Sooner or later we all discover that the important moments in life are not the advertised ones, not the birthdays, the graduations, the weddings, not the great goals achieved. The real milestones are less prepossessing. They come to the door of memory unannounced, stray dogs that amble in, sniff around a bit and simply never leave. Our lives are measured by these.

-Susan B. Anthony

LISTENING TO THE WRONG VOICES

by Loren Seibold, Editor, Best Practices for Adventist Ministry

A few weeks ago I received a letter from a church family asking us to drop their membership because, they said, the Adventist church has reached such a point of apostasy that they could no longer be members. They specifically mentioned spiritual formation and contemplative prayer, and said we were the spiritual equivalent of the Witch of Endor.

When I visited them (they'd moved to a remote place in the country) I told them we would of course respect their wishes, but pointed out that in our congregation we hadn't ever brought up spiritual formation or contemplative prayer. That we were an ordinary small congregation, believing, teaching, and practicing our faith in pretty middle-of-the-road Adventist ways - and in most ways an unusually accepting and gracious congregation. People in the church, and pastors before me, had...
ministered to them and their family. They were leaving us for offenses that hadn’t happened among us.

They would have none of it, though. They were attached to their fears. They held us responsible for everything they believed existed somewhere in the denomination. In a world with real spiritual dangers, their enemy was the church. When I asked where they got their information, they cited a particular preacher connected with 3ABN, and several other independent ministries. These were their pastors, they told me, and they were sending their tithe and offerings to them.

I wish they hadn’t left. Their lives appeared chaotic, and they could have found stability and balance worshiping with a group of kind and dedicated church members, rather than in their own home through a television set.

(They also accused me of practicing neolinguistic programming - which made me laugh to myself, because although I’d heard the term, I wasn’t sure what it was until I looked it up later and learned it was regarded as a technique for mind control. I will only say in my defense that if I was using it on them, it didn’t work!)

How do we minister to those who consult their fears rather than the facts? Sadly, the people who encourage them in these ideas are still considered legitimate voices by some church leaders - still invited to camp meetings, the ministries still operating with ordained Adventist pastors on their boards. Meanwhile, dear people like those I visited are becoming increasingly disconnected from the real world.

How do we minister to people who are listening to the wrong voices?

Discuss this topic on our Facebook page.

CARE WHAT YOU SHARE!

Second of three articles about Facebook 
by Pablo Gaitan, Senior Pastor, South Gate church, Southern California Conference

Facebook has made the cyber life a social one. That is helpful but simultaneously dangerous. The internet was built to move information around. Nevertheless Mark, genially, created Facebook with the purpose of transmitting human relationships. Facebook, by nature, moves us to share our lives with our “friends.” We build friendships, upgrade them or downgrade them through it. We express our feelings, expose our opinions, and expand our lives from the “real” world to the digital one.

There are two dangers in the share-ability genius of Facebook. First, your almost 1,000 friends (the FB average is around 500) are way more than the few real friends you actually have. (In a 2004 study, the average American had only 2 close confidants, and 1 in 4 said they had none). In Facebook, we live inside of a network of people, (from the past and present, from a close distance and far away), who, after you click the ‘share’ button, become part of your story. Like it or not, your comments, updates, pics, locations update, timeline and ‘likes’ all help people form an opinion and a description about you. Pastors are public figures, and opinions about their character are generated from all sources, one of which is now Facebook.

Second, Facebook’s share-ability has nudged us to the point where we are “hemorrhaging data”, sharing excessively with the world. Not all of what happens to you has a shareable nature. There are compelling reasons to want to prevent some information from being shared. It could actually happen that instead of being forced to share, we will not stop ourselves from sharing - that we, willingly and compulsively, violate our own privacy.

Once we were taught “Sharing is caring”. Here, in my humble opinion, I believe we need to “Care what we share”.

Discuss this topic on our Facebook page.

READING FOR PASTORS

“Six things mom taught me about church.” OK, I know it’s unpopular, but I still like the first one: “Dress up!”

From Thom Rainer of Lifeway: Warning signs of an inwardly-focused church. Quote: “Prolonged minutia meetings. Most of the meetings deal with the most inconsequential items, while the Great Commission and Great Commandment are rarely the topics of discussion.”
**Beautiful testimony on returning to church despite doubts.** Quote: “My doubt belonged in church. People who know my story ask what I would have changed about my spiritual journey. Nothing. I had to leave the church to find the church. And when I came back, the return wasn’t clean or conclusive. Since then, I’ve come to believe that my doubts belong inside the space of the sanctuary. My questions belong on the altar as my only offering to God.”

**You’ve got both Republicans and Democrats in your congregation.** How do you minister across the partisan divide? Quote: “In 2001, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported that 35 percent of white evangelicals ages 18 to 29 self-identified as Republican. Six years later, in 2007, only 40 percent did. Interestingly, the defected did not simply migrate to the Democratic Party. Most of them now consider themselves ‘independent’ or ‘unaffiliated.’”

From Monte Sahlin, “Will Social Networking Change Religion the Way Gutenberg Did?”

**Clergy killers:** Toxic congregations take a big toll on pastors’ mental health. Quote: “Ministers who were forced out of their jobs because of congregational conflict were more likely to experience burnout, depression, lower self-esteem and more physical health problems, the online study found. In addition, more than four in 10 ministers forced out of their jobs reported seriously considering leaving the ministry.”

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**TO THE POINT: GRADUATION**

A graduation ceremony is an event where the commencement speaker tells thousands of students dressed in identical caps and gowns that “individuality” is the key to success. – Robert Orben

Your families are extremely proud of you. You can’t imagine the sense of relief they are experiencing. This would be a most opportune time to ask for money. – Gary Bolding

All that stands between the graduate and the top of the ladder is the ladder. – Author Unknown

It takes most men five years to recover from a college education, and to learn that poetry is as vital to thinking as knowledge. – Brooks Atkinson, *Once Around the Sun*, 1951

Commencement speeches were invented largely in the belief that outgoing college students should never be released into the world until they have been properly sedated. – Garry Trudeau

[It] is clear the future holds great opportunities. It also holds pitfalls. The trick will be to avoid the pitfalls, seize the opportunities, and get back home by six o’clock. – Woody Allen, “My Speech to the Graduates,” *Side Effects*, 1980

It is indeed ironic that we spend our school days yearning to graduate and our remaining days waxing nostalgic about our school days. – Isabel Waxman

What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us. – Henry S. Haskins, *Meditations in Wall Street*, 1940, commonly misattributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson

You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself in any direction you choose.
You’re on your own.
And you know what you know.
You are the guy who’ll decide where to go.
– Dr. Seuss

Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you’ll land among the stars. – Les Brown

Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value. – Albert Einstein

Of course there’s a lot of knowledge in universities: the freshmen bring a little in; the seniors don’t take much away, so knowledge sort of accumulates. – A. Lawrence Lowell

Things turn out best for the people who make the best out of the way things turn out. – Art Linkletter

A professor is someone who talks in someone else’s sleep. – W. H. Auden

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**IDEAS, EVENTS, RESOURCES, ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The New PlusLine Website: Now you can visit just one site to find the resources and information you need for your ministry. PlusLine has moved under the AdventSource website umbrella, providing you with a true one-stop destination for ministry. The information you are used to finding on PlusLine is now available on AdventSource's website and can accessed at [www.plusline.org](http://www.plusline.org) or by going to [www.adventsource.org](http://www.adventsource.org) and clicking on the...
PlusLine tab. Event registration has also moved to the AdventSource website.

