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Interview with Ryan Bell, Former Adventist Pastor

Welcome to Viewpoints: Adventist Perspectives on Peace, Justice and Righteousness. For 19 years Ryan Bell was a pastor, most recently the senior pastor of the Hollywood Seventh-day Adventist Church. In March 2013 he resigned his position due to theological and practical differences. In January 2014, Bell began a yearlong journey exploring the limits of theism as well as the atheist landscape in the United States, an experiment known as Year Without God. He received a Master of Divinity degree from Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and a Doctor of Ministry in Missional Leadership from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

AToday: Why did you decide to do the year-long experiment in this way—blog, events, etc.?

Bell: It came up very off-handedly over lunch. There was no real strategy. I was feeling a little frustrated with my unemployment and my theological questions that were coming to the surface a bit more. I had just picked up a book at a neighborhood bookstore called Religion without God, when I was meeting a friend for lunch. We started talking about why I chose that book. I've been drawn to Alain De Botton, who had written Religion for Atheists. I knew there was this new literature, and I was really interested in it because I wasn't sure if I believed in God anymore. I told my friend at lunch, “Maybe I'll become an atheist for a year and just see how that feels.”

I thought I might write a book in the end, but my friend encouraged me to write the blog. He said, “I think people would be really interested in reading about your journey because I think a lot of people are in a similar place, and I think it would be interesting to follow along.”

And because I have an outlet on the Huffington Post, it seemed appropriate to post it there as well. So I put it up, and they published it, and it just went crazy, which was a huge surprise to me.

AToday: So you didn't expect so much coverage?

Bell: Yeah, yeah. I just read again today a comment on the Spectrum blog. Someone said they were sympathetic to my doubts, they just didn’t see why I had to be so self-promoting and make a big publicity thing out of it. Which of course I didn't do that. That sort of happened. I say this to people: I challenge you to make a media splash. Try it and see how it goes. I've tried before with church stuff, and at PATH we're constantly trying to get our name out more. It's difficult. You never know what's going to strike a chord with people.

I had intended to visit some skeptics’ and atheists’ gatherings and meet some people. When you meet people they want you to meet other people, and the next thing you know you're invited to this thing and that thing. It really evolved organically like that. There wasn’t any foresight into trying to create a viral campaign.

AToday: As you look back, what do you see as positives and negatives to having it such a public journey?

Bell: The negative for me is that I had less time for myself. I’ve had less time for my own thinking, reading, writing.
Especially at the beginning of the year and then at the end of the year.

The benefit of doing it publicly is that there are so many people who can identify with my experience and have been in a similar kind of place. They may come to a different conclusion than I have, but I think people feel validated when they hear about somebody else who did something similar or is in a similar place.

It’s very pastoral actually. There is a nonstop stream of people who say, “If you have any time, I’d love to chat.” Right now I don’t have that kind of time, but I do intend for that to be part of what I do with my life going forward. I do want to talk with people who are in between. I want to try to create a space in whatever way—and I’m not sure exactly in what way yet—for people to feel safe and not to have fear around asking these big existential questions.

It does have a pastoral quality to it, which is weird because I’m in this transition myself. I really don’t feel that qualifies me, especially during this past year, to be a guide for anybody else. But people are looking for role models. It’s pretty interesting how people put me in that role the same way they did when I was a pastor. I didn’t love it then; I don’t love it now. But there’s something fulfilling about just being with people in their journey.

AToday: There are many Jews who are atheists in one sense but who are still Jewish in another. Is this a parallel to where you are with Adventism?

Bell: That’s interesting because one of my very first lunch appointments in January of last year was with a rabbi friend of mine whose first comment was, “You’re on a very Jewish journey. Half of my congregation are atheists, so you’d fit right in.” I knew there were plenty of atheist Jews, but I didn’t know that atheist Jews went to shul.

Atheism is not that threatening to Jews, liberal Jews especially, because the narratives give shape to them culturally, and it’s not about the ontology of God as much as it is about ethics and the moral framework that the Jewish story—whether it’s exactly true according to the Torah or not—gives their family, their culture, their community.

Am I that connected to Adventism? My favorite part of not being religious is actually not being Adventist. Sometimes I miss Christianity; I almost never miss Adventism. But my friends are there, so that’s the rub. I have a lot of friends who are Adventists.

The longer I’ve been away from it—almost two years now—the more I feel that there are some things that are inherent within Adventism that are really destructive. And I know people who are trying to make Adventism a safe place for women and for gay and lesbian and transgender people. There are people who are trying to make Adventism safer, but it’s not in and of itself a safe thing for people, especially for people on the margins of life and society.

I wish the “atheist Jew” analogy were more apt. I do. But if the analogy were “Is Ryan an atheist Christian like there are atheist Jews?” then I would feel a lot more connected to that idea because I think the narrative about Jesus has real ethical value and narrative value.

I think it’s important to say that my friendships with people in the Adventist community are certainly not contingent on what I think about the existence of God.

AToday: Are there any pieces of Adventist identity that you hold on to?

Bell: I’m not doing a very good job of practicing it at the moment, but I definitely think that the rhythm of Sabbath is something that is healthy and beautiful. It doesn’t need to be on any particular day, and it doesn’t have to be from God, but I think the practice of ceasing from work and being more attentive to the important people in your life and perhaps taking a day and giving away your time to others is a very healthy practice that I picked up as an Adventist.

I think my politics, which is ironic because I think my politics was one of the problems that I got into in Adventism. But I feel like my politics around peace and justice are actually things I learned from Christianity and in part from my
attempt to make Adventism more relevant.

AToday: You studied pastoral ministry at Weimar. How do you see the journey or trajectory from there to where you are today? Is it marked more by continuity or discontinuity?

Bell: I'm going to wrestle with that more in some writing I'll be doing this year. I don't know if this is something that was part of my childhood upbringing or whether it was something that I learned along the way. But I think a fundamental impulse of conservatism is that there is this outside standard—whether it's the Constitution in the United States or the Bible in Christianity. It's the absolute standard and everyone has to accommodate their lives to that standard. Whereas I think I've always just been more classically liberal, where I thought people's individual experiences and stories mattered a great deal. I needed to at least take into account as a serious part of my decision making process the experience of people. A concrete example, the Bible appears to say that homosexuality is a sin. But I knew lots of people who were gay who were wonderful people who loved God and wanted to be part of a congregation, so I had to really wrestle with those things.

Even though I was raised conservatively, I think there was always a seed of liberalism in me. And by liberalism I just mean that people's personal experiences have to be taken into account. It's not just words on a page—sort of the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. I think I've always been more inclined to the spirit of the law than the letter. I think that seed of liberalism for me was always there somehow, so even though I was at Weimar I valued compassion or empathy. I don't want to imply that conservatives aren't sympathetic, but I think that hurting people matter, and our theology has to take into account the fact that people are hurting in unequal ways. So I see it as a natural progression from Weimar to where I am today.

AToday: Beyond religion, what do you think is the best contribution Adventism can make in the world today?

Bell: I think by being true to what I take to be the original Adventist impulse, which is to not be content with truth handed down from authorities before them and instead pursuing present truth. To me no matter what conclusion you arrive at about present truth, it's that pursuit of present truth that is the impulse of Adventism. James and Ellen White and others didn't want to accept their Methodist or Christian Connection as final. They saw something different or something more compelling or something their intellectual forebears left out or couldn't see. I think that's something the Adventist pioneers—and not just Adventists—said, "No, we've got to go for the truth no matter what. Even if it means we have to leave our churches. Even if it means we have to suffer some relationship breakups if our families and friends don't see things as we do."

I lost my jobs over the pursuit of the truth, but Adventist pioneers lost their jobs over it too. I disagree with their conclusions, but I think that spirit of searching for the truth and this idea that there's present truth—always something new to be learned or discovered—that to me is an Adventist spirit.

AToday: I think it's safe to assume that other pastors are dealing with questions, either about particular points of Adventist theology or with God more generally. What would you like to say to them?

Bell: I've been thinking about how much fear is involved in the process of having these big questions, especially for pastors. Not only have we been taught that this is the truth, but we've also been called to ministry. And that calling to ministry feels like an absolute too. We see that absolutism when a person leaves the ministry, and colleagues say, "Oh he left the ministry," like they really betrayed God because God called them to ministry and God can't be wrong.

So I think there's a lot of fear, not only around having doubts about theology, but around saying, "Do I want to be a pastor for the rest of my life. Is that required? Am I being a total fraud if I decide not to?" And also around beliefs about the afterlife. Maybe I'll burn in hell. We don't have a burning hell the way Baptists do, but we still have a hell in which you don't exist anymore. So that can be pretty bad if you're expecting to live forever with family members in heaven or on the new earth.

So my message to pastors would be: have courage. The truth can stand on its own two feet. If your belief system is
true, then you really don’t have anything to worry about. You should explore it and dig into it. And if it’s not true, wouldn’t you want to know that? It’s the same kind of thing that an Adventist Bible worker would say to a Catholic family in their living room. “Don’t be afraid. If Catholicism is correct, then you’re fine. But if it’s wrong and I’m right, wouldn’t you want to know that?” So I would say, “If evolution is true, and creation of the earth didn’t happen in six literal days or in six thousand or ten thousand years but over a much longer period of time… If that’s true, wouldn’t you want to know that? And if it’s not true and you’re right, then great.”

