June 10, 2012

"When the Mission was still in China for so many decades, was there ever an incidence that more than 1000 or 2000 people being baptized at one time? Never. And yet, when there is no foreign leadership, this kind of baptisms of 1000 and 2000 actually happened. What do these facts indicate? It indicates that the progress of God's ministry does not depends upon talents, knowledge, and money, but the willingness to suffer hardship and to endure toil, and God's faithful sons and daughter obey God's guidance, look up to the results which are given by the Lord through the Holy Spirit. The past experiences, and the understanding of the past give us important lessons. We should always bear in mind of these lessons which the Lord has given us in practical lives."

- Letter to Jan Paulsen from Chinese SDA pastor Liu

### Pastors Who Have Affairs

by Loren Seibold, editor, Best Practices for Adventist Ministry

I was talking to a psychologist awhile back who had done research on pastors who are sexually unfaithful (he was talking about male pastors - I'm unsure how this applies to female pastors). He said that pastors who are most likely to have an affair tend to sort into two general personality types.

One is the kind, deeply sympathetic pastor who loves to help people with their problems, who will drop everything to visit, counsel, or provide moral support. This pastor may find himself getting into close, confessional relationships with women in his church, women who he sincerely wants to help. He may feel insecure about himself and his ministry, and craves the feeling of being needed and appreciated. Women who are hurting, neglected or have low self-esteem respond to his kind attentions. But in these encounters the lines between pastoral care and personal intimacy blur, and he finds himself, not necessarily by design, in a sexual relationship.

The other is the pastor who is successful, talented and charismatic. He may pastor a large church or hold a high position, where he is used to being admired, listened to, and having people accede to his wishes. He may, said this psychologist, subconsciously begin to feel that he is a little above the rules that govern others. His ministry is so important, his leadership so vital to God's work, his circumstances so special, that he transcends normal expectations of moral behavior. He may be so used to successfully talked others into seeing things his way that
Even the risks in having an affair seem something he can navigate his way through. These kinds of pastors have a sense of entitlement and may, even after being caught, express puzzlement as to why they're not immediately forgiven and restored, because they have so much to give the church.

Such generalizations are a bit blunt, I know, and I'm sure you'll think of exceptions. Yet the situations I've seen tend to confirm this psychologist's premise. We notice, especially, the second kind, because they're people who are esteemed in the church, so their moral failures get played out publicly.

Yet the truth is that we're all vulnerable, all capable of falling into temptation in a whole variety of areas. A cliche by now, but still a profoundly true one: there, but for the grace of God, go I. As a pastor you have power, so a sexual relationship you get into with a church member has, by definition, a coercive element to it. We must remind ourselves that ministry is not just a calling, not just a vocation, but also a public trust.

What do you think? Discuss this article on our Facebook page.

NEW iPAD APP FOR FAMILIES, SHARING FAITH

by Paul Richardson

Your friend at work has been visiting with you about raising her kids with some honorable values. Where do you point her? eGraceNotes: Family First.

Your neighbor next door has been exercising too little and eating too much as a stay-at-home dad and he told you recently he wants to get back in shape. Where do you point him? eGraceNotes: Staying Young

Your unchurched cousins have been starting to ask questions about faith after their mother, your aunt died. Where do you point them? eGraceNotes: The Bible Says

For more than five years the North American Division (NAD) has been adding value to the lives of people who come to Adventist Church & School Connect web sites as well as netAdventist web sites through content that has being coordinated and archived at www.e-gracenotes.org.

Now, that content is also being made available through a new app for iPhones and iPads called eGracenotes. Find out more about the new eGracenotes app on our Facebook page.

READING FOR PASTORS

Ordination and other topics: "Listening to the Church in China" opens up a fascinating discussion with Pastor Rebekah Liu (whose mother has raised up one of the largest SDA congregations in China). You must read the answering comments by Pastor Liu, especially this letter! Quote: "During the time when the Chinese Adventist Church was under the leadership of a Mission, the leadership structure in Shanghai was huge with lots of personnel spending lots of money, but the baptism [sic] was not many. Later when foreign missionaries were gone, and outside financial support was cut off, our loving heavenly Father moved the brothers and sisters in Shanghai to work for the Lord with zeal."

Are church leaders too obsessed with congregation size? Quote: "In our previous job(s), we were appraised, assessed, promoted, given pay hikes, and so on, and a tremendous sense of security came from knowing how we were doing, as measured by some apparently objective standard. Then we started working for the church, and almost all of this disappeared…. But the desire for a metric of some sort, a measurable way of telling us how we are doing, never quite left us. And the number of people who came to our Sunday meetings was the easiest one to count."

Five secrets pastors refuse to tell.

Who knew that Ray Bradbury (who died on June 5) was a man of faith? (Certainly an unconventional faith, but any faith is hard to find among famous authors!) Here's an article about him, and an interview with him. (Even more surprisingly, horror writer Stephen King has occasionally spoken about his own faith - though that, too, raises questions about what faith means to him.)

Fast-growing denominations close more churches than declining ones? Lessons from growing churches. Quote: "Overall, evangelical groups have shown a greater willingness to close congregations that are unsuccessful in one area and move to another in response to demographic changes, Jones said. They also are more likely to start new churches, even though new congregations, like new businesses, have a higher failure rate. In the end,
starting new churches is the most effective way of gaining new people.”

Related to last issue’s excellent piece by Jennifer Vander Molen about ministry as a Results-Oriented Work Environment: Matt Perman talks about “A Theology of Workflow”. Quote: “Ironically, we need to realize that we are accepted by God apart from our productivity, on the basis of what Christ has done through faith. Now that we are accepted by God, the gospel causes us to be productive. I define productivity really as good works. So what happens is the gospel frees us to be able to do good works and drives us to do good works.”

Great piece by Tim Schraeder: Ten things that drive me crazy about working for the church. Quote: “#4. We use ‘let me pray about it’ as an excuse to get out of making decisions”

A $468,000 severance package for a pastor? It happened in Kalamazoo.

Creationism is gaining ground: according to Gallup, 46% of Americans now hold creationist view of human origins.

Serpent handling, an odd Christian practice, still goes on in parts of Appalachia - and it lead to the death of a preacher recently.

TO THE POINT: WINSTON CHURCHILL

There are a terrible lot of lies going about the world, and the worst of it is that half of them are true.

Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.

Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.

We are masters of the unsaid words, but slaves of those we let slip out.

History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.

I'm just preparing my impromptu remarks.

Please be good enough to put your conclusions and recommendations on one sheet of paper in the very beginning of your report, so I can even consider reading it.

He has all the virtues I dislike and none of the vices I admire.

I like pigs. Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals.

When I look back on all these worries, I remember the story of the old man who said on his deathbed that he had had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which had never happened.

Too often the strong, silent man is silent only because he does not know what to say, and is reputed strong only because he has remained silent.

A sheep in sheep's clothing. (On Clement Atlee)

A modest man, who has much to be modest about. (On Clement Atlee)

I am ready to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the ordeal of meeting me is another matter.

Politics is the ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month and next year. And to have the ability afterwards to explain why it didn't happen.

The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.

Nancy Astor: “Sir, if you were my husband, I would give you poison.”
Churchill: “If I were your husband I would take it.”

Note from Loren: In the May 14 issue of Best Practices for Adventist Ministry, I wrote a piece about my experience with a church member whose family wanted to drop their membership because of the influence of independent ministries. I apologize to 3ABN for mentioning them in the story without talking to them privately. The story was mine, and did not reflect the feelings of the NAD leadership. (I have also placed this apology on our Best Practices FB page.)
I had a great visit with the KS-NE pastors last week! I felt very enriched from spending a little time with you. I will be sharing with BP readers some of the thoughts you shared with me. The last week of July I'll be at Redwood Camp Meeting in Northern California. Please look for me! I want to meet you and find out what you're doing in ministry.

