<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEWS</th>
<th>OPINION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Federal Judge Orders an End to Parsonage Exemption Which Could Cost Clergy, Churches Millions:</strong> A special deduction long available to U.S. Adventist pastors appears now to be on the chopping block, a potential $16-million annual shocker to denominational budget-makers, if a court ruling stands....</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expansion of Adventist Health Ministries in the U.S. Will Total $8 Billion:</strong> Adventist Health continues its strategic expansion in today's disorderly world of healthcare, where size is seen as one of the surest guarantees of permanence....</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Young Adult Leaders Share Their Vision for the Adventist Church:</strong> Young adults invited to year-end meetings of the North American Divisions have drafted a report calling for an enterprising, outreaching, extroverted stance by the Church as it includes members of the Millennial Generation in its plans....</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thanksgiving is Occasion for Outreach, Community Building in U.S. Adventist Churches:</strong> Large Adventist churches, especially, are leading the way in making Thanksgiving a time for wide-scale ministry in their communities....</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Stillborn Presentation?:</strong> Andy Hanson discovers a rough draft of a presentation he sort-of, kind-of believes was intended for presentation by Church president Ted Wilson. Part is written in secret code, and the rest is as packed with irony as the soil of northern Minnesota....</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Three Jacks:</strong> On the same November day that John F. Kennedy died, C.S. &quot;Jack&quot; Lewis also passed away. These two in their respective mid-century realms had great influence on both religion and politics, and their passing helped rewrite the world view of columnist Jack Hoehn and others....</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speaking Christian and a Dialect of Christian known as Adventist:</strong> Columnist Ervin Taylor believes part of the great challenge of Adventists who seek to reach the world with the gospel is our distinctive dialect. Many of our favorite words are distinctively unwieldy at best, incomprehensibly abstract at worst....</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Survey of an Adventist Academy Class of 1959: Many Adventist pastors now in active retirement graduated from Adventist high schools in the late 1950s and early 1960s. One such graduate, Lawrence Downing, asks some heavy-duty questions about the survivors' lives, after graduation....

Sh’ma by the River, 4: Loving God with One’s Heart: What can a river—especially a flooded river!—teach us about our emotions and how to love God with our whole hearts? Debonnaire Kovacs gets us into the devotional flow....

FEATURES (available to logged-in subscribers only; for free 30-day subscription, click here)

"Jewish Adventist" Works for Reconciliation: Dr. Richard Elofer, a Jew by birth and director of the World Jewish Adventist Friendship Center, believes the Adventist Church can accomplish great good by seeking reconciliation with its Jewish brothers and sisters....

Consider Trees: Poet S M Chen urges us to listen to what the trees have to teach us....
Federal Judge Orders an End to Parsonage Exemption Which Could Cost Clergy, Churches Millions

By Adventist Today New Team, November 25, 2013

A United States Federal judge in Wisconsin has decided in favor of a lawsuit initiated by the Freedom From Religion Foundation and ordered an end to the parsonage exemption for clergy. This is a provision in the income tax law, one of literally thousands applying to various occupations, business activities and specific circumstances that makes tax law in the U.S. one of the most complicated in the world. It dates to a time when some churches owned a home which was provided to the pastor rent free. At the time the exemption began the rental value of some of these homes was such that if they were computed as income it would create an impossible tax burden for the clergy involved.

The foundation has the purpose of removing all items from Federal and state law that apply only to religion on the theory than any such provision is a violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution, specifically the "establishment clause." Although historically this clause has been understood to prohibit an established church in the U.S. such as the Church of England in the United Kingdom or the Lutheran Church in Scandinavian countries, the foundation argues that it should be extended to prohibit chaplains in the Congress, for example.

Clergy have a very complicated tax status. The parsonage exclusion means that the cost of purchasing and maintaining a home (mortgage payments or rent, utilities, etc.) is removed from the calculation of the taxable income of clergy, but this does not apply to the Self-Employment Tax that clergy must pay because denominations and congregations do not withhold the tax for Social Security and Medicare nor pay the employers half of the tax. Clergy are also prohibited from taking a home office deduction because of the parsonage exclusion, despite the fact that almost all of them have their primary office in their home.

If it is upheld on appeal, Religion News Service estimates that it will decrease the "take-home pay" of clergy of all faiths across the country by five or ten percent. The judge has ordered a stay on the actual enforcement of the decision until appeals are exhausted which means that it could be several years before this happens and the Supreme Court may reverse it entirely.

There are 44,000 people employed as clergy across the country. The vast majority of clergy are actually not included in this number because Catholic clergy live under a vow of poverty and are not treated as employees and the largest number of Protestant pastors are paid minimal stipends by local congregations, while other faiths and some Christians are unpaid volunteers. The clergy included in the figure above from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) had an average income last year of $47,880.

The Seventh-day Adventist denomination employs about 3,500 clergy in the United States. The current pay scale approved by the denomination's North American Division is a little below the average reported by the BLS. Most local conferences spend 35 to 40 percent of the Tithe Fund on clergy remuneration and benefits. If the decision is upheld and implemented, it will cost either the denomination or the Adventist clergy families a total of nearly $16 million a year.

If local conferences adjust wages to make up the loss, it will cost each conference in the U.S. an average of about $300,000 a year. In many cases that would mean five or six fewer pastors in the field and more local churches in districts with four or five churches assigned to each
One argument in favor of the decision is the idea that the government is in effect subsidizing religion with the clergy tax break. At the same time data from a number of sources, including the Faith Communities Today (FACT) research demonstrates that clergy-led organizations make a far larger contribution to the safety net for the poor, the aged, disabled and disaster survivors in the U.S. If religion is entirely removed from the picture, the cost to the taxpayer is many times greater.