There’s so much fear that’s instilled in people, not just pastors, everyone around these off-limit topics.

And I would say too—and you haven’t asked this question—if you were to ask me what is the greatest freedom I’ve experienced this year, I’d say it’s the freedom to have all subjects open for inquiry. The *Adventist Review* article and other comments people have written have really emphasized this. “Well, it’s because he was reading those uninspired authors.” I think other people would just call that knowledge. Not all books are true and right, but I think if there’s a god, he gave us brains to use to sort through things. One of my atheist friends says, “If there’s a god, and God created me, and the brain or mind he created me with made me inquisitive, but then he didn’t provide sufficient evidence to satisfy my intellectual curiosity, then that god is just toying with me.” So that’s a problem for a lot of people. So I think that freedom to ask, Is the earth millions and millions of years old? Is the universe 14 billion years old? That’s a great question. We should ask that question. We should talk about it. We should explore it without having predetermined answers. And the same is true for God, Jesus, the Bible, or any other topic.

This goes for atheists too. I would say any skeptic or any secular person, if they’re being faithful to their values, and I come along and I say, “Look, I’ve got this really important evidence that there’s a god,” then that person should listen and pay attention to that.

Christians aren’t the only closed-minded people out there. Not all Christians are closed-minded, and not all closed-minded people are Christians.

**AToday:** You said in an interview that you would love for there to be a god. What did you mean by this?

**Bell:** It depends on which god we’re talking about. There are a lot of gods that it would not be a good thing if they were true—the Southern Baptist God or the Westboro Baptist Church God. I want nothing to do with that god. In fact I hope that god doesn’t exist.

I think what I meant was that I think many people who believe in God hold it as kind of a general statement. They haven’t really examined it closely. They haven’t felt a need to. It’s just a worldview concept, a concept that outside of me, outside of all of us, outside of the universe, there’s an intelligence. And if you’re loosely Christian, the idea is that this intelligence is benevolent and created us and loves us and wants to create a better future for all creatures. That’s a really nice idea. I would love for that to be true. That’s a beautiful story.

I think people have this grandfatherly picture of God. God is a judge—he’s not to be screwed with—but also he loves us and he wants us to prosper and be healthy and enjoy eternity with him. That idea I think is very attractive. I think if you drill down into it, it has problems, but on the surface, I think that’s how people have this positive idea about God. My whole life was spent trying to reconcile that kind of a god concept with my experience of life and the world.

**AToday:** How did you choose between an agnostic or an atheist position?

**Bell:** The way it’s explained in the skeptic community, *agnosticism* is a label that refers to epistemology. It’s a question about what you think you know or don’t know. So an agnostic is someone whose posture toward whatever topic is being discussed is “I don’t know.” But *atheism* pertains to the question of God’s existence. So the two terms are actually about two different things. Agnosticism is about how confident you are about your knowledge. Atheism or theism is the question about God’s existence. I describe myself as an *agnostic atheist*, which means that I don’t think there’s a god, but I don’t know for sure. And I don’t think anybody can know for sure. At least not yet.
Most atheists are open to the possibility of discovering there’s a god. Some prefer not to even think of themselves as atheists because that’s not the defining characteristic of their lives. They’re humanists or activists of various types; they just happen to not believe in God. It’s not a big deal to them. So I would say for someone who is purely agnostic, someone who genuinely doesn’t know—it’s almost like a 50-50 proposition that there’s a god or not a god. Most atheists that I know do not claim that they know that there’s not a god. They simply say, based on the evidence that I have, I don’t think there is. It’s not a positive claim—there isn’t a god—but it’s more of a negative claim that I lack evidence or I lack a belief in a god.

Most people would say that unless they can know something is true they’re going to assume it isn’t. The default position or the null hypothesis is that there isn’t a god, and if you’re going to claim that there is, then you need to demonstrate that. So most atheists are just in a neutral position. I don’t believe in unicorns, not because anyone has proven to me that there aren’t any unicorns. Most people don’t need evidence to prove there aren’t unicorns; my assumption is that there aren’t unless someone can produce one. I think a lot of atheists have that approach to God. It seems unreasonable to believe there is a god unless there’s evidence that there is. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

**AToday:** You said in an interview that there are more important questions than if god is real. What types of questions are more important to you and why are they more important?

**Bell:** I think one of the things that led me to where I am now is a concern that the kind of belief in God that most of us have puts our focus and our emphasis off into another world—some other time, some other place. What I think are the most important questions are the questions that pertain to how we live now. This is where I actually find Jesus to be quite a compelling character because he—sort of against his cultural stream—focused on the immediate needs of his community, the people that he encountered.

To me the question of whether there’s a god or not sort of pales in comparison to questions like How should we live with one another? What are we going to do about the climate crisis? What are we going to do about income inequality and racism? If I had to pick a way to spend my life, I would rather spend my life working on those issues than endlessly going around the question of whether there’s a god or not. I would rather focus on those humanistic questions—relationships between people, our communities and nature.

**AToday:** What would you like Christians to understand about atheists?

**Bell:** I wish Christians would not immediately jump to the conclusion that atheists are immoral or bad people with no moral compass or are nihilists with no meaning and value in their lives, that all atheists are depressed with no way to make good ethical judgments. I think that’s a real fallacy. I think there are plenty of depressed Christians, and they’re are plenty of happy atheists. And vice versa.

**AToday:** What would you like atheists to know about Christians?

**Bell:** I wish atheists knew that not all Christians are biblical literalists. They’re not all homophobic and anti-women. It’s the fundamentalists that get a lot more media coverage in the U.S. than more liberal Christians.

I think we’ll all have better conversations if we can understand each other better, so a theist and an atheist can come to the conversation admitting the best in each other and talking about the actual differences that we have instead of these straw-man differences that we wish the other person would have so we could easily dismiss them.

I think atheists have to deal with the fact that there are a lot of really good Christians who do good in the world and who are happy, healthy productive members of society. That doesn’t mean there’s a god; it just means that some Christians have managed to believe in God and figure out how to live good lives in the world. And I think Christians have to realize that atheists are people who have very similar interests and values. That kind of parity in our understanding of each other would be a really good start.
**AToday:** You’ve said there are healthy and destructive ways to be a person of faith. How would you describe this healthy way.

**Bell:** I think anytime a person uses their moral, ethical, philosophical beliefs to channel the best human impulses to do good in the world and fight for the common good, those are things that are good expressions of Christianity that contribute to human thriving.

I think destructive ways of being a Christian are all the ways Christians can use ideology to discriminate against people who the Bible says are less or that they just think are less.

**AToday:** You’ve shared that a belief in the afterlife can be disempowering for action in this life. For those who believe in the “Great Controversy” theme with Jesus’ literal return, what would you want them to understand in order to be empowered rather than disempowered?

**Bell:** What I tried to tell my congregation is that one way of looking at eschatology is to say that we should be people who do now what we anticipate will be true one day. If we believe that there will be no more rich and poor, slave and free in some kind of future paradise, then as people who believe that, they should work to make that as true as possible now. That's what I tried to encourage my folks about—we’re called to be people of action to produce the kinds of results we hope to one day see.

**AToday:** Carl Wilkens, the American Adventist who stayed in Rwanda during the genocide, told me that he believes God is active in the world through people (link to interview). I’m curious how you would react if your Christian friends said they believe God is still working through you in the world through your work with PATH or in other ways. Would that be offensive?

**Bell:** I think there’s a way for it to be offensive, where it comes off condescending like, “You’re still a theist even if you don’t realize it.” That's a condescending way to say that person thinks they know more about what’s going on in my mind than I do. It’s a little offensive, but I don’t get offended easily. It’s more just wrong.

But I think that the way you’re intending it is fine with me. If you believe that there is a divine being—if we can use that word—that is superintending human affairs to some kind of good conclusion, then yeah there’s this kind of notion that anyone who is doing good in the world is doing it in participation with that process. Not all Christians would say that of course. That's fine with me.

I think there are some forms of Christian theism that would see God as roughly equivalent to the concept of love. And so they wouldn’t see god being a being per se, a creature among other creatures, the most powerful being among all beings, but would see God as more of a force, sort of like gravity is a force that we can’t see or identify but we see the results of it. In that sense if you think love is equivalent to god—god is love, love is god—then anybody who is acting loving is acting in harmony with that, whatever you want to call it. That's fine. We can all choose to call things different words.

The risk there is that people in the dominant society can tend to co-opt the minority position for their own. So there’s a way you can sort of say, “Let’s not focus on race. We’re all just human.” And if you’re a white person saying that, it’s very easy to sort of slip into, “Human, like me, of course. We’ll just call it human and we’re all just the same.” And a person of color might say, “Well, let’s unpack that a little more.” I think it’s also true that there is a line that you could cross in co-opting another’s viewpoint by saying, “They’re all worshiping the same thing even if they don’t know it.” But I also understand why someone would believe that if that’s truly their belief. Christians just have to understand how that can come across as sort of a totalizing kind of story.

**AToday:** During this year you started dating a Christian woman. What wisdom do you have for couples with different beliefs?

**Bell:** I think what works for us is that we’ve identified common values that in many ways transcend the question of
whether we think there’s a god or not. I think if two people are romantically attracted to each other and they don’t
have common values, that’s tough because one person wants to just spend money and one person wants to save
money; one person wants to help the poor and one person wants to just keep it all for themselves.