From Chip Dizard: Pastor's Digital Toolkit - How to use technology with your sermons, Monday, May 21, 2012, 4:00 PM - 5:00 PM Eastern Time. Go here to register and receive your login instructions. The Pastor's Digital Toolkit Webinar series is hosted by Chip Dizard of Web Video Chefs.com. In this free webinar I will cover:

1. What are the best software choices for attention grabbing graphics/presentations.
2. Why most Pastors don't use Powerpoint or Keynote correctly.
3. How to use video and motion graphics in your sermons.
4. How to create your own graphical presentations on a PC or Mac.
5. Answer your questions about technology use in sermons and evangelistic series.

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IMPLICATIONS OF AGING NAD PASTORS

Courtesy of Ansel Oliver, Adventist News Network. A recent review of pastoral demographics in the United States reveals that nearly 50 percent of Seventh-day Adventist ministers will reach retirement age within 10 years, a discovery that is prompting ministry officials to examine potential scenarios to address the coming dilemma. Namely, will the denomination hire a new crop to replace retiring ministers, or will it urge much of its experienced, aging workforce to continue working longer than previously planned? Each option has its own advantages, and church leaders say they’re exploring a mix of both possible solutions. Read entire article and discuss on facebook.

WOMEN CLERGY AFFIRMED BY NAD

Norma Osborn and Duane Schoonard were recognized for their outstanding contributions to ministry in the North American Division. Schoonard served as the first female associate secretary of NAD Ministerial and Osborn for her 25 years of unglamorous yet essential service as an associate pastor. The recognition occurred at the 2012 Women Clergy Conference held April 23-26. “I’ve been to four of these conferences so far but this was the first time that someone from the NAD came,” exclaimed Ann Roda-Hernandez, pastor for families at New Hope Seventh-day Adventist Church in Fulton, Maryland. “It was absolutely amazing that the NAD leadership was there - Dan Jackson, the Ministerial Department team and some Union presidents. It was the greatest show of affirmation that I’ve ever seen from our church! It meant a lot to the women clergy and it was a positive and inspiring experience for us who have experienced opposition to our calling.”

Also at the conference were several presentations on the unique contribution that women clergy continue to make in the NAD. Many of the presentations will soon be available for viewing on the NAD Ministerial Website.
Spam
Not spam
Forget previous vote
I’m a preacher’s kid, so growing up, I sat on a church pew every time the doors were open (and they were hard wooden things back then.) Mom was pretty strict about attending church, and I’ve sat through about a million worship services, weddings, funerals, vacation Bible schools, Sunday school classes, revivals, youth rallies, and more. Along the way, my mom had some pretty tough rules that have mostly fallen out of fashion since those days. But after a few decades, I’m wondering if they weren’t so bad after all. Let me know if you think my mom was nuts or maybe on to something:

1. **Dress Up**

My mom felt that church was about honoring God, and looking right was a big part of that honor. I had a whole collection of clip-on ties, and she made sure I was dressed up before I left the house. Today, even pastors preach in jeans and t-shirts, and the truth is, I love being casual. But attorneys and other professions have learned that how you dress impacts your attitude and perception.

As my mom said, it shouldn’t be about pride, it should be about honor. Looking around the congregation these days, I just wonder if we could use an occasional dose of my mom’s advice.

2. **Pay Attention**

I got slapped a lot in church for not paying attention. Even as kids, my mom wouldn’t let us lay down on the church pew, draw in coloring books, or scribble on paper. We had to pay attention – which, if you know how easily distracted I am, was like a personal nightmare. But looking back, it taught me discipline and a remarkable amount of Bible teaching.

3. **Send the Babies to the Nursery**

Back in those days, we didn’t have “children’s church.” All we had was a nursery for the babies, and my mom thought they should go. To her, there was nothing more rude than parents allowing a screaming baby to interrupt the worship of the congregation. She knew babies weren’t getting anything out of the sermon, so get them out where they could have a little fun! Please, leave us to worship in peace and quiet. I thought about my mom last Sunday, sitting behind a young couple with a screaming baby who just sat there, and sat there, and sat there. (You know the kind of parents that can’t POSSIBLY leave their children with anyone else?) What did the pastor preach about? I can’t remember….

4. **If You Show Up Late, Sit in the Back**

Mom thought church wasn’t the same as a movie, concert, or classroom. It was holy, and we needed to respect that. Although 99% of the time, our family sat on the front row, if we showed up late for any reason, we sat in the back. She would never distract anyone from my dad’s message by walking down the aisle after the service had started. By the way – I hope the lady who came in last week during our time of quiet reflection and walked to the front row apparently wearing tap shoes is reading this…. 
5. Bring Your Bible

My mom’s motto was “Buy a Bible, read it, and underline it.” She never understood how people could come to church without their Bible. To her, it was like showing up at a baseball game without a bat. I’ve tried the “pew Bible” and Bible apps on my iPad, but for me, I can't get my mom’s rule out of my head, so I bring the real thing – marked up and all.

6. Sunday School Matters

Remarkably few churches have Sunday school programs anymore, and I’m often surprised at the number of church members who think a weekly sermon is enough. Mom felt that we needed to go deeper, and Sunday school was that place. Obviously, that was before many churches started to encourage small groups – although most small groups I’ve attended are more about “reflection,” “what’s new in my life,” and “sharing.” My mom would probably puke.

At the time, I thought I’d been switched at birth, and my mom was an evil witch, but now, I’m starting to see she might have been pretty smart.

Let me know what you think. Crazy? Smart? Or something in-between?
Any healthy church must have some level of inward focus. Those in the church should be discipled. Hurting members need genuine concern and ministry. Healthy fellowship among the members is a good sign for a congregation.

But churches can lose their outward focus and become preoccupied with the perceived needs and desires of the members. The dollars spent and the time expended can quickly become focused on the demands of those inside the congregation. When that takes place the church has become inwardly obsessed. It is no longer a Great Commission congregation.

In my research of churches and consultation with churches, I have kept a checklist of potential signs that a church might be moving toward inward obsession. No church is perfect; indeed most churches will demonstrate one or two of these signs for a season. But the real danger takes place when a church begins to manifest three or more of these warning signs for an extended period of months and even years.

8. **Anger and hostility.** Members are consistently angry. They regularly express hostility...
toward the church staff and other members.