Share your thoughts about this article:
Expansion of Adventist Health Ministries in the U.S. Will Total $8 Billion

By Adventist Today News Team, November 24, 2013

About eight billion dollars in expansions are currently underway or planned for the next few years among the five health care organizations affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the United States. Some of the funds in this total may actually be used to refinance existing debt in new, consolidated borrowing.

Adventist Healthcare has applied for clearance from the State of Maryland to build a new campus for Washington Adventist Hospital in White Oak. Adventist Health System plans to issue as much as $4.4 billion worth of debt over the next three years to finance construction projects at 36 hospitals in five states, according to the Orlando Business Journal. Loma Linda University Medical Center has a $1.6 billion capital plan as reported by the Business Wire.

Adventist Today has also identified more than a billion dollars of projects previously announced by Adventist Health System entities, $140 million in projects announced by Kettering Health Network in Dayton (Ohio), and $314 million in projects announced by Adventist Health on the west coast. All together Adventist Today has identified more than 130 projects currently under construction or planned to begin in the next five to eight years.

None of these arrangements involve funding from church donations or denominational appropriations. Most are or will be funded by the issuance of bonds on the open market, some of which are backed by government funding.

An example of the kind of projects underway is Soin Medical Center in Beavercreek, Ohio, near Interstate 675, "the Dayton area's newest hospital," as described by the Journal-News local paper. It was opened last year by Kettering Health Network, the Adventist entity that operates eight hospitals in this Midwest metropolitan area, to meet the growing needs of suburbs east of the city. Initially licensed for 95 beds the new hospital is already reaching 80 percent occupancy rates and has two floors that are on stand-by for quick expansion when needed.

With the aging of the Baby Boom generation and rapid development of new technology in medicine, there is a growing need across the country for both additional patient space and up-to-date facilities. Because Adventist health care organizations seek to be responsive to the needs of the communities they serve, new construction is necessary in many places as well as new programs and renovated facilities with new equipment in other places.

"Across the country over a period of several years it amounts to a large investment," a retired health executive told Adventist Today. "It is not out of proportion with what is happening throughout the health care field. It really represents the way in which God has blessed the health ministries of the Church, as well as careful stewardship by the administrators."

Not only are church funds not involved in these projects; in fact, cash flows the other way. Adventist health care organizations make appropriations from operating surpluses to church and mission projects.
Young Adult Leaders Share Their Vision for the Adventist Church

By Adventist Today News Team, November 30, 2013

An official voice for the views of young adults from the Millennial Generation emerged for the first time at the 2013 annual meeting of the governing body for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. The meeting of the North American Division (NAD) executive committee was held earlier this month and the NAD communication department has now released a document put together by the 12 invited student delegates who attended.

The young adults who put together this statement are elected study body officers from Adventist colleges and universities, and therefore more likely to be representative of the attitudes of their generational peers than delegates selected by others. The NAD Working Policy directs each of the union conferences to include young adults among the members appointed to the committee, but in recent years this provision has not been given much attention. The Adventist Intercollegiate Association (AIA), which is made up of the student body officers elected on each campus, negotiated the arrangements for an additional group to be invited by the NAD officers. Student leaders participated from eight of the 13 institutions affiliated with the denomination.

"We appreciate being the first delegation of student representatives invited ... and warmly acknowledge the inclusive vision of the NAD leadership in inviting us," the statement said. "We ... therefore feel inspired to share our collective vision on behalf of our generation." The document includes 15 specific bullet points begins with an introduction that acknowledges "increasing disaffection and disillusionment with Adventism in our generation."

The theme in all of the points made is simply "we wish to move from ... a church too often focused inward to one passionately focused outward." The document calls for a missional church instead of one focused on defending the defensive stance of a withdrawing sect.

The document clearly states a wholistic understanding of the mission of Christ, urging that Adventists "live and teach our doctrines from a Jesus-centered perspective without compromising our distinctive message, ... effectively communicate and demonstrate the ultimate purpose of our many doctrines: living a life of freedom, abundance, and joy [and] ensure that we not only preach the gospel but practice it as well by actively engaging in the real problems of the world: loneliness, illness, addiction, poverty, and environmental degradation."

These young adult leaders want a church that is "a safe place for the community in times of hunger, homelessness, injury, and distress." And the perception is that this is not the character of many if not most local Adventist congregations at present.

The new media opened up the Internet are important to young adults. The document recommends that the NAD "build an engine for cultural change through a web presence that integrates education, evangelism, and practical spirituality." Instead of an institutional presence in the social media such as Facebook and Twitter, the document recommends that the denomination "actively encourage qualified lay members of the church to assume leadership at the grass root level."

The document speaks to the role of women in the church, recommending that the NAD "move forward with policies that encourage women to pursue ministry and leadership of all kinds within the church; encourage young women to follow God’s calling to pastoral ministry without concern for gender discrimination in future church employment opportunities; [and] acknowledge the diversity of conviction within the world church on the ordination of women with both moral courage and cultural sensitivity."

Specifically on the topic of engaging new generations with the Adventist faith and community, the document urges the denomination to "empower young people through offering significant positions in church leadership; challenge them by casting a bold vision with high expectations; make use of their talent and skill; make them feel needed and relevant." There was also a specific recommendation that Adventist leaders "foster opportunities for mentorship in mission and evangelism that will lead to a lifetime of dedication to the church."