Rebecca and I have more in common than not. The results of our belief systems are more in common even though
on the question of whether there’s a god we differ. I’m a fan of her kind of Christianity. I was that kind of Christian
myself, so I think it’s a good way of holding your faith. If you’re going to believe in something that is relatively
unbelievable, then you should at least channel it for good in the world instead of harm. Rebecca is that kind of a
Christian, and I’m totally supportive of that. And she supports my exploration, my doubts, my inability to make the
puzzle pieces fit together. I think that’s the key—to find those common values that you can hold almost as religious
values in a way. For me it’s from the perspective of humanism and for her from the perspective of Christianity. She’s
working with survivors of human trafficking, and I’m working with the homeless. Unless you asked us what we
thought about the existence of God, you wouldn’t necessarily know.

AToday: What can you tell me about the film Year Without God?

Bell: The film is being made by two guys—Ryan Moore and Tim Banks. They’ve been following me around as much
as possible this year, as much as I would let them. I’m not a producer or a film maker. I’m the subject. I basically told
them that they could do it.

It’s been fun. It’s going to be good. I think people will like it. I think people who think it’s going to be a hit piece
against Christianity shouldn’t worry. It’s not going to be “Now Ryan gets revenge on Adventism.” It’s not going to be
like that. It’s really a matter of documenting what it’s like to be in this in-between place where you’re struggling with
doubts and questions. It’s one story of how someone navigated that. It should be out in the fall of this year.

AToday: Will there be a book?

Bell: I’m working on a book though it’s a slower process than I wish it was. There are no hard and fast
commitments. We’ll see a book eventually, but I don’t know anything more than that right now.

AToday: What is the Life After God project?

Bell: It’s still in its conceptual stage, but my interest there is in being a companion in whatever way with people who
are in a similar place and creating kind of a cultural space and a social space for people who are in a crisis of faith
and trying to sort through what they believe and how it impacts their lives.

I don’t have an agenda to tear people’s faith away, but I do think that when people start having these deep questions
and doubts about what they’ve been told, they don’t have a place to go or people with whom to have that
conversation, so I’d like to hold that space for people in whatever way. And “in whatever way” is what I’m still trying
to figure out.

I think it will include gatherings, online forums, even up to the point of doing some personal coaching. Usually
coaching has to do with career coaching or life skills coaching, but this would be more like worldview
coaching—what do you believe about the world and how do you go about asking those questions.

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Loma Linda-Worthington Brand Given New Life by Atlantic Natural Foods Company

By AT News Team, Jan. 7, 2015: Two classic brands of vegetarian meat substitutes that were created by Adventists were recently acquired by Atlantic Natural Foods (ANF), a small company located in the suburbs of Rocky Mount, North Carolina. ANF purchased the brands from the giant Kellogg food company for which it has manufactured these products since soon after Worthington Foods was acquired by Kellogg in late 1999.

One of the first steps by the new owner was to invite three Adventist pastors to dedicate its manufacturing facility. The pastors were more than happy to participate, the Adventist Review quoted Rebecca Carpenter, communication director for the Adventist denomination’s Carolina Conference. “They invited our participation as a way of inviting the Lord’s blessing on the new venture.”

Atlantic Natural Foods is a privately held company that does private label manufacturing of soy products. It already produces Meatless Select and Caroline’s brands. Meatless Select meets high standards for healthy nutrition and Caroline’s is a non-GMO product using only soy beans imported from non-GMO nations. They are distributed by Whole Foods, a health foods chain with 360 stores in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, as well as three regional grocery chains in the southern U.S.; Piggly Wiggly, Harris Teeter and Ingles.

None of the principals in ANF have a background with the Adventist faith but one of the sales staff is an Adventist, Luci Sheehan, a spokeswoman for the company, told Adventist Today. “We are working to understand, appreciate and value the Adventist heritage connected with these foods,” she said.

Loma Linda Foods was owned by the denomination until it was sold to Worthington Foods around 1980. The profit from the sale provided an endowment that continues to fund global missions. Worthington Foods was one of the largest enterprises to be a member of Adventist-laymen’s Services and Industries (ASI) for many years.

ANF has created a single brand from the combined line of products, the Worthington-Loma Linda brand. It continues to provide many of the well-known products widely used by Adventists in North America. It will bring out a number of new products starting in the spring.

Working with food scientists to craft products that uphold the values of health and a sustainable natural environment, ANF will likely address some of the nutrition concerns that have been expressed by Adventists over the years about traditional vegetarian meat substitutes. At the same time it has launched a Web site which already provides many recipes for dishes that have longed been loved by Adventists and served at church potlucks as well as private family meals.

Adventists are asked to submit recipes and find out where to obtain these products at this new Web site: www.lomalindabrand.com

Old Adventist favorites like FriChik and Big Franks and Kaffree Roma, continue to be sold at Adventist Book Centers and campus markets at major Adventist institutions. They can be purchased online through Amazon.com with free shipping if the customer joins Amazon Prime. ANF is also stocking them at Stater Brothers markets in southern California and three Walmarts in the suburbs north of Orlando, Florida.

“We plan to grow the traditional stable of Loma Linda/Worthington Foods canned products, reintroduce some iconic items that have been discontinued over the years, and create new and exciting items that will address changing consumer preferences,” said an ANF statement.
Douglas Hines is chairman of AFT Holdings, an international investment and management group that is the principal owner of Atlantic Natural Foods and Kelly Krause is president of ANF. Hines announced that the Loma Linda brand would continue a tradition of supporting Adventist education by donating a portion of sales proceeds to Southern Adventist University and Loma Linda University.

If you are having difficulty finding access to these products or you have questions about the products, the Customer Care line at ANF is (252) 212-9000 or you can send an Email to Customer Care at info@atlanticnaturalfoods.com or write to it at 110 Industry Court, Nashville, NC 27856 in the United States.

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Community Relations Expert for Adventists Dies: W. Augustus Cheatham

From ANN, Jan/ 1, 2015: A government official in the administration of United States President Jimmy Carter and long-time vice president for Loma Linda University, W. Augustus Cheatham, known to friends as “Gus,” died recently after an eight-year battle with brain cancer. He was 72.

His brother, Pastor Charles L. Cheatham, retired president of the Adventist denomination’s Allegheny East Conference, announced his passing. “Memorial services will be planned and announced,” Cheatham said in a brief e-mail to friends. “Keep us in your prayers.”

Cheatham was a social worker by profession. He graduated from Washington Adventist University in 1965 and went on to earn a master’s degree in social work at Howard University in Washington D.C. He coordinated community services for the public schools in Prince George’s County, Maryland, from 1970 before entering 16 years of government service, including appointments as deputy assistant secretary in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) and deputy director of its Office for Civil Rights, a position for which he was recommended by HEW cabinet member Joseph Califano and approved by President Jimmy Carter.

“Having the oath of office administered by associate Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall was one of Mr. Cheatham’s most memorable experiences,” Loma Linda University said in a July 2007 statement. The university honored him at the time with its Distinguished University Service Award.

When he left government service in 1982, Cheatham became principal Pine Forge Academy, an Adventist high school in Pennsylvania, for three years. During that time, enrollment increased 170 percent, from 110 to 285 students; a new campus church was constructed; and funds were raised for a new gymnasium. In 1985 he was hired as vice president for communication and marketing at LLU where he served until his retirement.

“Though his illness slowed him down, we kept up our friendship, shared meals whenever we could, and had many opportunities to talk politics: national and church,” said Ray Tetz, a longtime friend and president of Mind Over Media, a strategic communications company in Silver Spring, Maryland.

“He cared deeply about what is happening in our nation and always wanted to know the latest in church politics as well,” Tetz said in a tribute on his Facebook page. “The last time I saw him earlier in the fall, his capacity for speech was nearly gone, but he still wanted to talk, and he was still filled with grace and gratitude.”

Cheatham “held many prestigious positions and has a long list of accomplishments and awards. Today we honor the husband, father, brother, uncle, cousin, friend, leader and man of God, ‘Gus,’ as he was affectionately called by all who knew and loved him,” said Sonya Sampson, president of the National Pine Forge Academy Alumni Association.
Adventist Youth at GYC Event Knock on Doors at 120,000 Homes in Phoenix Metro Area

By AT News Team, Jan. 5, 2015: Hundreds of teens and young adults attending the Generation of Youth for Christ (GYC) event last week in Phoenix, Arizona, distributed literature door to door on Friday and during the week prior to the event. The Adventist Review Email edition reported upwards to 80,000 doors were knocked on during the pre-event project and as many as 40,000 on Friday.

Perhaps as many as 5,000 people attended Sabbath worship at the event held at the Phoenix Convention Center, including many who are not teens or young adults. Pastor Ted Wilson, president of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, spoke to the group on the evening of January 1, New Year’s Day.

Pastor Paul Ratsara, president of the denomination’s Southern-Africa Indian Ocean Division, taught a seminar on “Relentless Prayer.” He has been a presenter at each of the GYC annual gatherings for the last five years. His son and daughter-in-law are members of the organization’s executive committee, the Adventist Review reported.

Being a Christian means living a life that “rattles the world,” stated Natasha Nebblett, president of the organization, in her opening address. Young people are caught in a war between Christ and Satan, she said. For the world to take notice of this spiritual reality, young Adventists must allow Jesus to be fully in charge of their lives, Nebblett concluded.