From Clinton Wahlen at BRI: "In less than a week, the Third International Bible Conference (TIBC) will begin on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Over 300 administrators and theologians of the world church will gather in Israel for study, prayer, and fellowship. In order that as many of you as possible may be with us in spirit, we have arranged for live streaming of plenary sessions. The theme of the conference is Biblical Anthropology and will include presentations on the nature and destiny of human beings, the last-day challenge of spiritualism in the context of the great controversy, the biblical concepts of death and hell, and many more topics. Also, our world president, Elder Ted N. C. Wilson, has prepared a special message for the church in Israel. Details, including a schedule and access to the live stream, will be posted soon at this BRI web address: http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/IBC12/ Thank you for joining us in prayer for this event and in watching the proceedings via the web."

Don't forget the Andrews University Leadership Conference, July 20-23, 2012. Keynote address by Richard Blackaby, followed by a series of pre-conference workshops on Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning. Session keynote speaker, Sunday 7 PM, will be Daniel Goleman, the of *Emotional Intelligence*, with more than 5 million copies sold in 40 languages. For more information call the Leadership Department at 269-471-6580, or go to www.andrews.edu/grad.

Just a reminder that there's been an update at PlusLine: 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 or by going to www.adventsource.org and clicking on the PlusLine tab. Event registration has also moved to the AdventSource website.
Of the five ordained pastors serving the over 10,000 Adventists in Sichuan Province, four are women.

“Please come to China and meet my people,” requested the Seventh-day Adventist pastor as my wife, Chandra, and I enjoyed table fellowship with her at our home last October. Little did I realize that six months later I would have lunch with Pastor Rebekah Liu at a restaurant in her homeland.

The land, people, history and culture of the “Middle Kingdom” have intrigued me for many years. Pastor Liu awakened my interest with stories about Adventists in China and how their decentralized religious universe is expanding in all directions. I found many aspects of those stories so compelling that I wished for other indigenous voices to give depth, breadth and texture to them. Thus, when Dave Weigley, Columbia Union Conference president, invited me to join him and Taashi Rowe, Visitor news editor, on an “adventure of listening,” I quickly agreed.

**Women Hold Up the Sky**

One of the primary purposes for our visit to China was to learn about the role and influence of women in the expansive growth of Adventism there. The picture began to form rather quickly. We learned about Hao Ya Jie (pictured, left), an ordained Seventh-day Adventist woman pastor, who leads the largest Adventist congregation in China. The Beiguan Church in Shenyang, with about 5,000 members, is “mother church” to about eighty other congregations with total membership of over 10,000! In Beijing we enjoyed dinner with Lilly, who is one of hundreds of ordained women elders who function as pastors in many of China’s approximately 4,000 congregations. Communion service on Sabbath at Shanghai’s 1,500-member elegant Mu’en Church was led by its two senior co-pastors, Pastor Dheng and Pastor Lu. Pastor Lu had been offered ordination by the official Three Self Patriotic Movement, but she chose instead to be ordained within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In Chengdu we spent a day in the company of Pastor Qin Zheng-Yi. Ordained to the gospel ministry in 2002, Pastor Qin is reported to have been
responsible for planting numerous congregations in this largest province in China, and providing apostolic oversight to the approximately 400 churches. Of the five ordained pastors serving the over 10,000 Adventists in Sichuan Province, four are women.

That women—and ordained women pastors—play a major role in the life and mission of the church in China is incontrovertible. Accepting women in leadership and pastoral roles is normative to the over 400,000 Adventists in China. Gender equality, and the ordination of both women and men as pastors and elders are seen as part of the divine order, and not as a political, ecclesiastical or cultural oddity. The leaders of the China Union Mission (based in Hong Kong) that we visited with readily acknowledged that they recognize and affirm the presence of ordained women pastors in mainland China and the prominent role they play in the life of the Church. Their acknowledgment gave voice to my own feelings that “this is the Lord’s doing, and it is wonderful to see.” Psalm 118:23.

Untamed Faith

In the seven cities we visited during our two-week itinerary, we met some incredible people of faith and enjoyed their inspiring stories. They explained how, during China’s so-called Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976, Adventism in China survived eradication. Although the government expelled all foreign missionaries in 1949, Chinese Adventists continued to establish and nurture the faith in Chinese soil. In the absence of denominational voices from abroad to help guide, instruct and shape them, they developed a deep reliance on Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Like the churches in early New Testament times, these congregational communities learned to live out their faith in ways that are rooted in their culture. Despite the diversity among them—in beliefs and practices—they found unity in the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the blessed hope of His soon return. Individuals who emerged as leaders because of their spiritual gifts took on the role of “apostles” to give guidance and counsel to congregations.

The stories of the brothers and sisters we met—more broadly, the story of Adventism in China—is ultimately a triumphant tale of a vibrant church, thriving against all odds. It is a tribute to China’s valiant shepherds of faith who proved that a religious, political or social system cannot control or eradicate what’s in people’s hearts. That lesson alone made my journey to this intriguing land a life-changing experience. And it is a lesson that merits the attention of Adventists in North America.

Raj Attiken, D.Min., serves as Ohio Conference president. A more detailed story on our trip to China is available in the June Columbia Union Visitor [3].

Photo by Rajmund Dabrowski: Pastor Hao Ya Jie from Beiguan Church in Shenyang, and Zu Xiu Hua, a pastor-leader responsible for starting 380 congregations in the province of Jilin.
"In the absence of denominational voices from abroad to help guide, instruct and shape them, they developed a deep reliance on Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Like the churches in early New Testament times, these congregational communities learned to live out their faith in ways that are rooted in their culture. Despite the diversity among them—in beliefs and practices—they found unity in the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the blessed hope of His soon return.

Lessons we need in the rest of the Adventist world.

A beautiful thing to see how the Spirit is working through these godly women in China. I'm sure that all of heaven rejoices...

It's so wonderful to see God guiding His church. To God be the glory for inspiring women to bring so many souls to Christ. One of the greatest things will be to see these ordained women pastors in heaven togher with the hundreds and thousands of souls they led to the feet of Jesus

One wonders why constituents have to pay for their jaunts that seem to have little or no redeeming value. Maybe it can be compared a bit to the GSA governmental scandal insofar as an expenditure that appears to have no value for the constituency.

No value? When women's ordination is such a hot button issue in the rest of "official
Adventism? Leaders going to China, to report first hand about what they see the Holy Spirit doing through the leadership of women is hardly valueless at this time in this denomination. It is something that those in opposition need to have placed in front of them, in order that they may openly deal with the reality of what the Spirit is doing, despite their strenuous opposition to female leadership.

If you want to know something of little or no redeeming value it is thousands and thousands of Adventists from around the world coming together at a multi-million dollar confab to vote on important matters like preventing women from being ordained, or tweaking the wording of fundamental beliefs to ensure that everyone knows we were created in seven literal contiguous 24 hour days. THAT'S $$$ wasted!

The GC president will be going to China soon. I wonder if you will judge his trip the same way--"no redeeming value" indeed.

"The GC president will be going to China soon. "
Is he going to pray for any of those women pastors, or will he just behave as he did in Australia?

If you want to complain about church projects "that seem to have little or no redeeming value," what about blanketing neighborhoods with poor quality reprints of old books?
The Adventist Review reports that Ted Wilson and other church leaders spent 10 days in China earlier this year. During the tour, Wilson preached at the Mu'en Seventh-day Adventist church in Shanghai on March 31, 2012 and visited a number of other churches.