"In some ways this document is not much different from what has been expressed by several younger generations over the past four
decade,” Monte Sahlin, who monitors research on the changing generations for the Center for Creative Ministry, told Adventist Today. “Unfortunately the work necessary to engage new generations in the Church has usually been given less priority than immediate organizational issues and the ongoing tug-of-war between warring viewpoints among Adventists.”
Thanksgiving is Occasion for Outreach, Community Building in U.S. Adventist Churches

By AT News Team, November 28, 2013

Thanksgiving is a holiday that originated in North America and remains one of the most important annual events in the United States. Many, if not most Adventist congregations in the country have special events this week reaching out to the local community, especially the poor, single adults, the disabled and aged, both members and the general public. It is one of the most reliable elements in local church programming.

Berean Seventh-day Adventist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, may have the largest impact of any Adventist congregation this year. WFAN television Channel 5, the Fox News station in the South's largest metropolitan area, reported that Berean Church fed more than 3,000 people at a community Thanksgiving dinner on Sunday (November 24).

A reporter and camera crew came to the event and showed that it included health screening, free haircuts, gift bags for children and boxes of groceries for low-income families to take home. Dr. Frederick Russell is the senior pastor for what is one of the largest churches in the denomination's North American Division (NAD) with about 4,500 members.

Small congregations are just as likely to do something at Thanksgiving. Another Berean Church in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, with fewer than 50 members fed about 200 people on the same Sunday as the Atlanta event. They have been sustaining Operation Jesus Feed for the past 23 years.

Across the country churches were doing the same thing, including Valley Community Adventist Church in Stockton, California. Located at 2929 South B Street, the church has about 350 members. Its community family dinner on Sunday was announced in the local newspaper.

A list of more than 26 events was released last week by the NAD communication department, most organized by local churches, as well as events sponsored by church schools, colleges, universities, and even hospitals affiliated with the denomination. The list included events in eight states from five of the nine union conferences in the NAD.

The list is longer than the one released last year and for the first time includes projects organized by coalitions of Adventist churches in large cities such as the Greater Los Angeles Thanksgiving Eve Feeding on Skid Row yesterday (November 27), a collaborative effort by seven congregations: Breath of Life, Tamarind Avenue, Berean, Altadena, Miramonte, Norwalk and University churches. About 800 homeless people were fed by volunteers, many of them young people (over 12 years of age) from Pathfinder Clubs.

"Every city should have a network of Adventist churches organizing projects like this," reflected a pastor from southern California. "It not only is a great opportunity for outreach but it brings members together from a diverse range of congregations, ethnic groups and neighborhoods. They rub shoulders doing something worthwhile and have great fellowship. It opens up lines of communication and personal relationships that strengthen the Church and increases conversation."

What happened in your local church? Adventist Today would like to know about and get in contact with metro coalitions that are doing
community action projects both around the holidays and at other times.

Share your thoughts about this article:

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A Stillborn Presentation?

By Andy Hanson, November 29, 2013

Could this be Ted Wilson’s outline of the presentation that Orville Parchment persuaded him not to give at the last meeting of the Executive Committee?*

“Of course Adventists believe all the other Christian stuff about loving your neighbor, etc. However, SDAs, not to be confused with the Seventh Day Adventists or the Seventh Gay Adventists, or any other corporate entity, are God’s remnant people because:

“We go to church on Saturday except on certain islands in the South Pacific. “We eat kosher as far as meat is concerned. “We do not work on Saturday, with the exception of preachers, ladies who prepare church potlucks, Herbert Blomstedt, and employees of Adventist medical and educational facilities. “We believe the Patriarchal Timeline chronicles actual historical events, including the construction of the Tower of Babel in 2242 B.C. “We believe that Jesus is currently in a Heavenly Sanctuary deciding which human beings deserve to be saved; this heavenly research began in 1844. “We believe Ellen White’s words, included in the Clear Word Bible, are the world’s final and authoritative prophetic voice. “We believe that Jesus’ Second Coming is imminent and will occur in my lifetime when a Heavenly determined number of SDAs experience Revival and Reformation. In addition, Jesus will appear as pictured on the cover of the Centennial Special Edition of the 1944 Advent Review and Sabbath Herald.

“I also believe that 20j3h wy08oe h05 g3 04reqh3e.”

Apparently, this last “belief” was considered so controversial that it was encrypted. However when I accidently placed my hands on the keyboard with my index fingers on the “f” and “j” instead of the “r” and “u”.....

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*A copy of this outline, purportedly handwritten, was discovered by an anonymous AT mole at GC headquarters stamped “NOT A GOOD IDEA/op” in trash being collected for shredding. I cannot vouch for its authenticity.

______________________ Join in the discussion:

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Three Jacks

By Jack Hoehn, November 25, 2013

Jack Hoehn was 17 years old in Angwin, California, a college freshman at the most beautiful campus in Adventism, when on November 22, 1963, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was murdered in Dallas, Texas. Although cell phones were still science fiction (Dick Tracey cartoons!) and there was no Internet to text on, we did have Television and Radio. Swept up in the national grief for our assassinated first Catholic president (yes, it used to matter), it was sometime later that I learned that another Jack had died the same day.

C.S. “Jack” Lewis

I first became acquainted with Clives Staples Lewis through other young Adventist college students I had met while working at church summer camp. After chopping wood, washing dishes, and being ersatz parents to 10- and 12-year-olds, we would apply our young and maturing minds to what we had been taught in Cradle Roll and Kindergarten with what we were discovering in the larger world outside of Adventism, and in this case, outside of the USA. We were still being nurtured at Adventist high schools and colleges, and were working in one of Adventism’s most endearing institutions, church summer camps. Pine Springs Ranch, Camp Cedar Falls, Leoni Meadows, Mivoden, Big Lake, Little Lake, and Inbetween Lake camps were beautiful humble institutions, not only for the pre-teens and early teens deposited there for a week or two, but also for the young staff and youngish pastors tasked with their operation. In my experience they were hotbeds of fun and faith mixed together.