10. **Evangelistic apathy.** Very few members share their faith on a regular basis. More are concerned about their own needs rather than the greatest eternal needs of the world and community in which they live.

My list is not exhaustive. You may have some items you could add. Have you ever been a part of an inwardly obsessed church? What signs were evident that led you to know the church was inwardly obsessed? Do you affirm some of the items on my list?
My Faith: Returning to church, despite my doubts

Editor's note: Andrea Palpant Dilley is the author of “Faith and Other Flat Tires.”

By Andrea Palpant Dilley, Special to CNN

During my junior year in college, I took a butter knife from my mother’s kitchen and scraped the Christian fish decal off the back bumper of the Plymouth hatchback I’d inherited from my
older brother. Stripping off that sticker foreshadowed the day, a few years later, that I would walk out of church.

The reasons for my discontent were complicated. By most standards, I had a healthy childhood. I grew up the daughter of Quaker missionaries in a rural Kenyan community that laid the foundation for my faith. I spent the rest of my childhood in the Pacific Northwest, raised in a stable Presbyterian church that gave me hymns and mission trips and potluck dinners.

I was surrounded by smart, conscientious Christians, the kind of people who read 19th century Russian novels and took meatloaf to firefighters when much of eastern Washington state went up in flames in the fall of 1991.

When I started into my skeptic phase, my Christian community gave me space to struggle. They listened to my doubts about faith. They took my questions seriously.

And yet when I turned 23 I left the church.

Listening to a sermon at my older brother’s church one Sunday, I stood up, leaned over to my father and said, “This is bulls**t.” I made my way to the end of the pew and marched out of the sanctuary. The sermon didn’t sit right with me. The pastor was preaching about Psalm 91, saying in so many words that a person just needed to pray and have faith in order to be protected from suffering.

More than just that sermon, I was sick of church. I was sick, too, of all the spiritual questions plaguing me: Why does the church seem so culturally insulated and dysfunctional? Why does God seem distant and uninvolved? And most of all, why does God allow suffering?

These questions didn’t come out of nowhere. I’d spent time in high school volunteering in refugee camps in Kenya and in college working with families on welfare in central Washington. I saw hungry babies. I walked into homes that were piled with garbage and dirty laundry.

In an orphanage in the slums of Nairobi, I held AIDS babies and worked with disabled kids who’d been left at the front gates of the orphanage by parents who couldn’t afford to feed them. I saw things that I couldn’t make sense of as a Christian.

Walking out of church was a way of saying “To hell with it; I’m done.”

For two years, I skipped church. My Bible gathered dust on the shelf. The local bars became my temples. I indulged in the cliché rebellions of a Christian girl, smoking cigarettes and drinking hard alcohol. I got involved with men twice my age without thinking twice about it. I wanted a break from being “good.”

And then, strangely, I woke up one morning at age 25, climbed into my car, and drove downtown to attend a 10 a.m. church service. I won’t relate here the whole story of how I came back to the church. But if I had to follow the standard testimonial narrative for Christians, the script for my life story would go something like this:
Step 1: Grow up in a Christian church.

Step 2: Go off to college away from said church.

Step 3: Be exposed to the enticements of secular life.

Step 4: Try drugs and cigarettes and Pearl Jam.

Step 5: Leave the church because of aforementioned enticements.

Step 6: Experience epiphany; realize vapidness of secular enticements.

Step 7: Return to church with penitent heart.

Step 8: Reestablish faith, discover good living.

In reality, I left the church more because of my own internal discontent than the lure of so-called secular life. When I came back, I still carried that same discontent. I was confused, and still bothered by questions and doubts. I stayed in the back row and didn’t sing or pray. I wasn’t really sure I wanted to be there.

And yet I sat there, Sunday after Sunday, listening to the pastor and the organ pipes and trying to figure out what was going on in my dark, conflicted heart.

Although I never experienced that dramatic reconversion moment, I did come to peace with two slow-growing realizations.

First: My doubt belonged in church.

People who know my story ask what I would have changed about my spiritual journey. Nothing. I had to leave the church to find the church. And when I came back, the return wasn’t clean or conclusive. Since then, I’ve come to believe that my doubts belong inside the space of the sanctuary. My questions belong on the altar as my only offering to God.

With all its faults, I still associate the church with the pursuit of truth and justice, with community and shared humanity. It’s a place to ask the unanswerable questions and a place to be on sojourn. No other institution has given me what the church has: a space to search for God.

Second: My doubt is actually part of my faith.

In Mark 9:24, a man says to Jesus, “I believe, help my unbelief.” The Catholic writer Flannery O’Connor called this the foundation prayer of faith. I pray that prayer often and believe that God honors my honesty.

I also believe God honors my longing. The writer and theologian Frederick Buechner said “Faith is homesickness.” C.S. Lewis called it “Sehnsucht,” a longing for a far-off country. I feel that
sense of unshakable yearning. It comes from the deepest part of my heart, a spiritual desire that’s strangely, mysteriously connected to my doubt.

Sitting in church every Sunday, my doubt is my desire – to touch the untouchable, to possess the presence of God.

*The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Andrea Palpant Dilley.*

[The Editors - CNN Belief Blog](https://www.cnn.com/blogs/belief)

How Christian partisanship can become a hurdle to our efforts to spread the gospel.

From A Faith of Our Own: Following Jesus Beyond the Culture Wars
(an excerpt from Chapter 2)

Worse than being used by politicians, Christians diminish God by aligning Him with partisan preferences. Baptizing complex party platforms with religious vernacular makes our position synonymous with God’s position. A simple legislative proposal, for instance, can be framed in such a way that a “true Christian” could not oppose it. Whether intended or not, dragging partisan politics into the sanctuary scribbles “thus saith the Lord” across opinions. Once the association is made, those on the other side of the aisle are not merely mistaken; they are apostate.

This language creates an unbiblical political litmus test for spiritual fidelity. Being a faithful Christian means voting a certain way or holding to certain political viewpoints. If one of the faithful falls out of line on the political end, his or her faith is called into question. Some Christians speak as if denying certain policies is the equivalent of denying Christ. This also means that those who aren’t of a particular partisan pedigree don’t feel welcome in churches where Christians allow such associations. It communicates that Christianity “isn’t for them.” So Christian partisanship can actually become a hurdle to our efforts to share and spread the gospel.

Using politics as a measure of spiritual fidelity only strengthens the constituency and increases our worth as a voting bloc as many today find great value in faith’s ability to moralize arguments and win debates. This positive feedback mechanism keeps partisan faith humming along, but it can become a vortex in which a well-meaning believer can get lost.

Partisan thinking can also be irrational thinking. In the late 1980s, a majority of Democrats were convinced that inflation had risen under President Reagan, but in fact, it had fallen substantially. In 1996, most Republicans claimed that the deficit had increased under President Clinton, but in fact, it had shrunk steadily. Late in the Bush presidency, twice as many Republicans as Democrats believed the economy was performing well. As one plunges deeper into the
culture wars, one loses a sense of reality and embraces a partisan
perception.