Despite the large number of homes contacted by the GYC volunteers over the past two weeks, there was no evidence in the Phoenix news media that the general public took notice. Adventist Today checked the news archive of The Arizona Republic, the daily newspaper for Phoenix and found that the most recent item about Adventists was published October 10 last year and reported on Adventist schools in an article that covered many parochial and private education scholarships. A similar check done of the news archives of the television and radio stations in Phoenix found that most recent report mentioning Adventists was broadcast on December 13 by KTVK and simply mentioned at patient that had died at an Adventist hospital in Colorado.

GYC has become a very influential organization within the Adventist movement in North America, although it is an independent group not an initiative of the denomination’s youth department. There has been some tension between GYC and the denomination’s youth ministries leaders. Among other things this led to a change in the organization’s name from General Youth Conference to Generation of Youth for Christ with the initials remaining the same.

The event last week was the 12th annual conference for GYC. The first gathering was in 2002. The Adventist Today Foundation has published a 200-page history of GYC written by a young Adventist journalist which provides a behind-the-scenes look at the emergence of the organization and its impact on the lives of a number of young adults. The book can be purchased as an E-book through Kindle (Amazon.com). It is entitled Something’s Happening by Suzanne Ocsai.
Adventist Leaders: Statement about Killings at Paris Newspaper

From APD, Jan. 9, 2015: Leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination sent condolences to the people of France and praised its government for supporting religious freedom after a militant Islamist attack on a satirical magazine killed 12 people in Paris. “On behalf of the Seventh-day Adventist world church and its president, allow me to convey to you our deepest sympathy in connection with the terrorist attack on the Charlie Hebdo office in Paris,” said Dr. John Graz, director of public affairs for the denomination.

“We join in the pain of victims’ families,” Graz stated. “We pray for them and for those who were seriously injured. We also pray for the beautiful country of France, which we love; and for her people.”

The letter noted that Adventists have long been defenders of freedom of conscience and religion, and underscored that those freedoms were the foundation of all freedoms, including the freedom of expression. “We thank France for these fundamental freedoms and its authorities for the freedom of expression and religion that they protect,” the letter said.

APD is the news service that serves the Adventist denomination in Europe.
ADRA Assists Displaced Persons in Ukraine and Russia

By AT News Team and ANN, Jan. 7, 2015: The conflict between Ukraine and Russia has significantly disrupted life for those living in certain areas in eastern Ukraine. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), the humanitarian agency of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, is active in the region, supporting internally displaced Ukrainians as well as Ukrainians who are now refugees in Russia.

ADRA told Adventist Today that in Ukraine it has been distributing water in cooperation with UNICEF, distributing food parcels in cooperation with the World Food Program, and leading other smaller food projects.

As of mid-December 2014, the food distribution program had successfully delivered 9,000 parcels, each one containing enough food for one person for one week. Distributions include oil, sugar, rice, buckwheat, milk and canned goods. ADRA distributes food to fifteen different regions in Ukraine, including parcels for approximately 300 families currently living in Kiev.

Ukrainian Adventists are also involved in the East Angel Project, where Adventist congregations collect food and winterization supplies and ship them to communities affected by the conflict. Additionally, volunteers have work on damaged homes in eastern Ukraine, repairing more than twenty houses to date.

ADRA explained that it is “partially operating shelters, but we are working with individuals and families to winterize their own shelters, through the distribution of funds and supplies.” The proposed goal of the winterization project is to equip more than 2,400 vulnerable households for the harsh winter months.

Psychosocial support has been provided to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Kiev, and ADRA plans to reach out to one or possibly two other cities. Furthermore, ADRA is developing a program to educate 15,000 children on the dangers of entering mines, where unexploded shells represent just one of the many dangers.

The Adventist Review reports that ADRA has also “been busy on the Russian side of the border, providing food, clothing, shelter and money to scores of refugees who have fled Ukraine since the turmoil started in April.” The report continues, “About 810,000 people have fled to Russia over the past eight months, according to the United Nations and Russia…. The Russian government has opened refugee tent camps and ordinary Russians have opened their homes to the refugees. Humanitarian organizations, including ADRA, have stepped in to help.”

Dmitriy Plugatariov, ADRA coordinator for the Adventist Church’s Caucasus Union Mission, explains, “People were often forced to flee from their homes in the military conflict in only their underwear, and they needed absolutely everything.”

The news release shares a number of projects coordinated by ADRA in the region:

**Donetsk.** The Adventist congregation in the city of Donetsk (not to be confused with a city of the same name in eastern Ukraine) has housed about 20 people in its church building for several months. Church members supplied the people with a shower cabin and daily hot meals. A tent camp with about 1,000 refugees is located in the area, and the church has provided its residents with food, water, medicine and personal hygiene items.

**Gukovo.** The church has cooperated on several projects with City Hall in Gukovo, a town of about 2,000 people. At the beginning, church members collected and distributed 100 food packages to refugee families. “They could see tears of joy and gratitude in people’s eyes,” Plugatariov said.

The next project saw church members provide food to 300 refugees living in a temporary facility.
Many refugees, however, lived in the homes of local residents, and they sought food and other assistance at a specially designated distribution point set up by City Hall. The church brought food and personal hygiene items to the distribution point.

In addition, the church gathers food baskets (each weighing 8 kilograms, or about 18 pounds) for refugees living in private homes, and members distribute them to families weekly.

"Thus with God’s help, they are able to support 400 families every month," Plugatariov said.

**Shakhty.** About 2,000 refugees are receiving temporary housing in Shakhty, and the local church has collaborated with City Hall on fulfilling several charity programs. When the first refugee families started arriving, the church provided them with food baskets, water, personal hygiene items and medicine for several months. Later on, when the number of refugees increased, the church decided to consistently assist 350 families with food baskets.

**The Dmitriadovskiy settlement.** The largest refugee camp in the Rostov region — more than 600 people, most of them children — is located in this small settlement. Some of the residents were born in this camp. The first project that the Seventh-day Adventist Church carried out at the camp saw the delivery of food, baby food, towels, a washing machine, a refrigerator and other equipment. Later, the church provided medicine and personal hygiene items. More recently, the church distributed personal hygiene items, medicine and school supplies to 145 families.

**The Primorka settlement.** Some 700 refugees live in this small settlement, with 200 of them in a tent camp and the rest in private homes. The church installed restrooms at the tent camp.
Adventist Volunteers Impact Ghana with Environmental & Public Health Projects

AT News Team, Jan. 4, 2015: More than 700,000 volunteers were mobilized last Sunday (Dec. 28) by the Seventh-day Adventist denomination in Ghana. They played a key role in the country’s first National Sanitation Day. The nation’s chief of state, President John D. Mahama declared the event to combat cholera outbreaks and improve the infrastructure and environment.

Adventist volunteers shoveled slit out of gutters, moved trash out of the streets and repaired sources of clean water, reported the Ghana News Agency (GNA). It quoted denominational leaders challenging other Christian bodies to join the initiative.

"We must move away from curing disease to prevention as the answer to Ghana’s health problems," Pastor Samuel Larmie, president of the denomination’s Southern Ghana Union Conference, told GNA. “We can’t sit down and fold our arms and watch people die,” noting the value that Christian faith should place on good health and the sacredness of life.

It is unfortunate that politics polarize the nation and public health should be de-politicized, Dr. William Brown, director of ADRA Ghana told GNA. ADRA is the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, the denomination’s international humanitarian organization. Brown urged the government to enforce public health laws, implement better sanitation policies and include health education in the school curricula.

A cabinet member for the national government, Julius Debrah, the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development, responded with a statement that “sanitation remained high on government’s agenda.” He told GNA that the current government was investing heavily in infrastructure projects related to drainage, water supply and health care facilities.

The Peace FM Online news service reported that the Adventist volunteers focused particularly on Central Accra and Osu, as well as the Teshie Seashore. It also quoted Larmie as he called on “other churches to [make] their contribution.” He stated that if the churches would “do their part to improve the physical health just like they do for the spiritual health, our society would be healthy.” It also reported that the denomination made cash donations to the Ussher Polyclinic as part of the project.

There are more than 3,100 Adventist congregations in Ghana with a total of 408,844 members at the end of 2013 (the latest year on record). Researchers estimate that the total number of Adventist adherents (including children and other non-baptized believers who attend church) is probably three or four times the membership number. During 2013 the membership grew by nearly six percent.
A Less than Satisfactory Guide

By Andy Hanson, December 6, 2015: The Adult Bible Study Guide is the most important publication of the Adventist Church. Back issues find their way into the most isolated mission outposts. Its biblical references and Ellen White quotations are the Adventist Bible for many. But it pays only lip service to the claim that our faith is based on sola scriptura.

The content of the Quarterly’s Lesson 13 on The Book of James motivates this appeal to Editor Goldstein for Quarterly revival and reformation!

For Example

No verses from James are cited in “This Week’s Study” of The Everlasting Gospel, and Jeremiah 31:13 was the “The Memory Text.” In the author’s argument that James’s gospel message is “faith alone,” he substitutes the words “obedience” and “faith that works” for “works” (1), and includes an Ellen White quotation in Friday’s lesson that seriously questions the notion that salvation requires faith alone. (2)

I’ve included in a footnote some of the words and passages that left me searching for clarity and context. (3)

Finally, a definition of “The Gospel” remains elusive. The lesson describes it as “everlasting,” “the foundation of our last-day commission to preach,” and “the good news.” We are told that “different people can hear the same gospel very differently,” and that it is only by “surrender[ing] ourselves in utter faith…we hear it correctly.” “The gospel is the power of God to save all who believe,” “the proclamation of good news” and “Abraham’s obedient faith.” We are informed that “the gospel is the same from Genesis to Revelation.”

