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**Adventist Today Appeal**

This Christmas *Adventist Today* rejoices in the outpouring of support received in 2014. But the budget will be tested as more news staff come aboard in anticipation of General Conference and we include the expenses of operating for 10 days or more from San Antonio.

If you have been looking toward to making a regular or special donation to *AT*, do so within the next week to apply those donations to your deductible, charitable giving this year. The emphasis in this
year-end campaign is to raise $20,000 to recruit more younger writers, readers, and viewers, now and in the future.

'Tis the Season of Giving in which we declare, "Thanks for your gracious support and prayers this year; we absolutely could not do it without you.

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Growing Numbers of Adventist Churches Celebrate Christmas in Many Ways

Monte Sahlin

By AT News Team, Dec. 24, 2014: Despite a traditional reluctance to make much of Christmas (explained in the current issue of a secular news magazine, *The Week*), more and more local congregations and institutions affiliated with the Adventist denomination are celebrating the Christian festival. Concerts, tree lightings, efforts to aid the poor and live nativity scenes are all among the many seasonal expressions of faith from local Adventist groups.

“The festival was banned in the nation’s earliest days,” the issue of *The Week* dated December 26, 2014, explains the history of an idea that turns out to be more American than Adventist. “New England’s Puritan leaders considered it a pagan or papist abomination, and citizens found celebrating around Dec. 25 would be sternly reprimanded.” It “became legal in the 1680s.”

Journey to Bethlehem is a re-enactment of the New Testament narrative leading up to the birth of Jesus along the lines of and sometimes including a live nativity scene. Hundreds of Adventist local churches and schools across the United States are implementing these projects. This is the 18th year the Kelso-Longview Adventist Church in Washington state has done so, reports *The Daily News*, with “a cast of several hundred” outdoors on the church campus.

Another church in the same state, the Wenatchee Adventist Church is in its fifth annual presentation with 250 volunteers, reports *The Wenatchee World*. But this is by no means strictly a regional phenomena in the northwest U.S. Oakwood University has live nativity scene in Huntsville, Alabama. Journey to Bethlehem was also presented in a small Midwestern town according to the La Porte, Indiana, *Herald Argus*. A group of 200 volunteers “assembled the sets, designed the costumes and prepared the music for each station [with] several hundred people attending.”

The Mason City, Iowa, Adventist church turned on the lights for the Advent Tree on Sunday night, December 7, according to the local newspaper. “The evergreen is believed to be one of the taller living Christmas trees in the U.S.” at 61 feet. “Prior to the tree lighting, an interfaith worship program was held in the church featuring readings and homilies by Pastor Sean McRoberts and Pastor Matthew Lucio as well as music by North Iowa Choral Society and Una Vocis.”

Glendale Adventist Hospital in southern California launched a Christmas tree lighting tradition this year, reported the *Glendale News Press*. “The evening saw a solemn moment as more than 100 people lit candles to remember those they’ve lost in the past year. The 20-foot-tall tree in the hospital’s West Tower lobby was decorated with memorial ornaments dedicated to lost loved ones.”

Christmas concerts have been announced in many places, including “a full brass band, string quartet, a 32-voice acapella choir,” at the Claremore, Oklahoma, Adventist Church, “as well as a performance by the Claremore High School jazz choir.” The *Claremore Progress* reported that this year’s guest conductor is Mark Elyfree, former conductor for the Province of Quebec in Canada.

On the campus of Southern Adventist University alone, three major concerts are scheduled, according to *The Chattanoogan*. December 2 following the annual Christmas Tree Lighting, a short program including performances by Deep 6, Southern Ringtones, Expressions of Praise, Collegedale Academy Band and the Southern Strings and Jazz Ensembles; December 6 the Christmas Pops Concert including the Wind Symphony, the Jazz Ensemble, the Percussion Ensemble, and the Southern Ringtones; and December 13 the School of Music Christmas Concert featuring the Choral Ensembles and the Symphony Orchestra performing Handel’s Messiah.
In many places the Christmas activities by Adventist groups involve serving the needs of the homeless and the poor. In Bermuda, Christmas dinner is served for anyone who has no place to go and share the meal with family or friends at the Hamilton Adventist Church. It is cosponsored by the cable television system for the island nation. Bermuda CableVision provides the food and the television employees and church volunteers work together in serving the meal.