When people hear Christians speaking foolishly about political
realities, should we not expect them to tune us out when we speak
about the gospel? If they see the irrationality of Christian
partisanship, how can they expect anyone to believe other incredible
claims about God and Jesus?

Ross Douthat of The New York Times wrote, “Is there anything good
to be said about the partisan mindset? On an individual level, no. It
corrupts the intellect and poisons the wells of human sympathy.
Honor belongs to the people who resist partisanship’s pull, instead of
rowing with it.”

While politicians don’t risk much in the conflation of faith and party,
the faithful place their integrity on the line. Christians like myself can’t help wondering if this is Jesus’ desire for His Body in
the twenty-first century. Is the church to be reduced to a voting bloc, a constituency to be bought and sold? Are Christians
to be seen as politicians in clerical collars? Such is the path of partisanship if Christians allow themselves to be led down it.

• • •

Today’s faithful are growing intolerant of the sort of blatant partisanship that has marked the last several decades of
Christian political engagement. I began sensing a change in 2007. I had been on assignment with several news outlets
following Christian political engagement among those on the left and the right. I’d spoken with hundreds of Christians
—pastors and activists, business leaders and teachers, college students and social entrepreneurs—whose words informed
dozens of articles. What I saw and heard struck me.

Their stories were a lot like mine. Maybe they weren’t raised in a staunchly conservative Christian household, but they’d
grown up believing that those on the other side of the political aisle—even the Christian ones—were their enemies. They
thought faithful Jesus-followers needed to jump feetfirst into the culture wars if they wanted to build the kingdom in a
country that was slipping into moral decline. Having reflected further, their thinking shifted.

A few months prior to Hillary Clinton’s conceding the Democratic presidential nomination to Barack Obama in June 2008,
I’d penned a column for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution titled, “WWJD? vote for Obama, More and More Young
Evangelicals Say.” My thesis: this group of Christians voted Republican in high numbers, but their young people had grown
disenchanted with the culture wars and were drawn to the language of “change” and “hope” flowing from the Obama
campaign. If current trends persisted, they might cross party lines for the first time in their lives.

The column was based on two thoughts. I noticed a growing partisan schism among Christians through conversations with
friends and interviewees, and I’d seen several polls that substantiated this sentiment. One such poll conducted by Relevant
magazine—a publication influential among young Christians—asked, “Who would Jesus vote for?” The majority of
respondents were self-described conservatives, and yet their top response was “Barack Obama.”

After the article was published, many expressed disbelief, if not horror, that people who called themselves “Christian” could
pull the Obama lever. They were even more incensed that I would give this group a voice in a major publication and said I’d
be hearing from them come November when I was proved wrong. The election came and went, and some exit polls
indicated a notable shift among young Christians.
I didn’t hear from my detractors after the election, but they didn’t seem to understand that this was not about Barack Obama or rising liberalism among young evangelical Christians. Rather, it pointed to a larger narrative about a whole generation of Christ-followers who believe the culture-war model is broken and want to liberate their faith from its partisan captivity. As they find and live out a faith of their own, they are no longer restricted to a single political party.

In 2001, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported that 55 percent of white evangelicals ages 18 to 29 self-identified as Republican. Six years later, in 2007, only 40 percent did. Interestingly, the defected did not simply migrate to the Democratic Party. Most of them now consider themselves “independent” or “unaffiliated.”

As pastor and bestselling author Tim Keller says, today’s Christians may be “the vanguard of some major new religious, social, and political arrangements that could make the older form of culture wars obsolete.” He says, “After they wrestle with doubts and objections to Christianity many come out on the other side with an orthodox faith that doesn’t fit the current categories of liberal Democrat or conservative Republican.”

When I lived in North Carolina, Elizabeth Dole was running for reelection to the United States Senate as a Republican. Democrat Kay Hagan opposed Dole. And though she was likeable, Hagan was still a Democrat. In a conservative state like North Carolina, party means far more than likeability. I assumed Senator Dole was a shoo-in.

Then Elizabeth Dole ran her infamous “godless ad.” The 30-second commercial attempted to set up an association between Hagan and an atheist political action group that sponsored a fundraiser where she spoke, but the ad’s claims went far beyond association.

“Godless Americans and Kay Hagan. She hid from cameras. Took godless money,” the commercial’s narrator said. “What does Kay Hagan promise in return?”

A female voice posing as Hagan answers the narrator’s question: “There is no God.”

Slipping in the polls, Dole decided to use the old tactic of insinuating that the Republican candidate loves Jesus and the Democratic candidate is a godless secularist who wants to chase God out of the public square. Dole's people didn’t know that this worn-out tactic no longer resonated with conservatives or with Christians.

As it turned out, Democratic Hagan was an elder at First Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, where she taught Sunday School each week and was involved in youth mission trips. Liberal she might have been, but godless she was not.

North Carolinians were appalled, and many decided to stay away from polling centers on Election Day, even numbers of staunch Republicans. With one voice, the voters of this highly Christian and conservative state repudiated the religious and political game Dole was playing. Twenty years ago, those insinuations might have worked, but not now.

Dole plummeted in the polls, North Carolinians sent her packing, and the ordeal illustrates that change is afoot.

Many are growing so ill with the blurring of faith and partisan politics that they’re abandoning the public square altogether. I can understand such exasperation, but I stress caution. Much good can be accomplished if Christians can learn to engage the political arena in a less partisan way.

Christians must be faithful not just within our churches, but throughout all spheres of life. Good Christians are good citizens, and as such, they should establish a faithful presence in the public square as in media, business, science,
education, and the arts. The question isn't, "Should Christians be involved in politics?" but rather, "How should Christians engage politics?"

WE WANT TO HEAR YOUR STORY—not just about Christian engagement in politics, but about your efforts to share the gospel beyond the political divide. What's working for you? Share your comments below.

The creative director at Cross Pointe Church in Duluth, Ga., Jonathan Merritt is a prominent faith and culture writer who has contributed hundreds of articles to multiple publications, including USA Today, The Christian Science Monitor, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and Outreach magazine. He is the author of Green Like God: Unlocking the Divine Plan for Our Planet and A Faith of Our Own: Following Jesus Beyond the Culture Wars.

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To order from Amazon.com: A Faith of Our Own: Following Jesus Beyond the Culture Wars

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Will Social Networking Change Religion the Way Gutenberg Did?

It is well known that Gutenberg's invention of printing technology greatly encouraged, if not made possible, the Protestant Reformation with its emphasis on each individual reading the Scripture and finding the truth about God for themselves. It shifted the focus of the Christian religion from social conversions in which a clan leader or a price or an emperor decided for groups, large and small, if they would follow Jesus or not, to individual salvation. It gave birth to what may well be some unintended consequences, such as today's extreme forms of individualism.