But what is the gospel? Is it The 28 Fundamental Beliefs? Ted Wilson seems comfortable with that definition. I’d vote for something like the Golden Rule in keeping with the “Son of Man’s” declaration in Matthew 25:31-46. However it’s defined, the gospel’s influence in a discussion of Adventist theology is of prime importance. Perhaps a Quarterly discussion of possible definitions would be appropriate.

Note: readers interested in my take on the Book of James can check out “Some Thoughts on the Book of James,” May 1, 2013 Archives

http://atoday.org/archives/opinion-archives

1. “Obedience to the commandments (including the Sabbath) through the faith of Jesus signifies those who remain faithful to the end. True religion demands both faith and obedience.”

2. “No Christianity is so lofty that it can soar above the requirements of God’s holy law. That would be beyond Christ’s power to help.” E.G. White, Signs of the Times, March 31, 1890.

3. Sunday’s Lesson

The good news of the Gospel isn’t really “good news” until “we surrender ourselves in utter faith to the teaching of the Word so that when the gospel is preached we hear it correctly.”

Monday’s Lesson

“In other words, Jesus was saying [to the Pharisees], You need what you do not have. Your works are not good
“The ‘righteous’ Pharisee is ignored by God, while the ‘sinful’ tax collector is not only accepted but leaves justified, forgiven, and free from guilt.”

Jesus “describes the cup of crushed grapes as ‘My blood of the covenant….’”

Tuesday’s Lesson

“Amazingly, God, through the sacrifice of Christ, proves Himself to be just in justifying the ungodly who have put their faith in Jesus.”

Wednesday’s Lesson

“The book of Hebrews describes the new covenant as ‘better’ than the old covenant (Heb. 8:1, 2, 6 NRSV). The obvious question, then, is ‘Why did God establish the old covenant if it was faulty?’ The problem, however, was not with the covenant but with the response of the people to it.”

“The animal sacrifices of the old covenant could never take away sins, including those committed under the old covenant.”

“In one sense, the new covenant is not new at all….”

“Without faith, bringing animal sacrifices was almost like making payment for sins.”

“[The new covenant] is not really new (Lev. 19:18), except in that we are not just to love our neighbor as ourselves, but ‘as I [Jesus] have loved you’” (John 13:34).

Thursday's Lesson

“As we have seen, the gospel is the same from Genesis to Revelation. The law is the same. The covenant is the same. Jesus, Paul, and James all affirm that the gospel is the same one believed by Abraham (John 8:56, Rom. 4:13, James 2:21-23). Some have difficulty with this assertion only because they define the gospel more narrowly than Scripture. Abraham’s obedient faith, however, originated through his foreseeing Jesus’ sacrifice. We do not need to balance faith with works in order to be saved. Faith alone is sufficient, but it must not be intellectual faith as the devils have, nor a presumptuous faith that claims the promises of God without complying with the conditions of salvation; rather it must be a faith that works.”

• 3
by Greg Prout, January 8, 2015: I was one of those ex-hippies at Pacific Union College interviewed by Max Gordon Phillips in the magazine *Signs of the Times*, October, 1969. I was “Dave” in his article, “Hope for Hippies.” I was young, very naive, and basically clueless about church and religion, but I had found Jesus. I recall getting word that a reporter from *Signs of the Times* wanted to talk with several of us who had found Christ and had providentially emerged from the hippie-drug culture of the 60's.

At the time of the interview, we were busily involved in witnessing activities on campus and beyond. We who found Christ too wonderful to ignore were starting prayer groups in men’s dorms, delivering speeches to the Women’s Temperance Society, and giving talks in a home for runaway girls in San Francisco. We traveled to Bay area churches, giving sermons and presenting Sabbath school programs. We shared our testimony as far away as southern California. We arranged for a Big Brother program on campus in connection with the Big Brothers of Napa. We sent carloads of food to San Francisco’s drug-infested Haight-Ashbury, and provided volunteers to help with a fledgling vegetarian restaurant in the deteriorating Haight district. We organized caravans of cars loaded with eager students and trunkloads of food to Morning Star Ranch, a commune in Sebastopol, CA, which had been created by Lou Gottlieb, the bass player for the 60’s folk-singing trio, the Limelighters. Singing groups were generated to bring a message of hope to Napa State (mental) Hospital. We had discovered “God” and the unbelievable treasure of being saved; we had to tell the world. We were on fire and Max wanted to record the flames.

Into a side room attached to the brand new Church on campus, we filed to meet our Interviewer. Mr. Phillips was unassuming and polite as he strategically positioned his small tape recorder to enhance our voices. He mentioned that he had heard unprecedented things were happening at PUC, and he wanted to know more. By then, it was nothing short of a campus-wide spiritual revolution. The church called it revival. Students were hungry for the God who could genuinely change lives previously ignored by a sleeping church. Redeemed lives, exciting times, radical times – we thought we were on the cusp of an “in the clouds of glory” event. The Israelis had just fought the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War and we concluded that was a “sign.” In those days we were “sign-freaks.” Everything was a sign of the end. Intoxicated by signs, we knew that Jesus' coming was about to happen, and our spiritual revival was exploding to counter the groundbreaking changes sweeping the country. Of course ours was ordained of heaven and called to address the cultural demise we perceived happening in our nation in the late 60’s. Little did we think we could have been a small forerunner of the larger Jesus Movement soon to sweep across America. We were giddy with the idea that Jesus was “even at the doors,” and with little time left, colossal efforts had to be made. Souls had to be saved, and we were positioned and blessed to spread the “gospel of love” everywhere we could. Max wanted to capture that spirit on the pages of a popular Adventist periodical.

He asked about our personal histories. Naturally our stories were unique and different from each other, but we shared a common thread of drug abuse. Max inquired what caused us to escape the clutches of such a self-destructive culture. We told our personal narratives of redemption that collectively landed us at PUC. There was something magical and intriguing about how we all got there, which for us underscored our conviction we were called by the Lord to usher in the End.

We “born-again” students were products of a calamitous surreal disruption of what we had been accustomed to; life had become dynamic, careening down paths unimagined. “Somebody” was stirring the pot of American culture, and at PUC a small, insignificant campus, God was stirring us, just like the small band of disciples He selected to evangelize the entire world. We were to do the same. In that spirit, Max Phillips wrote his piece “Hope for the Hippies.” He seemed a thinking sensitive person who knew something certainly unusual was occurring and the church had better pay attention.
And the church did. It counseled us to watch our attire, make sure we did not reflect the dress of the rebellious mobs’ evidence on American streets. Keep our hair cut, our shirts tucked in, and refine our coarse speech. Our spirits were immature and needed to be toned down and seasoned with the wisdom of doctrine. The church assured us our experience needed their counsel, and our emphasis on Love was too emotional. Without doctrinal savoring, our message of love was only sentiment, unreliable, and too much like the world.

By the spring of that year the fiery passions had dimmed. Too many students struggled with unanswered prayer, lives that didn’t change, and a religion that was just another course to pass. They failed to discover the joy of serving, and slid back into nondescript programmed lives. The church was certain our revival had been less than “the real thing,” because we failed at “reformation.” The Jesus Movement was beginning to rear its head in cities across the country, and since it too lacked the proper Adventist doctrines and guidance, it was spurious, doomed to failure, and not to be embraced. (See Signs of the Times, October, 1971). Many of us who tenaciously believed, went off to seminary and sadly, in time, became just like the church, arguing for doctrinal purity, the essence of Truth.

Fast forward several decades. My early years of uber-excitement over Jesus’ imminent return have long faded, and disappointment has had its effect. I now question if we have outlived “soon,” “near,” and “I come quickly.” No longer can we say, with an honest mind, that Jesus’ coming is “even at the doors.” We can say it, but we know it is not believable. Our signs-of-the-times theology has turned on us, leaving our message of urgency dubious. Perchance, as a recent author suggested, we should change the message of “Jesus is coming soon” to just “Jesus is coming,” and forget the descriptive modifiers of “soon” “any moment,” “near,” and “even at the doors.” After all, it has been over 2,000 years since He promised to return quickly, challenging any sense of an impending event.

From reading the NT, I would reason the disciples would be shocked so much time has transpired and still no second advent. Some today might retort, “a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day” to God (2 Pet. 3:8). So, are we saying it could be thousands of years in human reckoning before He comes? It already has been thousands of years. Though it might appear a short time to God, it certainly doesn’t to me. It’s been a very long time. We need to be honest about this issue. And thousands of years with no appearing is looming. From the human experience, “thousands of years” are “thousands of years.”

Jesus said in Revelation 22:20, “Yes, I am coming quickly.” How does that statement measure up? We need to re-think our message of deliverance. What rational person could argue that not much time has gone by since the resurrection-ascension? Jesus’ disciples believed His return very near, even in their lifetime. The early church of the first few centuries thought so as well. Almost every generation since has thought so; meanwhile, millennia upon millennia go by. No, Jesus – God in human flesh – spoke in human language to human beings in their time and context.