As part of the Christmas festivities organized by the Dorchester Center for the Arts in Cambridge, Maryland, donations of grocery items, coats and other clothing, school supplies and baby products will be collected at nine stores of various kinds for “the annual Cambridge Adventist Church Food and Clothing Drive,” reported MyEasternShore.com.

At Sligo Adventist Church in Silver Spring, Maryland, the congregation operates a homeless shelter for women and children during the winter months in collaboration with a local nonprofit organization. This is the second winter it has been open and the Montgomery County Gazette recounted the story last week of a typical client.

“Sameirow Carter was at her wits’ end last winter. The 34-year-old mother of four had no place to stay. … A teacher at her child’s school referred her to Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church. … Carter said her experience at the church’s shelter … was exceptional. The volunteers were friendly, and she was provided food and guidance about making a transition into other housing options. She stayed at the shelter for a month.”

Sligo is one of the largest local churches in the denomination with about 3,000 members. It is located on a campus shared by Washington Adventist University and Washington Adventist Hospitals, the two major Adventist institutions in this national capital that date from the early years of the 20th century. The General Conference offices are nearby.

Another creative Christmas outreach was a float which the Porterville (California) Adventist Church placed in the annual Porterville Children’s Christmas Parade. Described as “spiritual and a little traditional” by the Porterville Recorder local newspaper, it featured 20 children dressed as Joseph and Mary, angels and wise men, sheep and donkeys.

The celebration of Christmas by Adventists is becoming more international. The Borneo Post reported that the Seventh-day Adventist Church was one of the Association of Churches in Sarawak, Indonesia, who organized a joint Christmas worship service hosted by the Anglican Church and attended by more than 1,000 Christians.

The historical report in The Week stated without reservation or defensiveness that the major winter Christian festival is rooted in the pre-Christian Saturnalia. “The Bible doesn’t explicitly state the date on which Jesus was born, and many theologians place his birth in the spring.” It was in “the 4th century … church leaders pushed the date back a few months to Dec. 25 and borrowed some Saturnalia rituals for their own festival to keep the public happy. ‘If Christianity moves Christmas into December, you can then fade out these other festivals,’ said archaeologist Sam Moorhead. ‘You can attempt to move on as if nothing has happened.’ The festival quickly spread across the Christian world, but some pious believers refused to join in the holiday cheer.”
Coordinator Appointed for Adventist Response to Ebola Outbreak

Monte Sahlin

From ANN, Dec. 23, 2014: Elizabeth Foulkes has been appointed coordinator of the Adventist response to the deadly Ebola disease around the world. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) will take the lead as the global denomination and its numerous entities respond to the current Ebola outbreak in West Africa and possible future crises. The agency last week hired Foulkes, who previously worked on the international health team at World Vision, the largest Christian multi-denominational humanitarian organization.

Foulkes earned a master’s degree in global health from the School of Public Health at Loma Linda University. She will coordinate the Ebola activities of the denomination’s health ministries department, Adventist Health International, Loma Linda University, ADRA International, and the ADRA offices throughout West Africa. “We want to have a united approach, especially in terms of utilizing the church’s networks in the affected countries,” said David Holdsworth of ADRA’s Emergency Management Unit.

Foulkes said she entered the field of global health because she wanted to be involved in Adventist health ministries worldwide. She told ANN that she has previously worked to pull organizations together, and this new position allows her to do similar work on a larger scale. “This is a really interesting situation that no agency, including ADRA, has ever faced before,” Foulkes said. “It’s both a learning opportunity as a recent graduate as well as an opportunity to pull different Adventist entities together to work as a team. … There are a lot of people working on this, the General Conference and union and local conferences and universities, and I’m really just helping to facilitate all of those efforts,” she added.

The Ebola outbreak this year has infected nearly 18,600 people and taken the lives of more than 6,900 people, according to a report last week from the World Health Organization (WHO). Most victims live in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Ebola is spread through direct contact with bodily fluids and tissue of an infected person. Those most at risk are health care workers and family members caring for someone infected with the virus, according to the WHO. Case fatalities range from 25 percent to 90 percent depending on the amount of treatment available.