What if a new communication technology becomes more dominant than the printed page? How will that change Christianity and other religions? The Internet, web sites, Email, Facebook, Twitter and texting are already beginning to move into the church. Two or three or more generations from now, how will this technology have changed the nature of faith itself?

Leonard Sweet has written more about the impact of contemporary social trends on Christianity than just about any other author around and his brand-new book is Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival. It is a must read, in my opinion.

Sweet points out that Christ was "a master Storyteller ... a crafter of parables for the artists of everyday." He uses the parable of the mustard seed to explain the situation that is about to begin. He points out that the mustard plant was an invasive plant like dandelions in your lawn. "The subversive mustard weed is nearly impossible to get rid of. Once it takes root, it takes over and invites every insect, pest, and rodent to live within its leaves. It spreads quickly and can grow and thrive almost anywhere." (page 188)

He asks, "What does infectious faith look like? It erupts in amazing beauty and resilient brilliance. It pricks with an occasional thorny thistle. It incites passion, spreads love, breeds kindness, generates compassion. While it infests the mind and heart with Jesus, it revives the body with the Holy Spirit. ... The Body of Christ." (page 189)

"Jesus was a master of stories and ... a healer of the body ... a holistic blend of mind/heart, soul, and physical body ... [a] living organism." What will happen when a generation of young people invest the Jesus way of life with house churches, Skype Bible studies, Second Life enterprises, Facebook pages, and Twitter streams of prayer? What will be the common expressions of faith among my great-grandchildren? What is your speculation? Please share ... and read this book.

March 20, 2012 in Books | Permalink | Comments (4)
Will this conflict lead to a culture war between the sub-culture of traditional, academic research and analysis on the one hand and the culture of new technology on the other? Or, will someone create technology that effectively makes it impossible for E-publishers to lock out non-toll-payers?

An in-depth analysis was published in this morning’s edition of The Washington Post here.

January 15, 2012 in Trends | Permalink | Comments (2)

**American Religious Profile: New Data**

A new Gallup Poll has been released asking Americans about their religion. Remember, this is not based on official membership lists, but this is the self-identification of a random sample of adults across the country.

A third of American adults identify themselves as Protestant or with some Protestant denomination. One in four (24 percent) identify themselves as Catholic. Two percent identify themselves as Jewish and one-half of one percent as Muslim. A total of 17 percent said that they identify with no religion or simply refused to answer the question (15 percent and two percent). The others identified with many small religions generally considered not Christian.

A 57 percent majority clearly sees themselves as Christians, but the United States continues to edge closer to a time when that majority will disappear. It is a melting icecube. Despite the claims of some propagandists, the U.S. was never a Christian nation, always valuing religious liberty and pluralism over the established faiths of Europe. But in the 20th Century it did come into a time when the majority of Americans identified with one Christian denomination or another. How long will that consensus last?

December 30, 2011 in Religion | Permalink | Comments (2)

**American Catholics Hear a New Liturgy Today**

This weekend the revised liturgy is being introduced in Roman Catholic parishes across the English-speaking world. It is the first time that the English version of the mass has been revised since it was introduced after Vatican Council II. One of the major changes in Catholic religion made at that council in the 1960s was conducting worship in the language of the lay people. Incidentally, this was a very old issue at the time which got its start during the Protestant Reformation.

Many Catholics in America and Europe believe that this revised English liturgy simply re-introduces ideas and language from the old Latin liturgy; that it is a triumph for conservative Catholics who would like to erase the changes resulting from Vatican II. Bishop Donald Trautman, former chairman of the U.S. bishops’ committee on liturgy was quoted in USA Today earlier this week labeling the new liturgy "elitist" and incomprehensible to the average Catholic. He sees its introduction as prelude to a "pastoral disaster."

Much of the change in the liturgy involves the insertion of English translations of the old, Latin mass. There is a line-by-line comparison available on line if you want to see all of the details, most of which is obscure to anyone not trained in theology and church history. It includes more direct statements of a number of ideas that were never officially removed from Catholic theology, but have been largely ignored by pastors and people in recent decades.

This event demonstrates how difficult it is for religious institutions to reform themselves. Tradition has a power all its own. The center of gravity seems to always shift away from the "new thing" that the Holy Spirit may be calling God's people to and back to the old paths. The Catholic Church is not the only religion that suffers from this disability.

November 26, 2011 in Religion | Permalink | Comments (5)

**A Season of Apocalyptic**

It seems that this is a season of apocalyptic themes. Harold Camping, the founder of the Family Radio Network of Christian radio stations, finally gave up after repeated announcements of dates on which he was sure from his careful study of the Bible that Jesus was returning. The latest was in October. A cult in Peru was equally certain that Jesus would
return on October 15. There is growing speculation about the fact that the last year in the Aztec "long calendar" is thought to be 2012 by many scholars although they are uncertain as to what that means. Now a new movie is out entitled \textit{Melancholia} which one reviewer calls "a zombie apocalypse film."

Why so much focus on apocalyptic? It reaches way beyond the six percent of the population that usually thinks about this topic; the small number of Christians who have great interest in speculation about the end of time despite the fact that in Matthew 24-25, Jesus makes it clear that He does not approve of such speculation. He simply declares that "no one knows," that even as Messiah, He did not know when the second coming is scheduled. The most authentic Christian teaching on this topic is to live each day as it is the day; to be constantly prepared for the end of time no matter how short or long the time.

Is all of this attention to the apocalyptic simply the result of the economy? After all, it is for millions of families the end of their world as they've known it. The forces of good and evil are involved in a great, climactic struggle. It appears that before they are done there is a good chance that the politicians will destroy the American dream, and that is the end of the world for the large numbers who believe in that dream more than they believe in God. Or, are incapable of differentiating the two. Or, is there something else going on here? What do you think?

November 14, 2011 | Permalink | Comments (1)

\textbf{The Next Generation Begins}

One of the most common questions that I am asked; "When does the generation begin that follows the Millennial Generation?" Some demographers have placed the end of the Millennial generation (today's teens and young adults) as early as 1994. Others suggest somewhere in the middle of the last decade. I think we now have concrete data to support a clearer answer.

Demographers usually place the markers for the beginning and end of generations based on demographic events, not cultural or political events. After all, this is demography, not sociology or political science. The Pew Research Center released a new study yesterday that provides the best candidate I have seen for a demographic event that can serve as a marker between the Millennial generation and the generations following it.

It is possible that this next generation will become known as the Great Recession Generation. Of course, it is too soon to know what label will stick. That will only become known over the next 20 or 30 years. The year 2007 had a record high number of births in America, more than 4.3 million. The next year the birth rate started a downward trend that continues. Provisional data for last year indicates it is down to a little over 4 million.

The simple answer as to why is that mothers and fathers have responded to the bad economy by having fewer babies. But, that may be too simple and explanation. An alternate theory is that the economy is down, in part, because Americans have lost the will to take risks and responsibility for communal relationships (family and civic) and the economic downturn as well as the dropping birth rate are both symptoms of something deeper.