Included in the Review article is a statement from Wilson:

“We have visited wonderful, faithful, dynamic, and courageous Seventh-day Adventist church members,” Wilson wrote in an April 13, 2012, e-mail message to Adventist Review editors. “We have seen lovely churches that we own, heard wonderful choirs, seen enthusiastic young people in churches, and [witnessed] the results of earnest mission activities on the part of church members. We have seen some of the large, modern cities of this vast country as well as the strong infrastructure and natural beauty—and, of course, the thousands upon thousands of people just about wherever you turn.”

Full story:  http://www.adventistreview.org...

In another, picture-filled, article about Ted Wilson and the delegation's visit to China you can see him interacting with Pastor Hao Ya Jie (one of the featured female pastors in this Spectrum article). This article is from the Northern Asia - Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists' website: http://www.nsdadventist.org/ne...

"InterestedFriend"

Were you "Your Friend" in a previous existence? This syntax is so familiar . . .

(Just attempting to keep my friends "straight.")

Be sure to follow the link to the Columbia Union Visitor article. Worth the read.
China is a not a free country. Despite the fact that it manufactures almost everything we buy at Wal-mart, China remains a very closed and controlled society. There is no freedom of religion or freedom of expression. That, by itself and without more, ought to engender caution in those wishing to embrace Chinese excrescences of Christianity. But there's more.

The communist government of China uses the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Chinese Christian Council to control Protestantism in China, and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association to control Catholicism. The official "Adventist" churches in China are Three-Self Churches controlled by the government; as indicated in the article, ordination is controlled by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. The "Adventist" Church in China is not officially connected to the Adventist church in the rest of the world; the Three-Self Adventist Church in China is thus at risk of being just as Adventist as the Patriotic Catholic Association is Catholic: the latter has disavowed the Pope and is considered schismatic by non-Chinese Catholics. There are no Adventist seminaries or publishing houses in China; there is a Three-Self Protestant seminary, which Adventists wishing to receive official recognition must attend.

Women have found themselves in leadership roles because men in leadership roles were frequently imprisoned. For example, David Lin, who translated some of Ellen White's works into Chinese and died last year in Loma Linda, was imprisoned for seventeen years, between 1958 and 1975. The intermittent but often serious persecution of Christianity made it very risky for breadwinners, typically men, to be found in leadership positions in Christian congregations; their arrest might mean starvation for their families.

Elder Attiken is essentially arguing that practices that have developed as a result of religious persecution in an un-free country that tightly controls religious expression should be instructive or normative for Christians who are free to exercise their faith according to the dictates of conscience. Obviously, that is beyond absurd. Christians who are free to practice their faith according to Biblical guidelines and standards must do so, and Scripture is very clear in its prescription of male headship in the church.

David, rather than "beyond absurd", I think Attiken's article (and the expanded article in the Visitor) in fact mirror closely the experience of Peter when he visited Cornelius' family and then returned to church in Jerusalem and said that God was
obviously blessing the participation of Gentiles in the church so the church should recognize that.

Rebecca Liu's husband (who also is a pastor, surprising in light of your argument about breadwinners and starvation) commented (as quoted in the Visitor): "If there was theological [reason] not to ordain women, we would not prosper." While I wouldn't generally agree that prosperity or success is a measure of truth or correctness, one should certainly take it into consideration when evaluating all the evidence, as it sounds like Attiken et al. were trying to do by their visit. To cite another parallel, this was the argument of Gamaliel, and the work of Peter et al. did in fact prosper. We today claim that the success of the early Christians was because God had a hand in it.

Dear Brother, thanks for sharing the knowledge about what you know of Adventist church in China. Although we join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, but we are not controled by teh government and the Movement in terms of our beliefs and practice. Had you come to the church in China, you would not have said above things about your brethren in China. You are welcome to come and see and praise the Lord for His doing in China.

Your sister in Christ,

Rebekah Liu

Writing from Shanghai Muen Adventist Church

David, forgive me to say that I think your info is outdated. The Adventist Church in the 21st century is different from the Adventist Church in the 1975. Persecution is not a key element of our church life any longer. Once again, welcome to visit us and see yourself.
David, I agree with Rebekah. Your view of religious life in China is far from present reality. I've been here for just about 9 years. During that time I've met with leaders from both registered and unregistered churches and attended both types of service. For some, being a party member is like being an Adventist. It's merely a cultural thing. It has no real bearing on their actual beliefs. Just as cultural Adventists are not really Christians, many Party members are not actually atheists.

Some Catholic churches I've visited openly display pictures of the pope. Bibles are openly sold in bookstores, by street vendors, and in churches. The Chinese aversion to the pope goes back at least to Kang Hsi, who did not want Chinese people subject to a foreign king. The Chinese aversion to the Roman papacy is a wise one. It's not really about religion. It's about politics. China doesn't or didn't recognize the authority of the pope to appoint bishops as representatives of a foreign government to rule over Chinese people.

Adventists don't need a publishing house in China. If you want to get something printed, take it to a local printer and pay him to print it. It's not complicated.

As for the freedom here, China is, in many respects, much freer than America. Freedom is not a good thing in the hands of wicked people. China is certainly a much safer place than America. Is China perfect? Is America?

If Spectrumites knew and understood the simple faith of believers here, most would laugh them to scorn. The believers would be dismissed as ignorant, unsophisticated, superstitious, naive, and so forth. While I have seen women acting in rolls of leadership, the real power may be in the hands of the "old uncles" who are not seen.

Of course, China is a large place. I can only reference what I have personally observed where I live and travel. As a foreigner, there is a lot I don't understand and probably never will.

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Rebekah,

I am so glad you can clarify some issues for us. It's frustrating to read some statements by uniformed people telling us what it is like in China without actually knowing the whole context.

So please continue following this forum and make corrections as needed.
I also hope that when Ted Wilson visits China he will be able to open his eyes to the fact that women can be ordained and can do a great job as pastors. It's frustrating to have a GC President that still stands with the group that discriminates against women in church. It feels like being part of some Medieval church...

Glen,

Thanks for your comment. Much needed!

I believe that Adventism in China may become a much better Adventism than elsewhere. It seems to me - if I am seeing it correctly - that in China Adventism will be kept simpler than n the US. Here "theology" became an obsession and people got used to deal with "comments about the truth" often forgetting what the truth actually is. Kind of "philosophy of truth."

There have been way too many "gods" among us trying to define what truth is, and judging people based on that. I hope also that in China they will opt for Sola Scriptura instead of adding EGW to the Bible as if her writings were part of the Bible.

Two things jump out at me from your comments, David.

First, you mention the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association's disavowal of the pope as if it's a bad thing, and yet in every Revelation Seminar ever held outside China a significant amount of time is spent trying to convince our Catholic brethren to do just that. Shouldn't our evangelistic efforts among Catholics in China be easier since we don't have to deal with the whole messy "pope as antichrist" thing? We should be thanking the Chinese government, not vilifying them, right?

Second, you talk of religious practices that have developed under the watchful eye of an avowed secular government as if China's Cultural Revolution could somehow hinder the work of the Holy Spirit there. I believe that it is under those conditions where God is able to do his best work. You compare this oppressive secular environment with the freedom we in the Western world supposedly enjoy, and yet I believe that there is more suppression of thought coming from within our church these days than our Adventist brothers and sisters in China feel from their
government. In the Adventist Church of today under the watchful eye of Ted Wilson's Cultural Revolution, it is dangerous to exercise the freedom of thought and speech guaranteed by our government's constitution.

It is interesting to see the twisted arguments that develop in order to keep women out of the ministry.

Patti J. Grant

Of what benefit is male headship when the head referred to is buried in the sand?