It was Noel Johnson, whom we all considered a genius, and Jonathan Butler, a young man with a lovely laugh and probing mind, that I would later name my firstborn after, who introduced me to C.S. Lewis.

John F. “Jack” Kennedy and Bobby

Jack Kennedy’s death on that day started an instability in American politics that left us in the hands of a Texan (who pulled the ears of dogs for fun) and a Californian (who came on TV to convince us he was not a crook because Checkers his dog loved him) that took Americans to Viet Nam, Kent State, and Chappaquiddick in rapid succession.

I was not mature enough to understand the political world I lived in. I had been educated to believe that Catholics would try to restore the papacy in effigy in the USA, to make this country an image of the Beast. So I missed the fact that Protestant politicians were making Americans behave beastly with carpet bombings and body bags. Evil is happy to have all denominations and none serve him.

I did drive a few years later with Fred Bunch to hear Jack’s younger brother Bobbie Kennedy give a stump speech shortly before Sirhan Sirhan murdered him, too, in my home town. But it was mostly as a critic, a Catholic-fearer, that I approached the younger Kennedy’s principled and moral attempts to stop the Vietnam War.

C.S. Lewis Importance

Jack Lewis (it took me a while to learn that C.S. Lewis was known to his friends as Jack), on the other hand, I did recognize as a formidable giant in my life. And although his death on November 22, 1963, was likely consequent to him not having the protections of an Adventist lifestyle, with his pipe and pub culture, I found in Lewis a huge defender of my faith. First, he was one of the many who mature from the adolescent thrills (and Lewis said: ease) of atheism to the more robust and demanding questions of faith in the God who is, instead of what Lewis considered an immature understanding that God is not.

Secondly, although he was far removed from the life style of Adventism, I found again and again the theology of Adventism confirmed and reaffirmed by his broad and generous intellect. I did not meet Lewis in children’s fairy tales; I met him first in theology, in the classic Mere Christianity. And then in the equally famous Screwtape Letters, in which Satan is very much the same real opponent to God pictured in our
Great Controversy story. Although Lewis’ mind spun fables with alacrity; those fables made spiritual realities like Satan, Heaven, Hell, the Fall, Right and Wrong, and the key of Christ to all the spiritual questions in this Universe more real, not less real.

Jack Lewis and Ellen White

I became an avid student of C.S. Lewis and have read almost all of his published works, as well as many of his letters published posthumously. Ellen White is the only religious writer I have studied more than Jack Lewis. I have found that God speaks to me through both of these messengers. It was as an adult that I first read the Narnia books, so I am not in love with Aslan as are children who first read these stories, but I understand him and appreciate the analogies to Calvary he offers.

Figure 1. My library with some well appreciated and worn C.S. Lewis books.

My all-time favorites? The Great Divorce, a short book about the nature of selfishness and the reality of righteousness in a fable of hell as a great empty city full of people who keep moving farther and farther away from each other because they can’t stand any impingement of their self. They are offered a day trip to the outskirts of heaven where they learn that truth and beauty and right are more real than the ghosts self has made them, even heaven’s grass hurts their selfish little pathetic feet.

And Lewis’s science fiction trilogy, Out of the Silent Planet, Perilandra, and That Hideous Strength, where Professor Ransom, a very Lewis-like English don, understands the Great Controversy between good and evil in a series of science fiction adventures. The science is dated, but as fiction it can afford to be. But the theology of the nature of good and the nature of evil is first rank, top line, Garden of Gethsemane truth.

After being in a Venus Eden with a Green Eve, Professor Ransom even becomes a vegetarian, which of course Lewis was not, but he lets truths ride where they may. And the last book of the trilogy takes the battle away from another planet’s Eden back to earth on a University Campus where Scientism and Christian truth battle it out. Although Lewis was not against Science, he understood what happens when atheism cloaks itself with Science and self becomes a little strutting tyrant against its Creator.

Theistic Evolutionists have tried to have Lewis join them, but Lewis was more of an Intelligent Designer as John West has shown in the research of The Magician’s Twin: C.S. Lewis on Science. Lewis in The Problem of Pain even postulates that death in nature before Adam and Eve was the result of Satan’s fall, which has helped me very much in my own understanding of the Greater Controversy between Christ and Satan starting with Creation Day one.

JACK by George Sayer is my favorite biography of Lewis, but there are many.

Good Catholics, Good Anglicans, Good Adventists

It has now been 50 years for me, Jack Hoehn, to consider what the life and death of Jack Kennedy mean to me, and what the life and death of Jack Lewis mean to me. I’ve learned that Catholic Jacks (and Bobbys) make decisions that have consequences for both good and evil that far outlive them and us, and that good Catholics are far superior to bad Adventists.

I’ve learned that Anglican Jacks can follow the truth where it leads, including making unlikely bedfellows of Ellen White and C.S. Lewis in strange but wonderful agreement on many important issues of faith, if not lifestyle. Christianity as intellectually credible is a good place to start your Christian growth. Jack Lewis, in my opinion, makes this case better than anyone else.

And I’ve also learned that having “3 Jacks” in a hand of cards is not a bad way to begin to play the game of life. In my case since I was smart enough to marry Deanne, not too long after this, I had the advantage of holding as it were: 3 Jacks and a Queen!