My instinct is that we have arrived at the marker between generations and this new generation (currently three years of age and under) will most likely end being called the Recession Generation, at least initially. I confess my thoughts are much influenced by the multiple reports from economists of all stripes which predict that the Great Recession will last a decade or longer. If the economy somehow pulls out of the current depressed mode in the next two or three years, then the label won't stick. A generation lasts more than a decade and future events could change perceptions.

You can download the full report from the Pew Research Center here. I am interested in hearing other conclusions.

October 13, 2011 in Trends | Permalink | Comments (1)

\textbf{One Thing You Can Do About Slavery}

\textit{Prism}, the journal published by the Sider Center, stated recently that the total number of people in the world who are
current in slavery (not using the word as another way of describing political oppression) is larger than it ever has been in human history. This includes people in sexual slavery as well as labor slavery. These situations are probably distant from most of my readers, but there is one thing you can do about this evil, and this is not about fund raising.

Join youth groups, congregations and individuals around the world this weekend in fasting and prayer for those who are enslaved. A graduate student of mine in Canada started this concept last year thinking that a few church youth groups she is connected with would join in, and found that through social networking it exploded around the world. So this is the Second Annual Weekend of Fasting and Prayer to End Human Trafficking. Pick a time frame that works for you starting on or after 12 a.m. September 23.

For more information use this link. No matter where you are or what you are doing this weekend, you can do something for "the least of these" with whom Christ identifies fully.

September 19, 2011 in Events | Permalink | Comments (2)

Why Do They Hate Us?

Memories of what happened ten years ago bring me back to the haunting question of the time. It still remains largely a mystery. Why do some people have such hate for those who believe differently that they think God has authorized them to kill?

This is not a Muslim problem, despite the slander believed by some. Christian fundamentalists bombed the Federal courthouse in Oklahoma City before Muslim fundamentalists flew planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In fact, it seems most religions have a very small percentage of people who are insanely, violently zealous. There are Christians willing to kill people they disagree with over abortion despite the fact that Jesus clearly taught us to "turn the other cheek" and not resist evil with evil.

Ultimately this kind of hate does not come from God. It is not about piety or devotion in any religion. It is rooted in evil. It is a marker of all the God is against. There is a word for this in all religions; sin. Anyone who thinks they can rid the world of sin by resorting to violence or injustice is overcome by the very thing they are supposedly fighting against. It is like the old folk tale of the tar baby. The more you hit it, the more you are stuck in it.

The only thing that is victorious over sin is divine love. God chooses to struggle against sin by extending mercy, forgiveness and grace because He is wise enough to know there is no other way to actually overcome sin. Hate and terrorism ends when I decide to quit hating those with whom I disagree on the most profound topics, the most cherished truths.

Why do they hate us? Because we hate them. The only thing that disconnects this vicious cycle is when we choose to join God's side and love the hater. That takes far more courage, a far more fearless moral stand than anything else. The Son of God gave His life to demonstrate this reality.

September 11, 2011 in Spirituality | Permalink | Comments (4)

Who is Lying about Social Security?

Governor Rick Perry has said that Social Security is a Ponzi scheme and a "monstrous lie." Perhaps this is just political BS and should be ignored by anyone serious about religion and moral values. For one thing, it is unclear to me precisely what he thinks the "lie" is; what is untrue about the idea that future generations will have the same benefits that the law calls for and are provided to senior citizens today?

It is true that the Baby Boom generation, the front edge of which is turning 65 this year, will create a problem because there will be for a period of time a smaller population paying taxes and a larger population getting benefits. That problem has been examined in tens of thousands of pages of careful studies and it can be fixed with a small increase in taxes, an average of less than $200 per year per taxpayer. It will leave the United States still with the lowest taxes of any
industrialized country.

The interesting thing is that the right-wing politicians who have made speeches similar to Governor Perry’s all say that they do not intend to change any of the benefits for the people (like me) who will become eligible for Social Security in the next decade (or longer, depending on the specific speech). What that means is that they are not proposing to fix the "bubble" described above. They are talking about changes that have to do with the situation decades down the line when the larger Millennial generation will be the taxpayers and the smaller Gen X will be those going onto Social Security. Why use the contemporary problem to argue for changes that will not come into effect until the problem is passed?

One possibility is that this entire effort is fundamentally dishonest. The real purpose of rhetoric against Social Security is to attack a plan that some politicians do not like because of the basic concept itself not because there are any real economic problems associated with it. Another clue that this might be going on is the total lack of any description of an alternative. What does Governor Perry propose to replace Social Security with? A previous Texas governor who became president proposed to modify Social Security by allowing individuals to put money into a type of Individual Retirement Account (IRA) instead of paying taxes into the Social Security program. This was dropped after analysts across the political spectrum agreed that it did not solve any real problems; it did not improve anything. It only gave a relatively small percentage of the population with very high incomes a more lucrative retirement.

Frankly, I agree that individuals with sufficiently high incomes ought to be allowed to put money into an IRA instead of the Social Security fund. And Social Security benefits ought to be paid only to people who have incomes below a reasonable ceiling. But, if you look at the numbers you will see that this is simply a trade-out. It does not change any of the major facts in the situation.

What is the moral meaning of this issue? Is there anything about this item that is not simply politics? I believe so. It seems to me that when politicians like Governor Perry say that Social Security is a Ponzi scheme and a lie, they are lying. They are engaged in a propaganda technique that dates back nearly a century called "the big lie." (Look it up in your high school civics textbook.) It is simply this, if you assert something loud enough, often enough and with sufficient conviction, then it will appear to be true even if it is totally lacking in factuality.

In the early 1970s there was an effort to get senior citizens signed up for Social Security and Medicare. I worked in that effort and talked to thousands of seniors, going door to door in inner city neighborhoods. I have seen the kind of poverty and suffering that existed before the Social Security and Medicare programs became as entrenched in American society as they are today. I do not want to go back to that kind of America. I do not know why anyone would want to go back to that kind of America.

I share Governor Perry’s biblical worldview which makes him even more morally culpable in my opinion. There is an objective reality which is outside the control of politicians or wishful thinkers or opinionated people of any kind (including myself). If we have no social insurance plan in America, people will suffer. Telling young people that there will be nothing for them, therefore they should vote to close down the program is truly a monstrous lie. It is manipulating them into creating the lack of benefits in the future. Can a politician convince you to shoot yourself in the foot? Is it moral for him to try just so he can get himself elected?

September 09, 2011 in Social Justice | Permalink | Comments (10)

We Are At a Demographic Tipping Point

For some time now demographers have predicted that America will eventually become a country that no longer has a white majority. The latest census data released last week shows that for newborn babies we are already at that point. When the count was taken more than a year ago, 49.8 percent of infants in their first year of life were not white, and with the natural progression of births over the last year it is certain that the number has pushed past the 50 percent marker.