Perhaps we should abandon the “signs of the times” approach? Perhaps the Kingdom is here, and Love is the answer, and we had better focus on compassion and service now and cling to the belief that Jesus will come someday. Only the Father knows when.

I wonder how Max Gordon Phillips would write about current church issues if he were still alive. We read his article about our conversions, and aside from one minor misquote, he wrote accurately. We appreciated his interest in our experience for he came across as kind and genuine. After the interview, I never saw him again. I would occasionally see his name attached to a church periodical, but nothing more, until today (January 2, 2015), when I read he passed away. Life evolves, theologies morph, and we all eventually end in the grave of history, as we wait for our deliverance.

* 1
Sharing is caring!
Debbonnaire Kovacs, Jan. 6, 2014  I was baptized when I was fourteen years old. I had devoted all my young heart to God in all the ways I understood, for my entire life, and as soon as I understood what baptism was and what it meant, I started wanted to be baptized.

That is, I knew I ought to be baptized.

I was completely ashamed of the true and secret reason I kept putting it off: I was terrified of being completely underwater. I struggled mightily with this desperate sin. Like many of us, I had been raised to see every weakness or fault as a failure of will or, worse, a failure of faith. If I really loved Jesus, surely I would be willing to go through much more terrible things than merely being underwater for 30 seconds!

So I prayed. And I struggled. And I hid my true feelings from everyone, except God. Thank heaven, I did know I could talk to God about anything at all, and I knew God still loved me, no matter what. I had an image of God disappointed in me, but I also knew, deep down, that God would help me to build up my faith to the mighty citadel it would have to be to enable me to allow someone to put my face underwater!

When I was fourteen, our church had an evangelistic series. You know the kind, four or five weeks of concentrated and earnest emotional orchestration, intended to work us up to the fever pitch that would bring us to our knees at the altar.

We come by it honestly. Our Adventist forebears, and those of most mainstream American churches, grew up in the camp meeting and revival era. Ellen White describes scenes of people weeping and wailing and being "slain in the Spirit" which would horrify most churches nowadays.

I was fourteen. Of course it worked! I submitted my terror to Jesus and stood in water up to my chest, dressed in a white robe and trembling enough to create waves. The organist was playing "I Surrender All," as I had requested, and I was surrendering all. I could endure, just for those few seconds. I would cling to the pastor’s wrist in the prescribed two-fisted grip and trust that he who put me under would be able to bring me up.

Nobody told me my feet would come out from under me. I was so frightened I almost gulped in water. The pastor expertly pulled me back to a standing position and wiped my streaming face and there I stood, still scared spitless, but overwhelmed with a certainty of new life and that indescribable feeling you get when you face your worst fears and come out a conqueror.

I felt the beam of God’s smile. I couldn’t have put words to it for many years, but today I know God was saying, like any proud parent, “This is my beloved daughter—I am delighted with her!” Or, in the vernacular, “Did you see that? That’s my kid! That’s my girl!”

Because, of course, it was Abba who put me under, and Abba who brought me up and keeps on bringing me up and getting my feet back under me and wiping my streaming face.

That’s my Dad! Did you see that? Did you see what He did? I love my Dad! And he, believe it or not, is still proud of me. You can do anything—anything at all—if God is holding your hand and saying, “I’m proud of you!”

- 2
Sharing is caring!
REACH-NYC Reaches Out to Its Community in Creative Ways

Tony Romeo, Jan 6, 2015  The following is taken from a New Year letter written by Pastor Tony Romeo, executive pastor, which we thought would be of interest to our readers. REACH-NYC is an independent ministry seeking to help others in creative ways that are focused and open to members of all faith traditions. Our leadership has spent many hours developing programs that reach the needs of all classes of people living in this vast metropolis and do it with knowledge gained by understanding that dialogue and a receptive acceptance of everyone is vital in the times in which we live.

If the last week or so have been as busy for you and your family as it has been for me and my family, then you could use a relaxing break just about now. It’s the day after Christmas and boy, do we all need to take a break.

In the link below is a relaxing piece of music and the story behind it that I hope you enjoy.

I received a phone call about four weeks ago from a resident of Greenwich Village, NYC. He was a flutist looking for a place to record some music for his friend, Nicholas Duchamp.

He was wondering how much it would cost for him and his associate to record a flute solo in the sanctuary of Historic Manhattan Seventh-day Adventist Church. He had heard that REACH-NYC and the church were opening doors to the community, and had attended some of the recent concerts.

Well, I thought I would share with you Avi Eilam-Amzallag – Taksim for Solo Flute – played by Nicholas Duchamp, the piece that was recorded in the 1881 landmark sanctuary of the church I pastor. It was recorded on Tuesday, December 9, 2014. Take a few minutes out and just relax and enjoy.

We never did charge any fee for the use of the church sanctuary for that recording, and Jonathan Brahms, the flutist that first called me about making the recording, agreed to play his flute for our benefit concert. He played in our “Classic Greenwich Village Christmas Concert,” accompanied by Bob Wilson on piano.

We are now working with Nicholas Duchamp, who is planning on having a ten-flute concert with some of his fellow musicians in an upcoming concert in June 2015.

Jonathan, a person I now consider a friend, whispered to me while he was attending our reception for the musicians and guests at our Christmas concert, that he had first called another local church but never received a call back. He was surprised when I returned his email and call within two hours. I have found that being professional in New York City brings great rewards. In this case, the reward was a new friend and some fantastic music.

This is how connections are made with the community. This is how conversations are started, bringing people together.

This past year, REACH-NYC-sponsored events have delivered needed services, with our partners in ministry, to such groups as “Sister Friends Galleria, Supporting Low Income Women and Their Children” who help women who are homeless learn skills and transition into housing of their own.

REACH-NYC has also sponsored three concerts this past year, with local professional talent attracting 80% of attendees from the Greenwich Village and surrounding communities of New York City. At these concerts a reception
is held that introduces those attending the reception to meet the musicians, as well as to taste and enjoy healthy vegetarian foods made especially for our guests.

At our last concert in August, an amazing contact was made via a guest from Israel, who in turn connected REACH-NYC with a famous musical group from Israel who will be playing at our first sponsored event in March of 2015.

REACH-NYC also sponsors weekly small group Bible studies, pastoral counseling, and other needed services. We have even conducted funeral arrangements for those who wanted something special for a departed loved one.

It is a special honor to now have twelve different groups that meet at this magnificent venue, the Historic Manhattan Seventh-day Adventist Church, to help people struggling with addictions and family histories to have a safe and consistent place to meet weekly in their various recovery groups.

All of us at REACH-NYC wish you the very best for the New Year. May God grant each of us peace and a calm spirit.

For more information, or to find ways you can help this organization, visit www.reach-nyc.com

To learn about the historic Manhattan Seventh-day Adventist church, visit www.manhattansdachurch.com
Welcome to Viewpoints: Adventist Perspectives on Peace, Justice and Righteousness. For 19 years Ryan Bell was a pastor, most recently the senior pastor of the Hollywood Seventh-day Adventist Church. In March 2013 he resigned his position due to theological and practical differences. In January 2014, Bell began a yearlong journey exploring the limits of theism as well as the atheist landscape in the United States, an experiment known as Year Without God. He received a Master of Divinity degree from Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and a Doctor of Ministry in Missional Leadership from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

AToday: Why did you decide to do the year-long experiment in this way—blog, events, etc.?

Bell: It came up very off-handedly over lunch. There was no real strategy. I was feeling a little frustrated with my unemployment and my theological questions that were coming to the surface a bit more. I had just picked up a book at a neighborhood bookstore called Religion without God, when I was meeting a friend for lunch. We started talking about why I chose that book. I've been drawn to Alain De Botton, who had written Religion for Atheists. I knew there was this new literature, and I was really interested in it because I wasn't sure if I believed in God anymore. I told my friend at lunch, "Maybe I'll become an atheist for a year and just see how that feels."

I thought I might write a book in the end, but my friend encouraged me to write the blog. He said, "I think people would be really interested in reading about your journey because I think a lot of people are in a similar place, and I think it would be interesting to follow along."

And because I have an outlet on the Huffington Post, it seemed appropriate to post it there as well. So I put it up, and they published it, and it just went crazy, which was a huge surprise to me.

AToday: So you didn’t expect so much coverage?

Bell: Yeah, yeah. I just read again today a comment on the Spectrum blog. Someone said they were sympathetic to my doubts, they just didn’t see why I had to be so self-promoting and make a big publicity thing out of it. Which of course I didn’t do that. That sort of happened. I say this to people: I challenge you to make a media splash. Try it and see how it goes. I’ve tried before with church stuff, and at PATH we’re constantly trying to get our name out more. It's difficult. You never know what's going to strike a chord with people.

I had intended to visit some skeptics’ and atheists’ gatherings and meet some people. When you meet people they want you to meet other people, and the next thing you know you’re invited to this thing and that thing. It really evolved organically like that. There wasn’t any foresight into trying to create a viral campaign.

AToday: As you look back, what do you see as positives and negatives to having it such a public journey?

Bell: The negative for me is that I had less time for myself. I’ve had less time for my own thinking, reading, writing.
Especially at the beginning of the year and then at the end of the year.

The benefit of doing it publicly is that there are so many people who can identify with my experience and have been in a similar kind of place. They may come to a different conclusion than I have, but I think people feel validated when they hear about somebody else who did something similar or is in a similar place.