Glen Hansen

David, Please note Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution:

No State organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion.
The State protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the State.
Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination."

Glen Hansen

"The fact is that the communist government of China still, to this day, interferes with religion far more than Robert Mugabe ever thought about doing."

David, I wonder if you haven't been duped by a "Save Chinese Christians from the Evil Government" cottage industry. These outfits are run by people too lazy to get a real job. They solicit donations to provide bibles and various other outreach materials to the "poor oppressed Chinese brethren." Save your money, it's a hoax, a scam, a rip off. I could buy ~50 bibles tomorrow if I wanted them, for a lot less than
the guy on "Christian" tv hustling them.

The government may be anti religion. So am I in certain respects. The only thing which prevents me from believing in and serving God is my own evil/ignorance, not the government.

China is a complicated place. The government does a fairly good job of keeping things together. China may not be Disneyland but in certain respects, it's not far off.

Questions that pop to mind, David.

1. Were these women ordained by the official Seventh-day Adventist Church? If so, are their ordinations "official"?
2. Do you believe the Seventh-day Adventist Church sinned in ordaining these women? Did the church sin in electing a woman as a GC Vice President?
3. Can you see how people might validly argue that, on the basis of the approach in China, sociological contexts should be taken into account in ordination practices?
4. Are you aware of the church's altered stance on polygamy in countries that are free? Do you see that as normative? Shouldn't we view every church policy as "instructive"?
5. All men and women in China are still "free to exercise their faith according to the dictates of conscience"—though the result may be persecution. Have we not been told that troubles and persecution are not lasting deterrents to faithful living? "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:10, 11).

Your argument here does not hold water—though I would not characterize it as "beyond absurd." Beyond absurd would be maintaining a position that regards these ordained women of God as aberrant, unofficial, or in any way inferior to men.

Chris, first, the "official" SDA Church in China is not the SDA Church, but rather a TSPM church. The whole purpose of the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" was to cut off all ties between native Chinese Christians and foreign missionaries and/or
foreign ecclesiastical organizations. Obviously, the persecution of Christians is nothing like what it was in the 1950s, when TSPM was formed to control Christianity (and it was even worse during the "cultural revolution" of 1966-1979 when all organized religion was banned), but my understanding is that the "official" church is still the TSPM/CCC Church.

2. See, above, regarding what is the SDA Church in China. From my perch in the U.S., I'm not going to judge anyone who lives in a communist country for how they've responded to the lack of freedom. (And I'm a big fan of Ella Simmons.)

3. I think the SDA Church has in fact treated the male/female issues as purely cultural or sociological (which is why the anti-patriarchal agitators have gotten so far in the SDA Church), but I don't think that's biblical. The apostolic command regarding sex roles in church governance is specifically rooted in the order of creation. 1 Tim. 2:11-15. Hence, sex roles are part of the created order, not an injustice that needs to be righted.

4. No, I don't know what you're talking about with regard to polygamy.

5. See, paragraphs 1 and 2, above.

Greetings Chris', just provide one answer to your question 1: only few woman pastors of our church is ordained by the Three-self church. Most of them are ordained without the permission of the government and the church.

G'day Chris,

I have little to add to your conversation with David.

Having hosted several Chinese Communist Party members in my home for months at a time, may I say that they are model citizens making the most of the system to fast track upward social mobility. These friends of mine were very willing to attend church with me.

During my time in South Korea, I became friends with a twenty something Chinese
girl from a north-east Chinese province. She told me about how she came to Christ and to the local Chinese congregation. Her father was a policeman, assigned to supervise the churches of his city. She suggested to him that she would like to become a Christian and attend church. And she asked him which congregation she should attend. He advised her to attend the Adventist church because they don't fight.

In a small university in the far off corner of Korea one of my fellow foreign language instructors was a political scientist from Beijing. My wife and I befriended her and then invited her to our local bi-lingual congregation. (She attended regularly with us). When she first came, she was very sure she was a communist. After some months of regular church attendance plus semi-regular Bible studies she was anxious to say she was a Christian.

Yes, God is at work in China. My prayer is that God will raise up people and leaders to follow him in China.

To the Web manager:

There does not yet seem to be a method to reply directly to a comment unless there is a "reply" listed, and many do not have that link. Are there no plans to make all comments accessible for direct replies?

**Disqus allows one or more levels of replies and each site chooses the depth they want. We have chosen 1 level of reply - although that issue is actively being discussed on the web team. There are tradeoffs. If every comment had a reply option then the depth of reply threads could get so deep as to be more confusing than helpful. At least that is what we presently think. Also, when a person replies to a comment their text is, of course, inserted just below the original comment. And that means that the reply is no longer in chronological order. That too can be a problem when people are looking to read just the newest comments. All of this involves trade-offs and this new system is both a work in progress for us and can be modified if we can determine a change would be an improvement. - website editor

Also, when searching the comments listed, since they are not in date order, one must scroll up and down looking for a particular one as the oldest may be the first in line, or anywhere else. Do others have a problem? Are you satisfied with this system as it is, or
would you like to see changes. Why no list them here so we can inform the web manager and ask why it is so difficult to find a place to reply and to find a particular comment. Thanks for listening. Elaine

I'm having the same issue as Elaine. I can reply to comment (a non-relying post), but I cannot reply to a reply. Is replying to a reply something you enable in your own account, or does the website control that?

As just noted above, the depth of reply (presently set to 1) is site-wide, not user-configurable. If more reply depth is deemed better, after some collective experience, we can change the setting. - website editor

Elaine,
I can see your frustration, but I doubt the changes you mention can be made. I bet the Webmaster can't do much because the system (disqus) is set up this way and there may be no optio to change it.
Yes, it's frustrating not to be able to reply to the comments that re already a reply to a prior comment. The only way is to use the reply button on the main comment and hope it will post close to the comment you are targeting.
I have lost part of my motivation to follow Spectrum after the change. The prior system worked better (for me).

Please comment on what, under the old system, was better. We could, of course, turn off all reply capability. Then every comment would return to being shown in pure chronological order. It is a set of trade-offs with this change. - website editor
Webmaster,

I can no longer edit my comment below after you edited it, so I am answering here. I think it would be worth a try to have the capability to use "reply" to a "reply" and see what happens. May be people like it better, or not. Also, if there is an option to have the "new" flag as in the old system, don't hesitate to use it, because it was very nice to log in and see what was the new stuff. Otherwise we may be spending lots of time going through comments we already read before, until we figure out what is actually new.

I understand that the adjustment to new systems is always challenging and requires a few changes until the optimal level is reached. Thanks for working so hard to make this site always work better and for being so committed to all of us the Spectrumites. Where else would Adventists go to be able to discuss issues so freely and so broadly?

I have passed your comment on to our webmaster. We certainly will try to iterate the Disqus configuration to best meet the needs of our users. We had an extensive discussion about that yesterday on our standard web team conference call. There are clearly some things lost at present with the new system and we are looking into how to improve the system. One additional problem is that you cannot paste wysiwyg text and have the markup (e.g. bold, italics, etc) show up. And the edit boxes are too small. etc. However, there is no way we will be returning to the old way of commenting. That was hosted on our machine and was putting an excessive burden on its resources. Also, Disqus greatly reduces spam and also makes moderating drive-by nastiness - that needs editorial intervention - a lot easier. And Discus vendors comments from their own cloud environment so we have better overall performance as the web page creation is now distributed. But there is a pretty good chance that the current capability can be significantly improved as we started with a mostly out-of-the-box configuration and we likely can enhance that. We definitely are working in that direction as ease of commenting is a very important part of the experience and we do not want to frustrate people. - website editor
Web team,

At least on the iPad, I can't copy from comments/replies what I'd like to include in my reply. I can still copy from the article/blog. Is this going to be a permanent issue? Passed along to our webmaster - website editor

Please know we realize that you're working hard to smooth out the wrinkles, & we appreciate it. We're being patient, & hopeful :)

George Tichy

Web Team,

I guess we all know you guys are working hard on this issue aiming the best improvement possible, and I want to just verbalize a big THANK YOU for your dedication and commitment to the Spectrum project. I also know that there is no perfect system and that adjusting to changes is not always the most pleasurable experience for some participants, especially dealing with new software, etc. But I am sure that at the end of the day everyone will certainly make an extra effort to adjust to the differences between old and new. Thanks again for the great effort on your part.