Each year, as the babies of 2010 become toddlers, then preschoolers, elementary school children, teens and finally young adults, this wave will move across our demographic landscape. Eventually it will reach 50 percent of the entire population.
We now have a generation gap that is ethnic in nature.

I am familiar with generation gaps. I am from the first wave of Baby Boomers and I grew up watching a cultural generation gap ripple through our society. Some of my contemporaries might say that I helped cause the wave and did not just surf it. Now my grandson is riding a new wave.

William Frey, a leading demographer at the Brookings Institution, says that this new demographic wave "my exacerbate existing cultural generation gaps, as older, largely white generations may be slow to recognize the promise of this change." Such careful, academic language! We are already seeing reactionary convulsions.

**What does this mean for religion?**

The most immediate reality is that children's ministries and youth ministries are becoming largely ethnic minority activities. Even in historically white congregations, most of the people in Kindergarten are going to be people of color. Or, there will be very few, if any people in Kindergarten. Youth groups will soon enough have the same reality. There are parts of the country where this will not be a reality for another generation; the Northwest and the Upper Midwest. At the same time ethnic minorities now make up more than 40 percent of the infants in more than half the states.

Increasingly church growth cannot be a reality without the inclusion of ethnic minorities. Congregations that want to grow will have to embrace people of color and immigrants. That will force them to come to terms with the essential unfairness and enormous red tape of our immigration laws. Just as that issue has caused deep conflicts in our nation, it will cause conflicts in congregations. Christian fellowships will be tried to the core and we will find out what their true character is.
They are called "clergy killers" -- congregations where a small group of members are so disruptive that no pastor is able to maintain spiritual leadership for long.
And yet ministers often endure the stresses of these dysfunctional relationships for months, or even years, before eventually being forced out or giving up.

Adding to the strain is the process, which is often shrouded in secrecy. No one -- from denominational officials to church members to the clerics themselves -- wants to acknowledge the failure of a relationship designed to be a sign to the world of mutual love and support.

But new research is providing insights into just how widespread -- and damaging -- these forced terminations can be to clergy.

An online study published in the March issue of the Review of Religious Research found 28 percent of ministers said they had at one time been forced to leave their jobs due to personal attacks and criticism from a small faction of their congregations.

The researchers from Texas Tech University and Virginia Tech University also found that the clergy who had been forced out were more likely to report lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression, stress and physical health problems.

And too few clergy are getting the help they need, said researcher Marcus Tanner of Texas Tech.

"Everybody knows this is happening, but nobody wants to talk about it," Tanner said in an interview. "The vast majority of denominations across the country are doing absolutely nothing."

**A secret struggle**

The issue of clergy job security will be front and center next month when delegates to the quadrennial General Conference of The United Methodist Church considers a proposal to end "guaranteed appointments" for elders in good standing. The church's Study of Ministry Commission says clergy job guarantees cost too much money and can focus more on the clergyperson's needs rather than the denomination's mission. On the other side, many clergy express fears that eliminating job security may lead to arbitrary dismissals. A major concern is that clergy will be judged based on their performance at "toxic" congregations, churches with so much internal conflict that it is difficult for any minister to have success.

The clergy have good reason to worry. A small percentage of congregations do seem to be responsible for a large share of congregational conflict.

Seven percent of congregations accounted for more than 35 percent of all the conflict reported in the National Congregations Study. And that conflict often had a high price.

In the 2006-2007 National Congregations Study, 9 percent of congregations reported a conflict in the last two years that led a clergyperson or other religious leader to leave the congregation.

It is difficult to get specific denominational figures, Tanner said. Many churches do not keep records indicating when a pastor was forced out as opposed to leaving voluntarily. And not only is it difficult to get clergy to open up about such painful experiences, many ministers are forced to sign a nondisclosure agreement to receive their severance package.

In their study, Tanner, Anisa Zvonkovic and Charlie Adams recruited respondents through Facebook groups relating to Christian clergy. Four-fifths of the 582 ministers participating -- 410 males and 172 females from 39 denominations -- ranged in age from 26 to 55.

The participants were asked whether they ever left a job "due to the constant negativity found in personal attacks and criticism from a small faction of the congregation."

Twenty eight percent of the respondents said they had been forced from a ministry job. Three-quarters had been forced out once, and 4 percent had been forcibly terminated three or more times, the study found.

Even one time, however, is more than enough.

**A heavy toll**

Ministers who were forced out of their jobs because of congregational conflict were more likely to experience burnout, depression, lower self-esteem and more physical health problems, the online study found.

In addition, more than four in 10 ministers forced out of their jobs reported seriously considering leaving the ministry.

A separate survey by Texas Tech and Virginia Tech researchers of 55 ministers who were forced out of a pastoral position found a significant link with self-reported measures of post-traumatic stress disorder and generalized anxiety disorder.

"This study shows that not only is forced termination an issue, but a cruel one that has very distressing effects on those who experience it," Tanner, Zvonkovic and Jeffrey Wherry reported in the current issue of the Journal of Religion and Health. "It is important that Christian organizations recognize the problem and implement steps to increase awareness and solutions."

Months of suffering traumatic and demeaning psychological and emotional abuse as they are slowly being forced out of their pulpits due to congregational conflict, Tanner said, "is a really, really horrible process."

What makes it even worse is the complicity of silence that prevents clergy from getting the help they need to go forward.

David Briggs writes the Ahead of the Trend column for the Association of Religion Data Archives.
Poverty And The Absence Of Optimism http://t.co/Og8ls8Xn

Best Memes: BuzzFeed And Webbys Announce Vote For Year's Top Meme

Video

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Best Practices, the email newsletter from NAD Ministerial, will soon be going weekly according to publisher Ivan Williams. “I’m excited about the expansion of the Best Practices newsletter family to include special editions for ministerial directors, and pastoral evangelists. The expansion will allow us to deliver very specific resources for our different pastoral roles.”

Starting in May the new lineup is as follows:
- **First Week:** Best Practices for **Ministerial Director**
  Editor: Ivan Williams
- **Second Week:** Best Practices for **Adventist Ministry**
  Editor: Loren Seibold
- **Third Week:** Best Practices for **Adventist Evangelism**
  Editor: Shawn Boonstra
- **Fourth Week:** Best Practices for **Adventist Ministry**
  Editor: Loren Seibold
- **Fifth Week:** Best Practices for **Adventist Worship**
  Editor: Nick Zork

Subscriptions are free of charge and subscribers are welcome to register for any or all of the newsletters.

The newsletters are scheduled to arrive late Sunday night of every week according to managing editor Dave Gemmell. Recently Best Practices readers responded to a one question survey and Monday received the most votes. The Best Practices mailing list was divided up equally in seven parts and identical surveys went out each of the seven days of the week to one seventh of the Best Practices mailing list. Ironically more surveys were opened on Saturday although Saturday was the least favorite day selected to receive the email. This may be a good demonstration of the ‘halo effect’ said Paul Richardson, Reconnecting Ministries director for NAD. “People sometimes answer in a survey what they think the correct answer should be and not necessarily what they practice.”