It's very pastoral actually. There is a nonstop stream of people who say, “If you have any time, I'd love to chat.” Right now I don’t have that kind of time, but I do intend for that to be part of what I do with my life going forward. I do want to talk with people who are in between. I want to try to create a space in whatever way—and I’m not sure exactly in what way yet—for people to feel safe and not to have fear around asking these big existential questions.

It does have a pastoral quality to it, which is weird because I’m in this transition myself. I really don’t feel that qualifies me, especially during this past year, to be a guide for anybody else. But people are looking for role models. It’s pretty interesting how people put me in that role the same way they did when I was a pastor. I didn’t love it then; I don’t love it now. But there’s something fulfilling about just being with people in their journey.

**AToday**: There are many Jews who are atheists in one sense but who are still Jewish in another. Is this a parallel to where you are with Adventism?

Bell: That’s interesting because one of my very first lunch appointments in January of last year was with a rabbi friend of mine whose first comment was, “You’re on a very Jewish journey. Half of my congregation are atheists, so you’d fit right in.” I knew there were plenty of atheist Jews, but I didn’t know that atheist Jews went to shul.

Atheism is not that threatening to Jews, liberal Jews especially, because the narratives give shape to them culturally, and it’s not about the ontology of God as much as it is about ethics and the moral framework that the Jewish story—whether it’s exactly true according to the Torah or not—gives their family, their culture, their community.

Am I that connected to Adventism? My favorite part of not being religious is actually not being Adventist. Sometimes I miss Christianity; I almost never miss Adventism. But my friends are there, so that’s the rub. I have a lot of friends who are Adventists.

The longer I’ve been away from it—almost two years now—the more I feel that there are some things that are inherent within Adventism that are really destructive. And I know people who are trying to make Adventism a safe place for women and for gay and lesbian and transgender people. There are people who are trying to make Adventism safer, but it’s not in and of itself a safe thing for people, especially for people on the margins of life and society.

I wish the “atheist Jew” analogy were more apt. I do. But if the analogy were “Is Ryan an atheist Christian like there are atheist Jews?” then I would feel a lot more connected to that idea because I think the narrative about Jesus has real ethical value and narrative value.

I think it’s important to say that my friendships with people in the Adventist community are certainly not contingent on what I think about the existence of God.

**AToday**: Are there any pieces of Adventist identity that you hold on to?

Bell: I’m not doing a very good job of practicing it at the moment, but I definitely think that the rhythm of Sabbath is something that is healthy and beautiful. It doesn’t need to be on any particular day, and it doesn’t have to be from God, but I think the practice of ceasing from work and being more attentive to the important people in your life and perhaps taking a day and giving away your time to others is a very healthy practice that I picked up as an Adventist.

I think my politics, which is ironic because I think my politics was one of the problems that I got into in Adventism. But I feel like my politics around peace and justice are actually things I learned from Christianity and in part from my...
attempt to make Adventism more relevant.

**AToday:** You studied pastoral ministry at Weimar. How do you see the journey or trajectory from there to where you are today? Is it marked more by continuity or discontinuity?

**Bell:** I’m going to wrestle with that more in some writing I’ll be doing this year. I don’t know if this is something that was part of my childhood upbringing or whether it was something that I learned along the way. But I think a fundamental impulse of conservatism is that there is this outside standard—whether it’s the Constitution in the United States or the Bible in Christianity. It’s the absolute standard and everyone has to accommodate their lives to that standard. Whereas I think I’ve always just been more classically liberal, where I thought people’s individual experiences and stories mattered a great deal. I needed to at least take into account as a serious part of my decision making process the experience of people. A concrete example, the Bible appears to say that homosexuality is a sin. But I knew lots of people who were gay who were wonderful people who loved God and wanted to be part of a congregation, so I had to really wrestle with those things.

Even though I was raised conservatively, I think there was always a seed of liberalism in me. And by liberalism I just mean that people’s personal experiences have to be taken into account. It’s not just words on a page—sort of the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. I think I’ve always been more inclined to the spirit of the law than the letter. I think that seed of liberalism for me was always there somehow, so even though I was at Weimar I valued compassion or empathy. I don’t want to imply that conservatives aren’t sympathetic, but I think that hurting people matter, and our theology has to take into account the fact that people are hurting in unequal ways. So I see it as a natural progression from Weimar to where I am today.

**AToday:** Beyond religion, what do you think is the best contribution Adventism can make in the world today?

**Bell:** I think by being true to what I take to be the original Adventist impulse, which is to not be content with truth handed down from authorities before them and instead pursuing present truth. To me no matter what conclusion you arrive at about present truth, it’s that pursuit of present truth that is the impulse of Adventism. James and Ellen White and others didn’t want to accept their Methodist or Christian Connection as final. They saw something different or something more compelling or something their intellectual forebears left out or couldn’t see. I think that’s something the Adventist pioneers—and not just Adventists—said, “No, we’ve got to go for the truth no matter what. Even if it means we have to leave our churches. Even if it means we have to suffer some relationship breakups if our families and friends don’t see things as we do.”

I lost my jobs over the pursuit of the truth, but Adventist pioneers lost their jobs over it too. I disagree with their conclusions, but I think that spirit of searching for the truth and this idea that there’s present truth—always something new to be learned or discovered—that to me is an Adventist spirit.

**AToday:** I think it’s safe to assume that other pastors are dealing with questions, either about particular points of Adventist theology or with God more generally. What would you like to say to them?

**Bell:** I’ve been thinking about how much fear is involved in the process of having these big questions, especially for pastors. Not only have we been taught that this is the truth, but we’ve also been called to ministry. And that calling to ministry feels like an absolute too. We see that absolutism when a person leaves the ministry, and colleagues say, “Oh he left the ministry,” like they really betrayed God because God called them to ministry and God can’t be wrong.

So I think there’s a lot of fear, not only around having doubts about theology, but around saying, “Do I want to be a pastor for the rest of my life. Is that required? Am I being a total fraud if I decide not to?” And also around beliefs about the afterlife. Maybe I’ll burn in hell. We don’t have a burning hell the way Baptists do, but we still have a hell in which you don’t exist anymore. So that can be pretty bad if you’re expecting to live forever with family members in heaven or on the new earth.

So my message to pastors would be: have courage. The truth can stand on its own two feet. If your belief system is
true, then you really don’t have anything to worry about. You should explore it and dig into it. And if it’s not true, wouldn’t you want to know that? It’s the same kind of thing that an Adventist Bible worker would say to a Catholic family in their living room. “Don’t be afraid. If Catholicism is correct, then you’re fine. But if it’s wrong and I’m right, wouldn’t you want to know that?” So I would say, “If evolution is true, and creation of the earth didn’t happen in six literal days or in six thousand or ten thousand years but over a much longer period of time… If that’s true, wouldn’t you want to know that? And if it’s not true and you’re right, then great.”

There’s so much fear that’s instilled in people, not just pastors, everyone around these off-limit topics.

And I would say too—and you haven’t asked this question—if you were to ask me what is the greatest freedom I’ve experienced this year, I’d say it’s the freedom to have all subjects open for inquiry. The Adventist Review article and other comments people have written have really emphasized this. “Well, it’s because he was reading those uninspired authors.” I think other people would just call that knowledge. Not all books are true and right, but I think if there’s a god, he gave us brains to use to sort through things. One of my atheist friends says, “If there’s a god, and God created me, and the brain or mind he created me with made me inquisitive, but then he didn’t provide sufficient evidence to satisfy my intellectual curiosity, then that god is just toying with me.” So that’s a problem for a lot of people. So I think that freedom to ask, Is the earth millions and millions of years old? Is the universe 14 billion years old? That’s a great question. We should ask that question. We should talk about it. We should explore it without having predetermined answers. And the same is true for God, Jesus, the Bible, or any other topic.

This goes for atheists too. I would say any skeptic or any secular person, if they’re being faithful to their values, and I come along and I say, “Look, I’ve got this really important evidence that there’s a god,” then that person should listen and pay attention to that.

Christians aren’t the only closed-minded people out there. Not all Christians are closed-minded, and not all closed-minded people are Christians.

AToday: You said in an interview that you would love for there to be a god. What did you mean by this?

Bell: It depends on which god we’re talking about. There are a lot of gods that it would not be a good thing if they were true—the Southern Baptist God or the Westboro Baptist Church God. I want nothing to do with that god. In fact I hope that god doesn’t exist.

I think what I meant was that I think many people who believe in God hold it as kind of a general statement. They haven’t really examined it closely. They haven’t felt a need to. It’s just a worldview concept, a concept that outside of me, outside of all of us, outside of the universe, there’s an intelligence. And if you’re loosely Christian, the idea is that this intelligence is benevolent and created us and loves us and wants to create a better future for all creatures. That’s a really nice idea. I would love for that to be true. That’s a beautiful story.

I think people have this grandfatherly picture of God. God is a judge—he’s not to be screwed with—but also he loves us and he wants us to prosper and be healthy and enjoy eternity with him. That idea I think is very attractive. I think if you drill down into it, it has problems, but on the surface, I think that’s how people have this positive idea about God. My whole life was spent trying to reconcile that kind of a god concept with my experience of life and the world.

AToday: How did you choose between an agnostic or an atheist position?