George
(the Heretic...)

Simon Ferg

The Adventist Today website allows replies to replies, and I agree with some other comments mentioned that it appears to be a better format. It visually allows for more consolidated discussions.

JoeErwin

I imagine that my experience in China, when I visited there a couple of years ago, might have been atypical in some ways, but I felt free to come and go as I pleased, and the people I talked with seemed willing--perhaps even eager--to express their feelings about
their society and government. While they had some regional issues of concern, and indicated that they were not permitted to travel to some places, they did seem free to take initiative in education and development of skills and vocational directions. I really enjoyed my time in Kunming and Lijiang (Yunnan), and I hope to visit there again, perhaps to join in a collaborative research project.

Joe, If you are planning to do any research in Yunnan, I hope you do it soon. As transportation into the area develops, the environment will be consistently and systematically destroyed. As the economy develops and more people look for recreation, Yunnan will be exploited beyond your imagination.

As a consequence of clearcutting and rubber planting, areas previously rich in biodiversity are being turned into "green deserts." A researcher I spoke with in Xishuangbanna said that these "green desert" areas are so sanitized that they have less biodiversity than the Gobi desert. Simply as a tourist, I have seen areas both north and south of Kunming deteriorate into no go areas consequent to crowds, noise, vehicles.

If you have a project, get on it.

Glen, I'm confident that what you say is true. There certainly is dramatic development in and around Kunming. And, yes, the amount of tourism around Lijiang (tourists mostly from the east) is extraordinary, and the facilities to accommodate tourism are remarkable.

I am especially interested in some primate populations west and southwest of Lijiang, but I'm aware that they are already under much pressure from human populations. As I am in my 70s, I do not have long to do this sort of thing anyway, but I may be able to help some Chinese colleagues and students from elsewhere make some progress.

I was interested in going to Xishuangbanna, but the weather was unfavorable (much
rain and flooding), but it looked to me like it was already very seriously overwhelmed and degraded by excessive tourism--with not much real wildlife remaining.

Thanks for your comment.

joselitocoo

: China remains a very closed and controlled society... That, by itself and without more, ought to engender caution in those wishing to embrace Chinese excrescences of Christianity. https://www.google.com/search?q=ex·cres·cence/ (eks-kresˈins) an abnormal outgrowth; a projection of morbid origin

Glen hansen

Joselito, I don't understand David Read's aversion to the Chinese church. Note the following remark by David Lin regarding the 3 Self church:

"Forty years of experience have proved that the Three-Self patriotic movement was timely and needful. Despite developing pains and mistakes, it has met the expectations of its founders. It has assisted the government in implementing its policy on religion, and today[~1990] Chinese Protestants on the mainland worship in some 6000 churches and 10,000 meeting places, and can freely purchase Bibles and hymnals; and the public regards them as a part of Chinese society. No longer is it said, "One Christian more means one Chinese less," a remark which aptly described the suffocation of patriotic feelings among Chinese converts during semi-colonial times."

http://www.temcat.com/003-Adve...

David Read

My "aversion" to the Chinese Church is that, historically, it has been forced to compromise with a totalitarian communist state. The account of the communist subornation of the Adventist Church in China is harrowing:
The modern Chinese government has chosen, for the moment, to tolerate indigenous Christian expression, but there is no freedom of religion as a constitutional principle. Peter Somerset's anecdote involving a police officer assigned to "supervise" Christian churches in his city illustrates that toleration is not the same thing as freedom; free countries do not have police officers supervising churches. Even a general policy of toleration does not protect believers from arbitrary discrimination, as in this instance:

Recently, one of the contributors to this site wrote a piece taking Elder Ted Wilson to task for failing to mention, on a visit to the Zimbabwe, that that country is governed by a murderous thug. But, for purposes of using the Chinese SDA Church (which is still not organizationally connected to the SDA church outside of China) as our rule of faith and practice, we're all expected to pretend that China is Disneyland, a place where everyone is free and happy. Sorry, I'm not playing along. The fact is that the communist government of China still, to this day, interferes with religion far more than Robert Mugabe ever thought about doing.

That said, I have no aversion to the church in China. I do have an aversion to using the idiosyncratic practices that have arisen there, in very trying and non-ideal circumstances, as an example for the SDA Church in the rest of the world. Scripture, not China, must continue to be our rule of faith and practice, and Scripture is very clear about male headship in the Christian Church.

David Read... is this one example of a Chinese idiosyncrasy you find objectionable?
"On many occasions, local women led the congregations after the ministers were arrested... These lay leaders sustained the Adventist movement at the grassroots level... Even though the Communists were capable of infiltrating any Christian institution, they failed to penetrate into the highly diffused and decentralized Adventist church network."
Rebekah Liu,

Would you be so kind and comment a little bit about the role of EGW's writings in the Chinese Adventism?

Also to Rebekah--
Another commenter above, who is living in China, says that while he's observed women in church leadership roles, in fact, the real power may be held by the old uncles who remain hidden. Are the women pastors true leaders in the churches? Thank-you.

Greetings George,  Thanks for the question. My observation about the role of EGW's writings is that they have served as the unifying factor for Adventist churches in China in terms of theology and church practice. Due to government restriction, we do not have a Union or Division (we had China Division before 1957), and we had little communication among Adventist churches in China at least between 1960s to 1990s, but because of the common respect towards EGW's writings, and the reading of them, we remain theologically unified in general although we do have diverse understandings regarding law and grace like the overseas Adventist church, we are still within the Adventist theological spectrum.

EGW's writings were translated by five pastors in the 1950s when China Division was dissolved and pastors were no longer paid by the church. One thing to be noted is that the Signs of Time Publishing House of the China Division was requested to print EGW's five books in the 1930s, but the publishing house felt it was not going to make profit, so the request was denied. In the 1950s, after the translation of the five books (PP, PK, DA, AA, GC), they were printed and distributed secretly throughout the country, and later smuggled out to Taiwan and were published by the Taiwan Signs of Times Publishing House.

The experience of the publication of EGW's five books is one of the facts which make us Chinese Adventists think that most probably the church could do better without China Division. :-)

Listening to the Church in China http://spectrummagazine.org/print/4001
Reply to Hopeful,

Also to Rebekah--Another commenter above, who is living in China, says that while he’s observed women in church leadership roles, in fact, the real power may be held by the old uncles who remain hidden. Are the women pastors true leaders in the churches? Thank-you.

