honestly protest and lament circumstances we cannot accept -- circumstances God does not accept. And may we experience the full measure of God's true deliverance: not merely spiritual peace that leads to stillness but a holy discontent that leads to action -- the action of joining God in the Kingdom work of renewing this beautiful and broken world.
The Christmas Story

A modern psychologist, Dr. Phil Harker, looks again at the age-old story of Christmas:

“Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born,
But not within thyself, thy soul shall be forlorn;
The cross upon Golgotha thou lookest to in vain
Unless within thyself it be set up again.”

These words, penned by the Mediaeval mystic, Angelus Silesius, inspired the following poem.

THE CHRISTMAS STORY
Birth of the Ever-Coming Son

The yearly celebrations speak, to minds that probe the story,
Of the cycle of God’s Life in us, from fall to final glory.
The seasons as they come and go throughout a single year
Tell of progress in the Life of Christ in all who bring Him near.
The wise who understand will know ‘we have the mind of Christ’
Who clearly see through Ego’s lie and how we’ve been enticed.

Religion’s world has drifted far from its vast mystery base
Where once true seekers came to know the real ‘way’ and true ‘place’
By which ‘I AM’ extends Himself through Christ’s Life in the soul
And raises in our consciousness a yearning for that goal
‘Til, like the prodigal son of old, we end our choice to roam
And turn our weary hearts and minds to seek our former home.

These mystery stories have become our greatest celebrations
But they’re in need of clearer thought and deeper meditations
For they no longer seem to teach us as they did so long ago
The ‘way’ that Life will conquer death, the seeming mighty foe.
Let’s look again at Christmas, let’s see why it brings ‘good cheer’
And shows how Joy can overcome each heartache, angst and fear.

The Christmas story seems to tell of one man’s birth in Bethlehem
But this deep truth has more to share before we gladly say Amen
For it depicts the rise to Life in each and every soul
Since ‘Christ is all’ and ‘in us all’ a truth made clear by Paul
The story is of that One Life abiding in us all
Descent from Heaven into flesh, the rescue from ‘the fall.’

For that which truly is alive can never really die
Incarnate Life is but asleep, though tomb’d in flesh it lie.
This is the winter of the soul, its journey through the flesh
Christmas is time when sleeping Soul begins its Life afresh.
Every birth a resurrection, every resurrection a new birth
Until that day when as One Life we slip the bonds of earth.

Three days beyond the solstice of the icy northern night
When Sun seems held a captive to the earthly winter’s might
There comes a gentle stirring, as of lark or deer or mouse
So our sun begins its rise again, lights up this earthly house.
WE are the ‘house of God’ you know, in whom the Son must rise.
Christmas tells us who we really are; to some a great surprise!

The ‘red and green’ that features large in Christmas decorations
Tells us that every human being has two contrasting natures.
The green depicts the natural life, akin the verdant knoll
The red depicts the Spirit Life, the fire within the soul
The burning of the Yule log, upon the sacred hearth
Depicts the Spirit’s inner work on stubborn human hearts.

And high upon the great oak tree, as grows the mistletoe,
That higher Life its host must find in nature here below.
Lovers’ kissing underneath speaks union of each kind
With mother nature as the host to father’s Spirit mind.
The intermingling of these two grows silently akin
‘Til consciousness of ‘Christ our Life’ is born again within.

The candle with its radiance in the window of the home
Reminds it’s good to share that Light with all who feel alone.
The power of the Spirit represented by the flame
Transforms our lowly human thoughts to prayers too deep to name.
The gifts that are exchanged depict the spark of Life in all
Must needs be shared with all we meet or ever remain small.

The three wise men that bring their gifts come always from the east
Like the dawning light of day our minds must be increased.
The gold is human reason that’s refined in Spirit’s fire.
Frankincense, aroma of God’s love, fills hearts with pure desire.
And Myrrh, that bitter willingness to let small self be dead…
Then we can see that all our lives are One with Him instead.

The carols have their own due place within the exposition
For these express that deep desire, when given its expression
To find our long-forgotten home to which we would return
When on that day we cease to roam and end our long sojourn.
For life however wonder-filled when lived here ‘in the flesh’
Must always have a jaded end, it can’t be ever-fresh.
Tis from the birth of Spirit’s Life, well-nurtured as it grows
We feel the freshness of the morn that’s ever far from close.
And so Accuser’s ‘guilty’ charge, for which we fear we must atone
Will be proved false, come Easter dawn, when joined in Christ alone.
Ego says our names are legion; not true, there’s only One
That name is Christ who is our Life, God’s One and guiltless Son.

“Joy to the world, the Lord has come,” as heaven and nature sing
“Let every heart prepare it’s room, in us is born a King.”
And let the shepherds of such truth keep watch throughout this night
For they are those who hear that call, right now - the time is right.
Then gather round the little ones who’ll need their strong support
As they do battle ‘in the flesh’ and ego’s lies are fought.

Worship not the metaphor for history leaves us cold
Receive the ‘Ever-Coming Son’ who’s always new, not old.
And sing with praise the song of Life God seeks to make our own
That we may ever sit with Him upon His inner throne
And there will be rejoicing when the prodigal returns
Adorned with ring and robe and crown; the great assize adjourns.

Our life is hid with Christ in God; His Life we did not steal
And God is One who changes not, no matter what seems real.
For it is ‘God that justifies,’ the ego that condemns
So long as we believe it’s lie the exile never ends.
Thus Christmas tells the story of the first step back to home
Let us follow through the seasons and forever cease to roam.

Phil Harker