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COMMENTS: If you have personal stories about how Jack (John F.) Kennedy or Jack (C.S.) Lewis have influenced your life, please share them with us briefly in about 300 words. Although the mechanism for allowing edited comments is still not ideal, for now e-mail them to the editors at editor@atoday.org and they will all be read with interest. Include your real name and comments that correct, advance, or improve the topic of this article. They may be published whole or in part within Adventist Today guidelines.
Speaking Christian and a Dialect of Christian known as Adventist

Ervin Taylor

“Christian language has become a stumbling block in our time. Much of its basic vocabulary is seriously misunderstood by Christians and non-Christians alike. Big words like salvation, saved, sacrifice, redeemer, redemption, righteousness, repentance, mercy, sin, forgiveness, born again, second coming, God, Jesus, and Bible… have acquired meanings that are serious distortions of their biblical and traditional meanings.” This is the opening sentence in the introduction of Marcus Borg’s 2011 volume Speaking Christian with the subtitle Why Christian Words have Lost Their Meaning and Power—and How They Can Be Restored.

Borg is best known for his books Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time and the Heart of Christianity. He is the emeritus Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture, at Oregon State University and Canon Theologian at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon.

Borg suggests that the misunderstandings of the language of traditional Christianity are the products of two major causes. The first is the “literalization of language in the modern period,” while the second he characterizes as “heaven-and-hell Christianity.” He insists that when these two elements are present, it “diminishes and distorts the meaning of Christian language.”

He notes that Christians are “deeply divided by different understandings of shared language.” About half of American Christians believe that “biblical language is to be understood literally within a heaven-and-hell framework that emphasizes the afterlife, sin and forgiveness, Jesus dying for our sins, and believing.” Roughly, the other half have moved on to use an alternate vocabulary to approach their understanding of Christianity to the degree that Borg insists that the differences between these two ways of understanding the message of Jesus as interpreted through Paul, results, for all practical purposes, in two separate religions.

Expanding our comments beyond those contained in the Borg volume, these two ways of approaching Christianity that he identifies are currently broadly represented, on one hand, by fundamentalist and conservative Protestant evangelicals and, on the other, by modernist or liberal Protestantism. In many cases, historic Protestant churches, such as the Lutheran and Presbyterian traditions, have undergone organizational splits which, in the early parts of the 20th century, had separated “modernists” from “evangelicals-fundamentalists” into separate organizational traditions. Even though its historical roots preceded the Fundamentalist-Modernist split in other parts of Protestantism, the Seventh-day Adventist (Adventist) Christian variant has generally aligned itself with the conservative and fundamentalist wing of Protestantism. However, because it adopted a non-biblical source of religious authority in the writings of Ellen White, it was widely viewed as a cult in the minds of many fundamentalists and evangelicals. This changed to some degree beginning in the late 1950s.with the publication of Questions on Doctrine. Interestingly, this book created a backlash in some traditional parts of Adventism which accused denominational leadership of “selling out” so-called historic Adventism.

Some who belonged to what might be characterized as the nascent progressive or liberal wing of Adventism viewed these developments within institutional Adventism as the equivalent of rearranging the deck chairs on the theological Titanic of Adventism and generally ignored these disputes. Most thought there were much more fundamental issues that classical Adventism had to address if a more mature Adventism was to emerge to make any meaningful contribution to the larger First World Christian community. Failure to do that would consign it to the intellectual and cultural backwaters to become a museum-level religious institution.

One of these areas involved a vocabulary that had evolved within Adventism by which it defined itself. In a sense, the terms that were used in its internal discourse might be viewed as one part of an Adventist “dialect” which reflected the subculture that Adventism had created over its corporate history since its creation in the mid-19th century. Some of these terms and phrases included remnant to refer to corporate Adventism, in the truth to refer to the state of those belonging to corporate Adventism, out of the truth for those who had left the Adventist Church, and truth-filled literature to refer to written materials published by corporate Adventism. The writings of Ellen G. White were often termed the Spirit of Prophecy. The grand metanarrative of Adventism which had been assembled by White was referred to as The Great Controversy. It was even argued that there was a right (orthodox) and wrong (heterodox) way to pronounce the word “Adventist.” (I can never remember which is supposed to be the orthodox way, ad-VEN-tist or AD-ven-tist.)

Like the words that Borg has identified as creating major misunderstandings for Christianity in general, a number of words and terms
used in traditional Adventism can, for many, be considered a stumbling block that obscures and confuses more than accurately describing contemporary First World Adventism. Just as dictionaries are in need of being updated as languages evolve, the Adventist vocabulary is in great need of being updated if clarity and understanding are to be advanced in First World Adventism.

One archaic term that needs to be totally rethought or completely dropped is the term “Remnant” as applied to the Adventist Church. This word had great meaning to the small group, the “Little Flock,” that gathered together around Ellen White after 1844. This group needed some way of viewing what they were doing as being of cosmic significance and thus they applied to themselves the term “Remnant.” They (as opposed to all of the other apostate religious groups of their day) believed in all of the Hebrew Ten Commandments and “had” the “Spirit of Prophecy” (which they identified as Ellen White); they were also able to see themselves in the book of Revelation. Thus the term conferred great consolation. Even if they were a tiny group of ex-Millerites living in northeastern United States, they had “the” Truth and could point to the Bible to validate their existence.