Thank you for the question Hopeful! Old uncles do exist in some of the churches. But it maybe the situation of a few churches in the 1990s. As I know, today we have only two or three old uncles left in China. The biggest church in Adventist China has no old uncles from the very beginning and the whole church board is composed of women. One of the biggest district in China of Gongzhuling church in the Northeast is also led by Pr. Zuxiuhua (female) and no old uncles from the very beginning. My mother, an ordained pastor, was called at the age of 50, and has been leading her district for 20 years without any old uncles except the first 10 years. Pr. Hong of Wuxi, another woman pastor, is co-pastoring with Pr. Zhu (a male pastor at the age of 70), but Pr. Hong is said to be the one making decisions since Pr. Zhu is getting sick and old. The old uncle in Beijing, Pr. Zhao actually has to listen to Elder Chen, a female elder who proposed to ordain him some years ago. For years, Elder Chen has been serving as THE leader of Beijing church even though another young pastor, Pr. Chen (a male pastor) was ordained long time ago. In terms of Shanghai church, my husband is the one making decision in consultation with his colleagues, and Pr. Lu (the female pastor) tends to follow his decisions. Of course, there are churches where there is no woman pastors but I can hardly find a church without woman elders serving as pastors. We are not intentional in creating woman leaders. We simply follow the lead without any political intentions.

By the way, we did have churches which have old aunties who held power for years. The church in Kunming is still controled by Pr. Cui, who is more than 80 years old. She is one of the few respected older generation pastors. My mother is becoming one of the old aunties. But she is learning to delegate the power to a younger generation already.
Thank you very much, Rebekah, for taking the time to answer our questions, & at length. These are fascinating aspects of the church in China, & all of us are more thoughtful about our faith when we learn how God works in varying settings.

A couple of more questions, if you have time to answer them:

1. In our part of the world, whenever there has been an attempt to ordain women pastors, or to consider them ordained, there has been up-front opposition from the highest rungs of church governance. Has there been any reaction or communication from the General Conference to the Chinese church regarding its practice of ordination?

2. From your EGW writings response, is it correct to conclude that the Chinese church hasn't had the Testimonies?

Greetings Hopeful, It's always a pleasure to see my overseas sisters and brothers are interested in God's doings in my country regardless of the comments including David's--at least people are interested and are trying to communicate, and this is wonderful! Let's me answer the second question which is an easier one. Regarding EGW's book, we do have many books translated, but we do not have a whole set of the Testimonies. We have only three volums of selected Testimonies.

In terms of reaction or communication from the GC to the Chinese church regarding its practice of ordination, yes, we did have some Union officers, including the former Chinese Union Mission President (he was no longer the president since last year), who did not recognize woman ordinatoin. Some churches inside China also know the decisions of the GC session and have chosen not to ordain any woman pastors.
such as Beijing Gangwashi church, but Beijing Chaoyangtang Church does have one ordained woman Pr. Ruth Xu. The lady elder in Gangwashi Church who is the one really in charge openly declared that she will not ordain any woman pastors although she is doing everything an ordained pastor is doing.

The current Union president Pr. David Ng is supportive to woman ordination. Today, my friend who works in the Union based in HK and serves as one of the five regional directors of the Chinese Adventist Church told me that these days they are collecting data for ordained woman pastors and he told me there are more than 20 woman pastors already many of whom I do not know.

One interesting thing is about our Northern Asia Pacific Division President. He is a Korean, but is a very wise and mission-minded leader. I heard that he was responsible for the move of ordaining Pr. Hao Yajie, the pastor of biggest Adventist church in Shenyang who is shown on the picture of this article, the one on the left. Pr Hao, for years, has served as a local elder, with a board of woman board members. According to the report, later last year, the Northern Fellowship of the Northern Chinese Adventist Church got pressure from the Division president and was pressed to ordain her. The reason the Northern Fellowship pastors were reluctant to ordain her was not that she was a lady because there were other ladies ordained such as the one shown in the picture, on the right side, Pr. Zu. Pr. Haojajie was the one organized a huge welcoming event for Elder Wilson when he visited Shenyang from the airport to the hotel they stayed and to the church, here is the website for this event: http://www.zgaxr.com/Item/8350...

I personally don't know how much impact it will give to Elder Wilson after he got in touch with so many woman pastors along his way of visiting God's church in China. I hope he could say,"I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee."Once again, I would like to let the rest of the world know that we were never intentionally in ordaining woman as pastors, like my father in-law and Pr. David Lin, who had been the old patriarchs of the Chinese Adventist Church, both of whom had made it clear that it was because of the need of church we started to ordain pastors who had been called by God and along the way, some woman were called and we just ordained in following the calling of God. There is no conspiracy or whatever political. I could see most original hands of God in my own Chinese Church everywhere, and my prayer is "Let it be till You come again."
Read a fan of Ella Simmons? Have you read this, David?  
http://www.greatcontroversy.or...

"InterestedFriend"

Were you "Your Friend" in a previous existence? This syntax is so familiar . . .  
(Just attempting to keep my friends "straight.")

To the Web editor:

This is the one comment space that always works!

You folks have done a great job and we do appreciate the results. We are only suggesting a few "kinks" which are a little detrimental to active use: the lack of a "reply" button for each and every comment--resulting in this space rather than below George Tichy who has written on the new Disqus system.  
Question: When clicking "sort by oldest first" it does not seem to be working, or else takes more time than allowed. Is this meant to be a method for sorting chronologically?

Elaine

Elaine, I am finding it more practical just to write a new post (in a new writing space like this) instead of a comment to a comment. Even if we write a comment to a comment, it will appear somewhere in the middle of the long page, and who will find it anyway? In writing a new post at least people can see it and read it.
George, the comments index on the right side of the articles shows the name of the poster, as well as the time they posted. If you will click on the time for the comment posting, it will take you directly to the comment, even if it is in the middle of the page.

But only if the comment hasn't moved on, pushed off the index by later comments.

Jan,
Thanks for the hint. I had never noticed that they were two distinct links, it always appeared to me as one link.

I would like to post part of my father in-law's letter to the former GC president Elder Paulsen. My father in-law was a co-worker of the more famous Pr. David Lin. The letter was emailed to Elder Paulsen through Elder Parchment 6 years ago, but received no reply. My father in law served in the former China Division as the president of the Adventist Academy and the Adventist Hospital in Chongqing. This is what he wrote to Elder Paulsen, and represents most of us leaders' current view on many issues:

"Regarding the organizational relations between the Chinese Seventh-day Adventist Church and outside Seventh-day Adventist Church, my point is very simple.

In terms of beliefs, the basis of our faith and standard is the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Keeping the commandments of God and having the faith of Jesus are the characteristics of our faith. The true Church is the home of God's sons and daughters. Jesus is the head of our Church. The Bible is the only standard of our beliefs. The works of the Spirit of Prophecy help us to have a right understanding of the Bible, and also give us correct guidance in the Lord's work. These facts and recognitions indicate that we are in perfect harmony with world-wide Seventh-day Adventists in terms of beliefs."
Our Church is a global religious organization. Although we have the same faith, due to different situation of each country, the organizational relations and methodology of ministry in each country must vary.

I believe that if our loving heavenly Father can move and chose His sons and daughters to organize and lead His Church to push the soul-winning ministry forward, then, in China, our heavenly Father also could move and chose His sons and daughters to rise up and to organize the Church in China, and to make progress in the soul-winning ministry.

This is just what we are told by facts. During the time when the Chinese Adventist Church was under the leadership of a Mission, the leadership structure in Shanghai was huge with lots of personnel spending lots of money, but the baptism was not many. Later when foreign missionaries were gone, and outside financial support was cut off, our loving heavenly Father moved the brothers and sisters in Shanghai to work for the Lord with zeal. Although at that time, in the Shanghai church, there was only one person who got full-time pay and only a few received allowances, the lay members of the church worked with zeal, and every year, there are more than 200 people got baptized. For so many years, the Mission failed to translate the five great works, the Great Conflict Series of the Spirit of Prophecy, and yet, within a short period of two or three years, these were all translated and printed out under extremely difficult situation. When the Mission was still in China for so many decades, was there ever an incidence that more than 1000 or 2000 people being baptized at one time? Never. And yet, when there is no foreign leadership, this kind of baptisms of 1000 and 2000 actually happened. What do these facts indicate? It indicates that the progress of God’s ministry does not depends upon talents, knowledge, and money, but the willingness to suffer hardship and to endue toil, and God’s faithful sons and daughter obey God’s guidance, look up to the results which are given by the Lord through the Holy Spirit. The past experiences, and the understanding of the past give us important lessons. We should always bear in mind of these lessons which the Lord has given us in practical lives."