Foulkes said the people affected by the virus are not only those infected with it. Ebola also affects citizens who have less access to health care and food. One of ADRA’s primary responses to the crisis so far has been providing emergency food rations to those affected. ADRA is coordinating with the United Nations Food Programme and seeking educational grants from several governments, including the United States, Germany and Denmark.

Adventist organizations have already responded to the crisis with hundreds of thousands of dollars in supplies and equipment. Donn Gaede, secretary of Adventist Health International, commended ADRA for funding the new position. “This new hire is another one of ADRA’s contributions to the overall effort,” Gaede said.

Dr. Peter Landless, health ministries director for the denomination, said, “I’m delighted that ADRA has not succumbed to Ebola fatigue. Adventist [organizations] have continued tirelessly to address at least some of the needs in the wake of this huge humanitarian disaster.”

Much of the denomination’s support has focused on two Adventist hospitals in the region; Cooper Adventist Hospital in Liberia and Waterloo Adventist Hospital in Sierra Leone. Both hospitals were closed temporarily for a quarantine period at various times over the past few months after several Ebola-related deaths. Cooper has reopened and is operating and treating non-Ebola cases. At Waterloo, the Sierra Leone government made renovations and will soon
begin operating the facility as an Ebola treatment center.

The current Ebola outbreak is the largest in the virus’ 40-year history, health officials have said. Adventist health ministry leaders in August urged denominational leaders and members in West Africa not to travel and refrain from large public gatherings and personal affections such as hugging. The measures were “stringent but necessary,” Landless said.

*The Adventist News Network (ANN) is the official news service of the Adventist denomination. Angela Taipe contributed to the reporting on which this story is based.*
Monte Sahlin

From ANN, Dec. 22, 2014: Dolores E. Slikkers, a co-founder of Maranatha Volunteers International and philanthropist who helped shape Adventist denominational policy, died last Thursday in a car crash in her hometown of Holland, Michigan. She was 85.

Police have opened an investigation but said “very preliminary medical information” indicated that Slikkers may have suffered a medical emergency that was a factor in the crash. “However, this cannot be confirmed until results of an autopsy are received,” police said in a statement.

Slikkers played an active role in Adventist leadership over several decades, including as a member of the executive committee of the General Conference (GC), the top governing body of the denomination. She was serving as a member of both the Andrews University board of trustees and the executive committee of its Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at the time of her death.

“Dolores Slikkers was strongly committed to Adventist beliefs and values,” said Pastor Benjamin Schoun, a GC vice president and board chair for the university. “Her special interest was in Adventist education, which she promoted strongly,” Schoun said. “She was … the longest-serving member of [the university board, and] was active in that responsibility, asking pertinent questions at nearly every board meeting.”

Slikkers and her husband, Leon, also contributed financially to many church projects from revenues made in their successful boat manufacturing company, S2 Yachts. “From the success of those efforts, they were able to generously give financial gifts for various church projects, including assisting students with tuition costs for Adventist education,” Schoun said.

Perhaps the highest-profile project that Slikkers helped initiate was Maranatha Volunteers International, an independent non-profit Adventist organization that she co-founded with her husband and John Freeman in 1969. Today, Maranatha mobilizes volunteers to construct urgently needed schools, churches, orphanages, clinics, and homes around the world. “Dolores and Leon were part of the original group of [volunteer] pilots who flew missionary trips to the Caribbean and Central and South America,” a fact sheet from S2 Yachts states.

Since its inception, Maranatha has constructed more than 3,800 “One-Day” churches, 600 “One-Day” schools, 115 evangelism centers, and 760 water wells, according to its website. It mobilized more than 2,400 volunteers in 2013 alone.

Slikkers also served on the boards of the It Is Written television ministry and Griggs University, now a branch of Andrews University in Michigan. More recently, she was a member of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee.
formed by the GC. She was “quiet and kind-hearted,” said Dr. Ingo Sorke, a professor of religion at Southwestern Adventist University who served with her on the committee. “She had a sincere love for her church and a genuine expectancy of the Second Coming.”

Slikkers also had a fondness for skiing and for celebrating birthdays. She sent out more than 2,000 birthday cards every year and went skiing regularly with her husband.

Dolores Slikkers nee Parker was born June 22, 1929, and is survived by Leon, her husband of 67 years, as well as four children, six grandchildren, and 10 great-grandchildren. She was preceded in death by her sisters, Marjorie and Lela, and is survived by two brothers, Bill and Ted Parker. The funeral was held at the Holland Adventist Church, where she was a member.