We can wonder whether certain parts of the contemporary Adventist tradition in the First World, now more than a century removed from that early phase of development, can look squarely at the traditional Adventist dialect of Christianity, understand how and why certain words were chosen, and leave them behind. Other parts of contemporary Adventism may continue to see value in retaining the use of these terms and we should affirm their right to continue to use them just as certain parts of the Adventist Church may not wish to ordain women as pastors while others are proceeding to do just that. It appears that if Adventism is to have a future without an organizational split, it must quickly adopt a pluralist way of moving forward.
Survey of an Adventist Academy Class of 1959

By Lawrence Downing, November 25, 2013

The November 16-22 “News and Opinion” from Adventist Today reports that the General Conference has taken note that a large number of people who once were church members are no longer.[1] The article reports that groups have been formed to examine this disturbing trend. As I read the article, an informal survey I conducted some eight or so years ago came to mind. A summary of the findings follow. It will be noted that what my academy classmates reported in the survey parallels the GC and other survey findings. It is important for readers to know that this was an informal survey, and the results should be taken within the context of an identified questioner seeking answers from persons I knew. It is to be recognized that this is not a “scientific” survey. It does give a limited insight into how a group of teenagers who once shared a common educational experience, responded to the religious instruction they received.

Survey of the Monterey Bay Academy Class of 1959

By Lawrence Downing

The 109 graduates of Monterey Bay Academy class of 1959 were probably not very different from graduates from other SDA academies across America that year. We did pride ourselves that we were the largest class to graduate from MBA, and we assured one another that we were the best, the most loyal ever, and we pledged to always remain close. The naivety of youth!

In an attempt to gain an understanding of how my classmates now relate to the Adventist Church, I prepared and sent out a brief questionnaire to all classmates whose addresses I had. As reported below, I contacted 75 people and had 63 responses. What follows is a brief summary of the findings.

Number of Graduates: 109
Classmates Contacted: 75
Responses: 63
Are Adventists: 33
Are Not Adventists: 30

Summary of Findings from the Thirty-three Who Are Adventists and Attend the Adventist Church

A significant number of our classmates continue to have a strong and meaningful relationship with the Adventist Church. Several of this
number responded that they did not understand how anyone could leave the Adventist church and were puzzled why anyone would doubt that this is God's church. Strong affirmations were given by several to Ellen White's role in the church and expressed appreciation for her prophetic guidance.

**Summary of Findings from the Thirty Who Do Not Attend the Adventist Church**

Our classmates who no longer attend the Adventist church or do not consider themselves Adventist gave a variety of explanations for their break with the church. Several mentioned that people in the church were not there to support them when they went through a personal crisis. One classmate reported that when his marriage ended he was told by the pastor that he could no longer continue as a church officer. The person accepted this information, stopped attending church and never heard from anyone in the church again. (The masculine pronoun may not reflect the gender of the person described.) Others stated that in divorce situations, the church members and leaders were judgmental and did not express care or concern.

**INTEGRITY ISSUES**

Several in our class stated that they now believed that what we were taught about the Bible and Ellen White was not correct and that as students they did not receive information that helped them understand and apply the gospel to their lives. Legalism was emphasized rather than God's grace and salvation through faith in Christ. They did not get to know Christ as their personal savior. They reported that in their view, there was more emphasis on following an Adventist life-style or pattern than with having a personal commitment to Jesus.

**THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS**

Classmates have come to question the spiritual and communal benefits the Adventist church offers. The internal strife and criticism they have witnessed have interfered with spiritual development. Occasionally the time demands put upon church members exceeded reasonable expectation. The nuts and bolts activity necessary to keep a church going seemed to suck dry one's spiritual well.

**CHURCH POLITICS**

A few classmates have had experience in church politics. Some served on local Conference and Union boards, and report that their experiences have not been satisfying. They state that they found church officials to be very impersonal, aloof and sometimes greedy in dealing with members. Said one person, "The childhood perceptions of the church—nurturing, caring, accepting—have faded into an adult reality. I found that from the church’s perspective, I'm OK if I 'dance to it's music' or 'walk the walk.' If not … 'come and see us when you can.'" One classmate said, "It (the church) is not unlike any other organization—meet the expectations or take a walk."

Some of our classmates express that they have found more caring, nurturing, and acceptance in secular organizations than in the church. The church, these people discovered, does not have anything better to offer than its secular counterparts. They found that the spiritual side is weak or absent in the church and that the church did not meet their other needs, either.

**SPIRITUAL NEEDS MET**

Some of our classmates stated that they have found that they can find their spiritual needs filled in solitude—through reading, meditation and prayer. This frees them from having to deal with the extra distractions brought upon them by the church community. These people state that they recognize other religious organizations are not any different from the Adventist church so changing "brands" is not the solution.
One person told me that he decided from an early age that there is no God. Academy attendance did not change that belief nor has subsequent time and experience caused him to modify this belief.

BACK TO THE CHURCH

A number of our classmates left the Adventist church for a time but have come back. Several of these, and others who have remained Adventists, stated that they are still concerned that the Adventist church finds its center in form and legalism rather than a spirit-filled joy that comes from the assurance of salvation. Despite regular church attendance, some of our classmates expressed that where they attend is not a "good fit" for them, theologically or socially. They are Adventists and have never left the church, but they are not satisfied with how the church operates or what they hear on Sabbath morning. There is too much emphasis on the 27 Fundamental Beliefs and not enough on what it means to be a vibrant Christian.

It is important to note that a strong majority of our classmates have positive memories of their time at MBA.

PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

After reading the responses that came from our classmates who no longer attend the Adventist church, it is my conclusion that one of the major areas where the church can improve is in the response to people in crisis situations. It is not helpful to the person who hurts if all he or she hears is negative. The responses from our classmates who have experienced crisis indicate that the judgmental attitude shown them by pastors and other church members resulted in hurt and withdrawal from the church. It is better to listen and be quiet than to offer unhelpful advice and comments. Several in our class stated that when they stopped going to church, no one called or made contact with them to see how they were doing. A telephone call, note, visit or other communication may well have made a positive difference.

Our classmates believe that it is important for the Adventist church and its leaders to understand and proclaim the gospel. People report that they believe the church has not made a clear presentation of salvation by faith through Jesus Christ alone. Others are clear that it is important to define the role of Ellen White within the Adventist church. Several of our classmates stated they have questions about Ellen White’s role, credibility and authority.

Classmates strongly affirmed that the Adventist church must meet people's needs. Some of our classmates said that their children or grandchildren do not find the church relevant and do not attend. Classmates said it is important that people learn to depend upon God and not the church.

The above is not an exhaustive study nor should it be interpreted as a final statement that expresses what we as a class think. What did come through loud and clear is that many of our classmates are firmly committed to the Christian faith and many are firmly positioned in the Adventist church. It is also apparent that there is a strong spiritual component among our classmates. Not every one attends the Adventist church and some may not count themselves traditional Christians, but they do have a firm hold on a spiritual dimension that serves as their guide and upon which they depend.

It should also be noted that the stronger negative statements are from a minority of our classmates. The strong majority did not express negative feelings. It is also important to note that most of those who responded did not state strong positive feelings toward the church, either. This disparity in the responses is largely due to the questions presented. I requested those who are no longer Adventists or who do not attend church to state their reasons. I did not ask those who are committed to the Adventist church to share why they continued in the church, nor did I ask them to share their spiritual journey.
We as a class evidence a wide diversity of thought. Some of us have gone through highly charged personal experiences. I learned that several of our classmates, while at MBA, went through very stressful situations that most of us knew nothing about. In the years since graduation, others of our classmates have seen relationships shatter and know what failure is about. Several respondents had situations develop in their lives that most of us cannot comprehend. Children and spouses have died. Marriages have broken. Health problems took a heavy toll on others. Fortunately, most of us have lived a relatively calm life with few struggles. For most of us life has been good.


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Loving from the heart seems like a no-brainer. Literally. Of course we love with our hearts. That’s where all emotions are seated, right? Or maybe the bowels, which is what the Hebrews used in this context. It seems to me that other societies have used other body parts, possibly the liver, certainly the brain, as the seat of emotion, but even Wikipedia is failing me on this one.

In the immortal words of Dr. Temperance Brennan, of TV Bone fame, “The heart is nothing but a pump.” True. However, I believe there’s good reason why humans have always thought emotions, positive and negative, (love, hate, fear, anger, happiness, sorrow, contentment, etc.), rise from body organs. There is a connection. Emotions make our blood pressure rise and drop, increase and decrease heart rate, adrenaline, dopamine, and more. Feelings, to put it more succinctly, are feelings.

The river overflowed its banks this week. I assume it did so just to give me good subject matter for this devotion. Emotions are scary for some of us. (I am one of them.) We have been raised so carefully to believe in “mind over matter,” and being mature and rational and in control and all that. We even name self-control as a gift of the Spirit. But the Greek word used in Galatians 5:23 is egkrateia, which means temperance. (Huh. Wonder what Bones would think about that?)

Temperance means the middle way. Not too hot, not too cold. Not too controlled by emotion, and not too controlled by brain. The river is essential to life, I want to say, when it’s contained within its banks, wending its merry way, not too low, not too high. But my analogy suffers a little when I think about the millions who depended for millennia on the seasonal flooding of the Nile, for one example. Is it okay to overflow once in a while? And what does that mean? Give way to emotion? Surely not…

Unless “give way” is taken literally. Make a way, or a path, make allowance for feeling.

When the Baddeck River overflowed this week, I don’t know if it caused harm or damage. I know it didn’t here, because there’s a nice big swale between the house and the riverbank. Room for it to swell, and to go back down again. A place for it to deposit, perhaps, all kinds of life-giving nutrients for future growth in the meadows.

This devotional did not go in the direction I had planned for it. I’m just saying.

Love God, others, self, from the heart. With the full strength of emotions. Without doing harm.

What does that mean?
Dr. Richard Elofer, Director of the World Jewish Adventist Friendship Center, believes that the final prophecy of the Hebrew Scriptures, found in Malachi 4:5, 6, is speaking of reconciliation between Judaism and Christianity. The prophecy reads: “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.” (NASB)

“When we read the text in Hebrew...[the Hebrew word] means the spiritual ancestors...” says Elofer. “The spiritual fathers have to be reconciled with the spiritual children. As a church, we are the spiritual children of Israel. Israel are our spiritual fathers."

For Elofer, the greatest schism that has occurred in the church is not the rift between Roman and Orthodox Catholics, not the rift between Catholics and Protestants, but the rift between Judaism and Christianity that began in the second century and came to full strength under Constantine in the fourth. At that point, not only was anti-Semitism rife so that Christians were rejecting Jews, but when Christianity became the official state religion and the day of worship was changed to the day of the sun, Elofer says, Jews “radically rejected Christianity.” They knew, he says, that Jeremiah said God would write his covenant, or his commandments, on the heart. If a supposed messiah said to change that law or covenant, then “he couldn’t be our messiah.”