I hope our world-wide Adventist Church leaders could take above words seriously.

Glen hansen

deleted
Why are Leaders So Obsessed with Church Size?

by Andrew Wilson

Why are so many church leaders obsessed with church size?

It seems an inescapable reality, at least in the circles I move in, that the number of people who attend a church on Sunday is the most commonly accepted metric for appraising how well a church is doing, even amongst people who openly admit that numbers shouldn't be the main thing.

Size of congregation is one of the first things leaders will ask other leaders about, when trying to gauge how things are going; it's one of the first things leaders will say about their own church, when trying to communicate faith or vision; it's an almost indispensable part of the mini-bio for leadership conference speakers ("Mr X leads a church with Y people attending on a Sunday").

Here I am writing about it, yet I still find it hard, when asked "how are things in Eastbourne and Seaford?" by a fellow leader, to stop our weekly attendance number from being part of my answer. Many readers may share my experience.

Yet almost nobody I know actually thinks that church attendance figures are the best, or even a particularly helpful, barometer of church health. So why do we do it?

I've heard a number of theories, some positive, some negative.

On the positive side, some say that it's because numbers represent people, and people matter to God. Which they do, but that doesn't explain why I assume a large congregation is more successful than a small number; gather five congregations in a town together and you'd have a much bigger number, but no more people overall, so I don't think that can be it. Others make a very similar point about unbelievers getting saved, but that involves the assumption that the bigger you are, the more people get converted in your church, which both anecdotally and empirically doesn't ring true (and why do people so rarely say, "X people have been baptised this year"?)

When it comes to introducing leaders, some reason that church size is simply a way of establishing the leadership credentials and gift of the individual; but again, this ignores important dynamics like location and history (seeing a village church grow from 100 to 200 might require more leadership gift than maintaining a city congregation of 300, for instance), not to mention making it sound like Jesus wasn't a very effective leader (120? Pah!).

Not only that, but the skeptic would make the obvious point that there are church leaders who gather thousands by preaching a false gospel, so how can size indicate health? Tricky.

The skeptic’s explanations, however, are equally problematic.

For a lot of observers, church size is all about ego: you want to believe that you're better than others, so you count people (often, with an implicit or explicit “just like King David did, and look what happened to him”).

But Luke counted people in the Jerusalem church, which doesn’t seem to have been about ego;
lots of pastors of smaller churches quote numbers as a way of lauding pastors of larger churches, rather than their own ministries; and I also can’t help noticing that the people who throw this one around almost always base their accusations on reports of megachurch pastors they don’t know, and aren’t qualified to judge, rather than on interactions with people they do know.

Alternatively, there’s the similar view that numbers are just a worldly thing that have crept in with the commercialization, individualism, celebrity adulation and materialism of the culture (fascinatingly, here’s a rare issue on which many very conservative and very progressive Christians tend to agree).

Aside from the awkward counterexample of Luke, though, there is also the (admittedly rather nebulous) point that many leaders of large churches fall over themselves to explain that numbers aren’t the main thing, and that spiritual growth matters much more, which doesn’t fit well with the “infected by worldly values” view. So I don’t think it’s that, either.

My suspicion is that our preoccupation with numbers is driven by four things, and that the fourth of them is the biggest.

The first is that, in a group of churches where the size of congregation drives income and hence the staff base (which is not true in many more established denominations), larger congregations provide greater job security and opportunities to specialise for their leaders, two things which many (though by no means all) church leaders aspire to.

When a leader first plants a church, their ability to work full time for the church in the first place requires the church to grow to (say) 80 people; if they get to 120, they may be able to take on another pastoral staff member; by the time 500 or more are gathering, a sizeable staff team with specialist skills will be in place, enabling the key leader to focus much more on what they do best. For many, this would be appealing, and would therefore be seen as “successful”.

The second is that a number is one of the most rapid ways of placing your church in some sort of context for people who have never been there.

In fact, most church leaders in most denominations will be able to get an intuitive sense of what a church will “feel” like from just two words: the name of the denomination, and the number of people who attend the church. Try it: Methodist, 70. Newfrontiers, 350. Anglican, 1100. Pentecostal, 8000.

More than almost any other shorthand, this enables the unacquainted church leader to get an idea for what the church in question is like: its meetings, its leadership challenges, its building(s), its staff, its flavour. In fact, as Tim Keller has argued, the number probably tells you more about what the church “feels” like, and the responsibilities of the leader you’re talking to, than the name of the denomination.

But although this may explain why we talk about numbers so much, I doubt it can explain the sense of success that is associated with uttering a larger number rather than a smaller one. I suspect it’s a factor, but it can’t be the main one.

Thirdly, it is hard to argue with the fact that in general, and all other things being equal, more gifted leaders lead larger churches.

All other things are often not equal, of course, which makes this statement fraught with risks (not least of which is the danger of suggesting that the guy who leads a church of eleven Muslim converts in Mogadishu is somehow "less gifted" or "less of a leader" than John Hagee or Joel Osteen).

But this should not blind us to the fact that, on a level playing field, it probably requires a greater measure of leadership gift to lead a church of 2000 than a church of 20 (although the leader of 20 may well be more gifted in many other areas than the leader of 2000).

The two most gifted out-and-out leaders of my acquaintance in Newfrontiers, P-J Smyth and Steve
Tibbert, also lead our two largest churches, and those two facts are surely connected. So it is understandably tempting for church leaders to appraise the success of their leadership ministry by the number of people in their congregation. (Whether they should or not, of course, is an entirely different question!)

**But I suspect that the main reason we are tempted to measure leadership success by church size is simple: it’s because it’s easy to count.**

Church leaders are subject to identity wobbles and the desire for career fulfilment like anyone else; we are often insecure; we want affirmation; we want to know that we are doing a good job.

In our previous job(s), we were appraised, assessed, promoted, given pay hikes, and so on, and a tremendous sense of security came from knowing how we were doing, as measured by some apparently objective standard.

Then we started working for the church, and almost all of this disappeared. Mostly, we were fine with that, because we knew that our security was in God, that he was the one who was building his church, and that he cared more about disciples than deliverables, and more about obedience than objectives.

But the desire for a metric of some sort, a measurable way of telling us how we are doing, never quite left us. And the number of people who came to our Sunday meetings was the easiest one to count.

If that sounds far-fetched, consider this thought experiment.

Imagine there was a universally accepted, easily identifiable measurement for doctrinal purity in your church: the Theological Accuracy Quotient (TAQ). Imagine, also, that there was a church equivalent of what financial analysts call Return on Net Assets (RONA): the spiritual growth the church had experienced, given the resources it had. Say there was a Worship Experience Index (WEI), and an Evangelistic Zeal Coefficient (EZC), and a Godliness and Prayerfulness Assessment (GPA).

In this scenario, would the rather pedestrian “numbers on a Sunday” get a look in? I suspect we’d find that conversations in the toilets at leaders conferences quickly started including phrases like “Hi Mike, how’s your WEI at the moment?”, or “God has really blessed us; we have a GPA of 4.0 at the moment”. Attendance figures would be so last season.

None of which is to say, by the way, that we shouldn’t count people (at Kings, we do every week), or that leaders who do count are insecure, or that we should never ask people how big their church is for fear of feeding the beast.