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The Pale Blue Dot

by Ronald R. Coleman – Guest Opinion, December 21, 2014

In his splendid reflection on the photograph which has come to be known as “The Pale Blue Dot,” astronomer and cosmologist Carl Sagan muses over the apparent insignificance of mankind in the vastness of the universe. He closes with an admirable appeal to cherish our tiny world and to practice kindness and compassion in our dealings with one another. But he perceives no hint of help for us in this endeavor. We are, in his view, all alone.

Those who are familiar with other comments made by Mr. Sagan will know that he does not dismiss the importance of religion in our lives – but he defines religion in such a way as to eliminate what he calls a “sapient” God. God, if there is such a thing, is not a Being interested in human affairs – rather, God is merely an invention of our own imaginations. Religion is just a state of mind, a way for the simple-minded to dupe themselves. (Sagan is not the first well-known scientist to espouse this idea. Einstein expressed a similar view.)

But is it really true that there is “no hint” of a God interested in human affairs?

Mr. Sagan often talked of the “rigorous standards” of evidence. But evidence, in his view as a scientist, included only what he saw in the physical universe. He ultimately dismissed any ideas that did not fit that paradigm (though, oddly, he seemed blind to physical evidence that seems clearly to be pointing to the existence of a greater intelligence). His conclusion that mankind is all alone is thus somewhat understandable, though not necessarily sound.

We are left to ask why this reluctance to even consider what religions refer to variously as the Divine, the Mystery, the Unknowable. After all, Mr. Sagan enthusiastically summoned a vivid imagination predicting other advanced life in our galaxy, as evidenced by his passion for the SETI project, but any mention of intelligence as suggested by any source theological in nature he always attempted to explain away.

What I am about to suggest here is entirely speculation on my part, but fair speculation, I think. So I propose here that perhaps, having witnessed too many deplorable examples of religion, people such as Mr. Sagan simply choose – perhaps even unconsciously – to distance themselves.

Who could blame them? Who could blame anyone? Too much greed, intolerance, and selfish ambition is practiced by men and women who cloak themselves in a mantel of moral authority which they call religion. Those aspiring to higher ideals, observing such religion in action, are in good conscience prevented from taking into consideration the possibility of such a God operating in human affairs. As J. B. Phillips put it, “…many men of goodwill will not consent to such a transaction.”

But had Mr. Sagan visited a certain Galilean village some twenty centuries ago he might have met a carpenter who was reported to have calmly but unashamedly claimed to be a representative from another realm. If he had heard this Galilean’s impromptu lecture on the side of a mountain describing what real religion is, had the chance to hear him say where he came from and who sent him, to listen to what he had to say about how we should treat each other, perhaps witnessed his anger in reaction to the corruption of the national religion in his time, witnessed his life, death,
resurrection and eventual departure – had he had the chance to personally observe all this and much more – I suspect he would have been comforted by this evidence of good will manifested by a divine extraterrestrial intelligence.

Yes, the supernatural, by definition, is something that science so far cannot detect or explain, but this does not mean that that realm does not exist. By failing to accept that some things in our short lives cannot be fully explained – accepting that some mystery is part of our reality – we can unwittingly limit our imaginations. (It is worth noting here that some believers in the Divine, in their unwillingness to adjust their traditional beliefs in spite of scientific evidence that would suggest adjustment is needed, are no less misguided than so called non-believers who deny even the possibility of an intelligent designer in the face of evidence to the contrary.)

Let us do this, at least. Let us accept the fact that some doubt will never be removed completely from our lives – that in fact some doubt is healthy, as it can help guard against both gullibility and arrogance. But doubt which prevents us from allowing certain clues to be even considered is a blind doubt which can unnecessarily limit our vision. In our quests for discovery let us not thus limit our imaginations.

Our earth is indeed a small stage in a vast cosmic arena. But we can take comfort in knowing that One presenting himself nearly two millennia ago as the embodiment of divine power delivered a message of kindness and compassion, enjoining us to follow his example and promising that we would not be alone in the endeavor.