Elofer points out that this was a huge shift. Originally, the Christian population was almost entirely Jewish. “Jews accepted Jesus with enthusiasm and were baptized by the thousands.” Jesus, he says, was never a Christian, and didn’t come to start a new religion. The book of Acts calls him the savior of Israel. “If Jews and Christians had understood their faith and the teachings
of Jesus, we would still be one people.”

Dr. Elofer himself represents a reconciliation between these two often contentious faith traditions. He was born into a devout Jewish family in Casablanca, Morocco. When he was eight, the family moved to France, where his father contributed to the establishment of a synagogue in the town of Villejuif, a suburb of Paris whose name translates to Jewishtown. At twelve, like all faithful Jewish boys, Elofer became a “son of the covenant” in the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. Here he received his first full rabbinical Bible and began to read it intensively.

In an interview with Alberto Rosenthal, hoffnung-weltweit.de, which can be heard in its entirety at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvO40BFmPkI, Elofer says that after his Bar Mitzvah he was “disappointed,” and began to “rebel a little bit” and didn’t attend synagogue as faithfully as he had before. He doesn’t state the reasons. However, a few years later, he met some people who “helped me discover the Jewish Messiah. That made a revolution in me.” Elofer explains that in the past he had known of Jesus only as “an idol on a cross.” When he read the whole story of Jesus,(and when he discovered that what he was being told could be verified in his rabbinical Bible,) he says it actually helped him to discover more of his “Jewishness.” He realized Jesus was born, lived, and died a Jew, and says he felt Jesus was his close brother. Little by little, he came to see that Yeshua was, in fact, the Jewish Messiah. At nineteen, he was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Paris.

The next year, Elofer began his studies at the Adventiste Université du Salève, where he earned his first theological degree. He worked as a pastor for seventeen years in France, and then went to Israel to work fifteen years as President of the Seventh-day Adventist church there.

In his interview with Rosenthal, Elofer says that he and his wife were told there were only about 50 Adventists in Israel when they arrived. In an article in Adventist World magazine [see below], he is quoted as saying that, “After about 100 years of presence in Palestine/Israel we had only 50 members. Today there are more than 1,000 members, shared in 25 congregations, and the majority of our members are Israelis.”

It apparently became clear to the General Conference that Elofer had an understanding that was making a difference, because in 2000, GC asked him to become the part-time director of the World Jewish Adventist Friendship Center. In 2012, he moved back to France and became full-time director.

Dr. Elofer says that Adventists have so much in common with Jews, not only in doctrinal beliefs, but in lifestyle issues, such as clean versus unclean meats, that we could be called Adventist Jews. He believes that we could lead the way in dialogue and reconciliation between Jews and Christians.

It begins with something as simple—and as vital—as language. Elofer argues that calling the first part of the Bible the Old Testament implies that it is old, outdated, obsolete, and that it’s a will, or testament, of something or someone who is dead. Hebrew Bible or Hebrew Scriptures is a more inclusive term. He says he can start a good discussion with another Jew by saying that he would like to introduce the Jesus of the Bible, not the Jesus the church has generally taught. He
will ask them if they know Jesus was a Jew and if they realize that what is usually called the New Testament (he calls it the Book of the New Covenant, or the Apostolic Writings) was written entirely by Jews. He informs them that Jesus never told people to stop keeping Sabbath. They are, by his report, almost always surprised, and often then open to more discussion.

Discussion, dialogue, reconciliation are what Dr. Elofer is after. In the interview, he reads with feeling the first verses of what he calls “the Jewish gospel” that begins in Isaiah 40: ““Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God. “Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” That, he says, is good news to anyone. Comfort and tenderness are the center of everything Jesus said and did, but Dr. Elofer thinks we are not using those qualities as much as we might, to reach out to our estranged brothers and sisters.

“If we take the effort to change our words, we will change our thinking and the reconciliation can go from there.”

Dr. Elofer has earned a MA in Global Leadership (MAGL) (2008) and a Doctorate of Intercultural Studies (D.I.S.) at Fuller Seminary (2012). He is married to Liliane, they have three children: Rachel, accountant in England, Raphael currently engineer in computer science in Edinburgh, Scotland, and Johann, dentist in Paris.

He will be speaking at the Manhattan Seventh-day Adventist Church in a series of seminars starting on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday evenings (Dec. 4-6) at 7:00 p.m., and on Saturday morning, Dec. 7, 2013 at 11:30 a.m. and in an afternoon seminar that same day at 2:30 p.m. If you are in that area, you are encouraged to attend and bring friends. If not, you may learn more about Dr. Elofer or hear him and his insights for yourself below.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvO40BFmPkI
www.Jewishadventist.org
Consider Trees

http://www.atoday.org/article/2179/poetry-the-arts/consider-trees

By S M Chen
Submitted 2013/12/1

A tree, like man, is born to toil,
As leafage falls, lies for a time
In dormancy, then makes the climb
To start a life, through crust of soil.

If nature's kind (at least is fair),
The sapling usually will thrive;
Takes what it needs to stay alive
From earth and water, sun and air.

Through countless seasons, start to end,
The searing heat and bitter cold,
The wind and blight that make it old,
And topple many a fellow friend;
Despite the years of overuse,
Put upon by man and beast,
The tree complains not in the least,
Nor asks for respite from abuse.

Day by day, it seems to know
The One who made it, made us all;
So, when it feels the final call
To leave its place in earth and go,

It yields itself for greater good.
In dying, gives itself to man,
Providing, in what ways it can,
Warmth and shelter with its wood.

*       *

Sage advice is sometimes free.
The message of this simple verse
Is: we could do a little worse
Than take a lesson from the tree.

*Photo credit: D. Kovacs*