Bell: The way it’s explained in the skeptic community, agnosticism is a label that refers to epistemology. It’s a question about what you think you know or don’t know. So an agnostic is someone whose posture toward whatever topic is being discussed is “I don’t know.” But atheism pertains to the question of God’s existence. So the two terms are actually about two different things. Agnosticism is about how confident you are about your knowledge. Atheism or theism is the question about God’s existence. I describe myself as an agnostic atheist, which means that I don’t think there’s a god, but I don’t know for sure. And I don’t think anybody can know for sure. At least not yet.
Most atheists are open to the possibility of discovering there’s a god. Some prefer not to even think of themselves as atheists because that’s not the defining characteristic of their lives. They’re humanists or activists of various types; they just happen to not believe in God. It’s not a big deal to them. So I would say for someone who is purely agnostic, someone who genuinely doesn’t know—it’s almost like a 50-50 proposition that there’s a god or not a god. Most atheists that I know do not claim that they know that there’s not a god. They simply say, based on the evidence that I have, I don’t think there is. It’s not a positive claim—there isn’t a god—but it’s more of a negative claim that I lack evidence or I lack a belief in a god.

Most people would say that unless they can know something is true they’re going to assume it isn’t. The default position or the null hypothesis is that there isn’t a god, and if you’re going to claim that there is, then you need to demonstrate that. So most atheists are just in a neutral position. I don’t believe in unicorns, not because anyone has proven to me that there aren’t any unicorns. Most people don’t need evidence to prove there aren’t unicorns; my assumption is that there aren’t unless someone can produce one. I think a lot of atheists have that approach to God. It seems unreasonable to believe there is a god unless there’s evidence that there is. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

**AToday:** You said in an interview that there are more important questions than if god is real. What types of questions, are more important to you and why are they more important?

**Bell:** I think one of the things that led me to where I am now is a concern that the kind of belief in God that most of us have puts our focus and our emphasis off into another world—some other time, some other place. What I think are the most important questions are the questions that pertain to how we live now. This is where I actually find Jesus to be quite a compelling character because he—sort of against his cultural stream—focused on the immediate needs of his community, the people that he encountered.

To me the question of whether there’s a god or not sort of pales in comparison to questions like How should we live with one another? What are we going to do about the climate crisis? What are we going to do about income inequality and racism? If I had to pick a way to spend my life, I would rather spend my life working on those issues than endlessly going around the question of whether there’s a god or not. I would rather focus on those humanistic questions—relationships between people, our communities and nature.

**AToday:** What would you like Christians to understand about atheists?

**Bell:** I wish Christians would not immediately jump to the conclusion that atheists are immoral or bad people with no moral compass or are nihilists with no meaning and value in their lives, that all atheists are depressed with no way to make good ethical judgments. I think that’s a real fallacy. I think there are plenty of depressed Christians, and they’re are plenty of happy atheists. And vice versa.

**AToday:** What would you like atheists to know about Christians?

**Bell:** I wish atheists knew that not all Christians are biblical literalists. They’re not all homophobic and anti-women. It’s the fundamentalists that get a lot more media coverage in the U.S. than more liberal Christians.

I think we’ll all have better conversations if we can understand each other better, so a theist and an atheist can come to the conversation admitting the best in each other and talking about the actual differences that we have instead of these straw-man differences that we wish the other person would have so we could easily dismiss them.

I think atheists have to deal with the fact that there are a lot of really good Christians who do good in the world and who are happy, healthy productive members of society. That doesn’t mean there’s a god; it just means that some Christians have managed to believe in God and figure out how to live good lives in the world. And I think Christians have to realize that atheists are people who have very similar interests and values. That kind of parity in our understanding of each other would be a really good start.
You’ve said there are healthy and destructive ways to be a person of faith. How would you describe this healthy way.

Bell: I think anytime a person uses their moral, ethical, philosophical beliefs to channel the best human impulses to do good in the world and fight for the common good, those are things that are good expressions of Christianity that contribute to human thriving.

I think destructive ways of being a Christian are all the ways Christians can use ideology to discriminate against people who the Bible says are less or that they just think are less.

You’ve shared that a belief in the afterlife can be disempowering for action in this life. For those who believe in the “Great Controversy” theme with Jesus’ literal return, what would you want them to understand in order to be empowered rather than disempowered?

Bell: What I tried to tell my congregation is that one way of looking at eschatology is to say that we should be people who do now what we anticipate will be true one day. If we believe that there will be no more rich and poor, slave and free in some kind of future paradise, then as people who believe that, they should work to make that as true as possible now. That’s what I tried to encourage my folks about—we’re called to be people of action to produce the kinds of results we hope to one day see.

Carl Wilkens, the American Adventist who stayed in Rwanda during the genocide, told me that he believes God is active in the world through people (link to interview). I’m curious how you would react if your Christian friends said they believe God is still working through you in the world through your work with PATH or in other ways. Would that be offensive?

Bell: I think there’s a way for it to be offensive, where it comes off condescending like, “You’re still a theist even if you don’t realize it.” That’s a condescending way to say that person thinks they know more about what’s going on in my mind than I do. It’s a little offensive, but I don’t get offended easily. It’s more just wrong.

But I think that the way you’re intending it is fine with me. If you believe that there is a divine being—if we can use that word—that is superintending human affairs to some kind of good conclusion, then yeah there’s this kind of notion that anyone who is doing good in the world is doing it in participation with that process. Not all Christians would say that of course. That’s fine with me.

I think there are some forms of Christian theism that would see God as roughly equivalent to the concept of love. And so they wouldn’t see god being a being per se, a creature among other creatures, the most powerful being among all beings, but would see God as more of a force, sort of like gravity is a force that we can’t see or identify but we see the results of it. In that sense if you think love is equivalent to god—god is love, love is god—then anybody who is acting loving is acting in harmony with that, whatever you want to call it. That’s fine. We can all choose to call things different words.

The risk there is that people in the dominant society can tend to co-opt the minority position for their own. So there’s a way you can sort of say, “Let’s not focus on race. We’re all just human.” And if you’re a white person saying that, it’s very easy to sort of slip into, “Human, like me, of course. We’ll just call it human and we’re all just the same.” And a person of color might say, “Well, let’s unpack that a little more.” I think it’s also true that there is a line that you could cross in co-opting another’s viewpoint by saying, “They’re all worshiping the same thing even if they don’t know it.” But I also understand why someone would believe that if that’s truly their belief. Christians just have to understand how that can come across as sort of a totalizing kind of story.

During this year you started dating a Christian woman. What wisdom do you have for couples with different beliefs?

Bell: I think what works for us is that we’ve identified common values that in many ways transcend the question of
whether we think there’s a god or not. I think if two people are romantically attracted to each other and they don’t have common values, that’s tough because one person wants to just spend money and one person wants to save money; one person wants to help the poor and one person wants to just keep it all for themselves.

Rebecca and I have more in common than not. The results of our belief systems are more in common even though on the question of whether there’s a god we differ. I’m a fan of her kind of Christianity. I was that kind of Christian myself, so I think it’s a good way of holding your faith. If you’re going to believe in something that is relatively unbelievable, then you should at least channel it for good in the world instead of harm. Rebecca is that kind of a Christian, and I’m totally supportive of that. And she supports my exploration, my doubts, my inability to make the puzzle pieces fit together. I think that’s the key—to find those common values that you can hold almost as religious values in a way. For me it’s from the perspective of humanism and for her from the perspective of Christianity. She’s working with survivors of human trafficking, and I’m working with the homeless. Unless you asked us what we thought about the existence of God, you wouldn’t necessarily know.

**AToday:** What can you tell me about the film *Year Without God*?

**Bell:** The film is being made by two guys—Ryan Moore and Tim Banks. They’ve been following me around as much as possible this year, as much as I would let them. I’m not a producer or a film maker. I’m the subject. I basically told them that they could do it.

It’s been fun. It’s going to be good. I think people will like it. I think people who think it’s going to be a hit piece against Christianity shouldn’t worry. It’s not going to be “Now Ryan gets revenge on Adventism.” It’s not going to be like that. It’s really a matter of documenting what it’s like to be in this in-between place where you’re struggling with doubts and questions. It’s one story of how someone navigated that. It should be out in the fall of this year.

**AToday:** Will there be a book?

**Bell:** I’m working on a book though it’s a slower process than I wish it was. There are no hard and fast commitments. We’ll see a book eventually, but I don’t know anything more than that right now.

**AToday:** What is the Life After God project?

**Bell:** It’s still in its conceptual stage, but my interest there is in being a companion in whatever way with people who are in a similar place and creating kind of a cultural space and a social space for people who are in a crisis of faith and trying to sort through what they believe and how it impacts their lives.

I don’t have an agenda to tear people’s faith away, but I do think that when people start having these deep questions and doubts about what they’ve been told, they don’t have a place to go or people with whom to have that conversation, so I’d like to hold that space for people in whatever way. And “in whatever way” is what I’m still trying to figure out.

I think it will include gatherings, online forums, even up to the point of doing some personal coaching. Usually coaching has to do with career coaching or life skills coaching, but this would be more like worldview coaching—what do you believe about the world and how do you go about asking those questions.

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Chanting the “Thunderstorm Psalm”

Debbonnaire Kovacs, January 7, 2014  The psalm for this week’s Lectionary reading is Psalm 29, often called the “thunderstorm psalm.” I have created a video (about 3 minutes) of me singing this psalm by the fire with a thunderstorm overhead. Enjoy!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmQq-xjljdo