Ron Coleman is a lifelong Seventh-day Adventist church member who is also a senior pilot for United Airlines. He has been flying commercially since 1987 and at present flies the Boeing 787 Dreamliner on international flights. He wrote this blog after conversations with his son about the 2014 COSMOS: A SPACE TIME ODYSSEY series starring Neil deGrasse Tyson that promotes a naturalistic, no god necessary, view of life, based on the earlier writings of Carl Sagan.
What Mary Knew

Debbonnaire Kovacs

I've been through the messy miracle of childbirth. Thrice. Lived through it...just.

After the first time, I told my mother she'd been crazy all those years to say it wasn't that bad, and I was never doing it again.

There's a feeling that can't be described to those who haven't experienced it—a heavy rawness within, soreness without, exhaustion, elation. There's a feeling that nearly everyone has experienced—that of holding this unbelievably small thing, a kind of weightless wiggling in your hands, just staring and staring and trying to make yourself believe a new human being has joined the family of earth.

If you're lucky, you get a fingertip squeezed by a teensy fist, and if you're really lucky, you catch a wavering, curious gaze. For a second or three, dark, pupil-filled eyes stare into yours and you feel certain you can almost touch the miracle of being and the answer to life, the universe, and everything. Then the eyes slip sideways and the mouth begins to pucker and search again, and perhaps a thin cry, like that of a newborn kitten, emerges.

Find food. Do it now. The thin cry can instantly become an outraged shriek that's pretty much physically impossible for three-inch lungs, but happens anyway. Studies have shown that part of the reason babies crying on airplanes are so annoying is because our race has been wired to respond instantly to fix whatever our young need fixed, and everybody feels helpless, and rather outraged, themselves.

I imagine the miracle part of birth is about the same whether you're surrounded by hospital squeaky-cleanness, the cozy blankets of home, or damp straw, furry beasts, and the smells of mud and manure. Thank goodness for dry hay in the manger and the clean blankets you brought from home.

The part that's not the same? Staring into those eyes and trying to fathom their connection to the Great Creator. Feeling the clutch of the miniature fist and ... (how much did she know?) thinking of the hand that started time and made mud into a man.

Mary, did you know?

When you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God...

*But then, there's a sense in which that's always true, too.*
Hallelujah, Noel!

A atoday.org/hallelujah-noel.html

Debbonnaire Kovacs

by Corienne M. Hay, submitted Dec 22, 2014 (written years before)

This is another of my mother’s songs, and I wish you could hear it sung instead of reading it, but the blessing remains, I hope. DLK

1. Creator of the universe, omnipotent was He,
   Sustaining by His might all His word brought forth to be;
   But He wouldn’t use His power to make slaves of you and me,
   He made us free.

   And we chose to use our freedom to sin and go astray,
   So He chose to give up power to lie helpless in the hay.
   Hallelujah, noel! Hallelujah, noel, noel!

2. Throughout all His vast universe, omnipresent was He,
   And He could have kept His “everywhere” throughout eternity.
   But He couldn’t share that Presence with the likes of you and me,
   He’s purity.

   So He chose to give it up just to come and save us all,
   And He gathered His vast Presence in a Baby in a stall.
   Hallelujah, noel! Hallelujah, noel, noel!

3. The fountain of all wisdom, omniscient was He,
   But He wanted to keep from us, knowledge of all misery.
   Yet stubbornly we chose to know
   sin and sorrow, death and woe.

   So Omniscience now must learn,
   snow is cold and fire can burn,
   Only birds can fly, pet lambs can die,
   And little boys fall down and hurt themselves and cry…

Still, He chose to know the pain, just to win us back again,
Hallelujah, noel!  Hallelujah, noel, but why?

Ten billion angels all cry why? And so do I.

4. Yes, our God is all powerful, all wise and everywhere;
Creator and Sustainer and a Judge who’s always fair;
None of which would help us sinners if He didn’t really care,
We’d be nowhere.

But because His other “Alls” are encompassed in All-love
He wants all of His beloved to be with Him up above.

Hallelujah, noel!  Hallelujah, noel, noel!
Precious Baby, Lord of all, please be the Lord of me,
For at last my heart can see–it’s love!

The “why” is love!  Hallelujah, noel!  Noel, hallelujah, noel.
Debbonnaire Kovacs

I was staying in a cabin in the Canadian winter when I took this shot of a solar path light in new snow at night. May it remind us that the Spirit's light is always shining, even in the darkest winters. Merry Christmas to all and God bless your New Year!