Discuss this on Facebook:
Implications of aging ministers could challenge future staffing

By Ansel Oliver

A recent review of pastoral demographics in the United States reveals that nearly 50 percent of Seventh-day Adventist ministers will reach retirement age within 10 years, a discovery that is prompting ministry officials to examine potential scenarios to address the coming dilemma.

Namely, will the denomination hire a new crop to replace retiring ministers, or will it urge much of its experienced, aging workforce to continue working longer than previously planned? Each option has its own advantages, and church leaders say they’re exploring a mix of both possible solutions.

Retirement age is considered 66.5 for the year 2022, according to the U.S. Social Security Administration.

Ivan Williams, director of the North American Division’s Ministerial Department, along with other church leaders, are looking at how to prepare for an upcoming boom in pastors reaching retirement age. Here, he presents at a ministerial council in Ontario, California, last year.

How leaders address the situation could affect everything from hiring requirements and remuneration policies to seminary tuition and the cultural needs of the region’s diverse congregants. All aspects of developing and supporting ministers could be up for analysis.

“We’re going to be looking at how we can have top-level quality pastors in this opportunity that’s presenting itself,” said Dave Gemmell, an associate director of the Ministerial Department of the church’s North American Division (NAD).

What’s certain is that leaders will explore how to renew recruiting efforts, sponsor more graduate students for theological training and develop the recently formed Board of Ministerial Education. Until recently, NAD was the only one of the denomination’s 13 world divisions without one. The board would offer additional formal training for practicing ministers.

“We have a good system of education, but we haven’t historically had oversight of that in North America,” said Ivan Williams, director of the NAD Ministerial Department.

A caveat

Church leaders noted that the above statistics on retirement age do not include “regional” conferences, church administrative units that oversee historically African-American congregations in the Central and Eastern U.S. There are nine regional conferences within the division’s total of 58 conferences and one attached field. About 25 percent of NAD members belong to regional conferences, according to statistics from the office of the NAD executive secretary.

Statistics for this survey were gleaned from records in the NAD Retirement office. Regional conferences operate under a separate retirement structure and comparable stats aren’t available as of yet.

The entire division has about 3,460 ordained ministers and 230 commissioned ministers. There are about 920 licensed ministers, typically college theology graduates who have yet to enter the seminary or seminary graduates yet to be ordained.

The 1.1 million Adventists in NAD live in the U.S., Canada, Bermuda, and the North Pacific islands that comprise the Guam-Micronesia Mission.

Hiring the trained

Addressing future staffing challenges in the U.S. also presents opportunities to examine other factors in hiring pastors. Ministerial leaders say they would like remuneration practices to better reflect a candidate’s training. Currently, wages are similar for a pastor who has a doctorate in ministry compared to a pastor who doesn’t have a college degree. That fact could lead NAD officials to consider making an adjustment in salary policies.


Denis Fortin, dean of the Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, says trained pastors are needed to minister to professionals in their congregations. Church leaders are reviewing how to best train the next wave of future pastors.

But that decision is ultimately up to leaders at divisions, unions and conferences. Fortin says a trend in the past decade is the increased hiring of pastors who don’t have a master’s degree in theology, and sometimes no college degree at all. A seminary professor said a study several years ago found that on average about four pastors in each local conference did not have a college degree.

This practice of filling pastoral slots with Bible workers who have completed a several-week training course actually violates the North American Division Working Policy. Section L 05 states that “educational requirement for entrance into the ordained ministry shall be the completion of the seven-year ministerial training program,” specifying that college graduates “shall attend the Andrews University Theological Seminary.” Exceptions are allowed for “age” and “unusual circumstances.”

Seminary leaders say an increasingly educated membership deserves educated pastors.

“Why would the ministry not need good, solid education when other professions in North America require good, solid education, whether it’s a lawyer or someone in the medical field?” Fortin said.
One potential way to enforce the current hiring policy, Fortin said, could involve requiring a theological education before ordination or commissioning.

**Who's at the seminary now**

Fortin said the seminary graduate program has about 350 to 400 students enrolled, depending on the semester, and about 100 graduate each year. Church leaders estimate that about 200 pastors per year will be needed to fill future vacancies.

Walt Williams, an NAD Ministerial Department associate director and director of the seminary’s InMinistry Center, said more second-career students are entering the seminary, many of whom are attractive hiring options to conferences seeking a candidate with more life experience.

The seminary continues to experience an ongoing shift in demographics. Nearly 20 percent of the seminary’s current enrollment of graduate students is women, up from 15 percent a decade ago, Fortin said.

Also, ethnic demographics of seminary graduate students have shifted slightly. Caucasians still make up the seminary’s largest ethnic group at about 35 to 40 percent, but Fortin said that figure is down from about 50 percent in the last decade. About one-third are Black, 15 percent are Hispanic and 12 percent are Asian, Fortin said.

**Funding education**

Another consideration up for review by NAD officials is which party will pay for a seminary student’s tuition. Williams said he has noticed a shift in the last 10 years: where conferences once hired college theology graduates for an internship and then sponsored the candidate at the seminary, they now increasingly hire seminary graduates.

Part of that shift may have resulted from an incentive program to motivate conferences to hire seminary graduates. Several years ago the division began offering increased subsidies to conferences to hire unsponsored graduates fresh from the seminary. Some conferences are increasingly waiting to earn the incentive rather than risking sponsorship on an undergrad, with graduates frequently getting nothing to offset their debt.

"Now you have more theology majors going straight to the seminary without that one- or two-year break of an internship, which was very valuable," Williams said. In many cases, it has also increased the debt load of more graduates. Now, only about one-third of seminary students are sponsored by conferences.

Division leaders want to reverse that trend. NAD now subsidizes the seminary's graduate program with about $3 million annually based on 200 students, with another $1 million of subsidies for unions and conferences to sponsor graduate students.

"We want more sponsored students," said Tom Evans, NAD treasurer. "We don't want conferences going to the seminary and hiring graduates at the last minute with the graduate having paid for everything."

NAD Ministerial leaders say most of the conference hiring rate hinges on the economy. Williams, the ministerial associate director, said hiring has picked up some in the past year for the first time since the recession, but also professed, "the floodgates have yet to open."

Still, most graduates find jobs. Fortin said seminary research suggests that about 85 percent of newly minted pastors are hired "within a year or two." Some of those positions are in chaplaincy and not in the traditional pastoral role at a congregation, he said.

Williams said he hopes that conference leaders continue to employ and train young pastors with a long-term focus in mind.

"Any farsighted conference that I’ve been in tends to hire younger pastors," he said. "It’s going to take such courage to plan for the future."

"But I understand the challenge of administrators who have older pastors on staff who want to remain employed."

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