But it is to say two things. One, our attendance figures may be helpful to plan for the future, and helpful to orientate others, but not to measure our success, far less our personal value. And two, as the most successful church planter of them all pointed out, “with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me” (1 Cor 4:3-4). Thank God for that.
By their very nature, pastors are a confidential lot. They counsel numbers of people who share their deepest secrets and problems. They know things about families that could hurt and embarrass them if they shared information freely. So pastors tend to keep secrets and confidential information well. In most cases, you can feel comfortable that your confidence will not be breached when you talk to a pastor.

But most people don’t realize pastors have their own secrets. These spiritual leaders refuse to share their thoughts or pains for fear that their own ministries will be damaged. So they keep the secrets. And they hold the pain to themselves.

As I have spoken to pastors across the land, many have confided in me their hurts and secrets. I don’t think they would mind that I share these secrets with you, as long as I don’t identify them with any one pastor by name.

“My marriage is struggling.”

Pastors are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Oftentimes family meals are interrupted by a call. A planned date with a wife is put on hold because of an emergency related to a church member. Pastors’ wives sometimes wonder if their husbands are married to them or to the church. Resentment and marital fights are not uncommon.

“I fear my kids will grow up hating the church.”

One pastor told me in tears the story of a church member criticizing the pastor’s wife to the pastor in front of his 12-year-old son. The young boy went home insisting he hated the church and never wanted to return. Children are often exposed to the dark side of church life. Pastors worry that they won’t recover.

“I let a handful of critics control me.”

These pastors wish the squeaky wheel didn’t always get oiled, but such is the reality in many churches. “If I ignore them (the critics), “ one pastor told me, “they will make life miserable for me and my family. Sometimes it’s just best to give them their way.”

“I often have anger toward the supportive church members who don’t defend me to my critics.”

“It’s not my critics who bother me personally,” the pastor shared with me. “It’s the so-called supportive members who refuse to come to my defense when I’m attacked by a critic. Going into a business meeting, one of these supporters told me how much he loved me, and how he would always have my back. Fifteen minutes later, I’m being castigated by three members who hardly ever attend church. What does my supporter do or say? Absolutely nothing. That’s what really hurts.”

“I’ve thought about quitting several times.”
These pastors are truly called men of God. They really do love their congregations. Most of them will endure the criticisms aimed at them personally. But when supportive members really don’t support them, or when family members are hurt, many pastors think about quitting. “Only one thing has stopped me from quitting,” the pastor said. “It’s the call of God. That’s what keeps me hanging on.”

Through this blog and through other venues, I intend to do everything I can in God’s power to be the pastor’s advocate. The pastorate is one of the toughest jobs in the world. Indeed, it’s an impossible job in human power alone.

Pastors, how can we best help you? Church members, what can we do to be the best pastor advocate possible?

Share this:

Thom S. Rainer is the president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources (LifeWay.com). He was founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. His many books include Surprising Insights from the Unchurched, The Unexpected Journey, and Breakout Churches.

More from Thom Rainer or visit Thom at www.LifeWay.com
Sci-fi legend Ray Bradbury on God, 'monsters and angels'
By John Blake, CNN
August 2, 2010 12:33 p.m. EDT

Editor's note: This profile of Ray Bradbury was published in 2010. Bradbury died June 5, 2012.

(CNN) -- Ray Bradbury lives in a rambling Los Angeles home full of stuffed dinosaurs, a tin robot pushing an ice cream cart, and a life-sized Bullwinkle the Moose doll lounging in a cushioned chair.

The 89-year-old science fiction author watches Fox News Channel by day, Turner Classic Movies by night. He spends the rest of his time summoning "the monsters and angels" of his imagination for his enchanting tales.

Bradbury's imagination has yielded classic books such as "Fahrenheit 451," "The Martian Chronicles" and 600 short stories that predicted everything from the emergence of ATMs to live broadcasts of fugitive car chases.

Bradbury, who turns 90 this month, says he will sometimes open one of his books late at night and cry out thanks to God.

"I sit there and cry because I haven't done any of this," he told Sam Weller, his biographer and friend. "It's a God-given thing, and I'm so grateful, so, so grateful. The best description of my career as a writer is, 'At play in the fields of the Lord.'"

Bradbury's stories are filled with references to God and faith, but he's rarely talked at length about his religious beliefs, until now.

'Joy is the grace we say to God'

He describes himself as a "delicatessen religionist." He's inspired by Eastern and Western religions.

The center of his faith, though, is love. Everything -- the reason he decided to write his first short story at 12; his 56-year marriage to his muse and late wife, Maggie; his friendships with everyone from Walt Disney to Alfred Hitchcock -- is based on love.

Bradbury is in love with love.

Once, when he saw Walt Disney, architect of the Magic Kingdom, Christmas shopping in Los Angeles, Bradbury approached him and said: "Mr. Disney, my name is Ray Bradbury and I love you."

Bradbury's favorite book in the Bible is the Gospel of John, which is filled with references to love.
"At the center of religion is love," Bradbury says from his home, which is painted dandelion yellow in honor of his favorite book, "Dandelion Wine."

"I love you and I forgive you. I am like you and you are like me. I love all people. I love the world. I love creating. ... Everything in our life should be based on love."

Bradbury's voice booms with enthusiasm over the phone. He now uses a wheelchair. His hearing has deteriorated. But he talks like an excitable kid with an old man's voice. (Each Christmas, Bradbury asked his wife to give him toys in place of any other gifts.)


"I once asked him if he prayed, and he said, 'Joy is the grace we say to God,' " Weller says.

Bradbury was raised as a Baptist in Waukegan, Illinois, by his father, a utility lineman, and his mother, a housewife. Both were infrequent churchgoers.

His family moved to Los Angeles during the Great Depression to look for work. When he turned 14, Bradbury began visiting Catholic churches, synagogues and charismatic churches on his own to figure out his faith.

Bradbury has been called a Unitarian, but he rejects that term. He dislikes labels of any kind.

"I'm a Zen Buddhist if I would describe myself," he says. "I don't think about what I do. I do it. That's Buddhism. I jump off the cliff and build my wings on the way down."

Examples of faith in Bradbury's stories

Bradbury started writing for pulp magazines like "Weird Tales" and "Thrilling Wonder Stories" at the beginning of his career. But even then, faith was an important theme.

In his 1949 story "The Man," Bradbury tells the story of a rocket crew landing on Mars, only to see their thunder taken by a Christ-like figure who had arrived only hours earlier.

In subsequent stories such as "Bless Me, Father, For I Have Sinned," priests and other ordinary people search and find redemption.

Allusions to Christianity are common in his stories, but Bradbury doesn't define himself as a Christian. He considers Jesus a wise prophet, like Buddha and Confucius.

"Jesus is a remarkable person," Bradbury says. "He was on his way to becoming Christ, and he made it."

Weller, also author of "The Bradbury Chronicles: The Life of Ray Bradbury," says Bradbury's religious antenna is most attuned to Christianity.

"The guy keeps writing about Jesus, but he doesn't consider himself a Christian," Weller says.

"He says faith is necessary but that we should accept the fact that when it comes to God, none of us know anything."

The Rev. Calvin Miller, author of the New Testament novels "The Singer Trilogy," sees an optimism in
Bradbury's stories that's reflected in the Judeo-Christian belief that there will be a "new heaven and a new Earth" one day.

Miller once wrote an essay about Bradbury's "Christian positivism," titled "Hope in a Doubtful Age," that was published in "Christianity Today," an evangelical magazine.

After the essay appeared, Miller says, he was sorting through mail at home when he noticed two thank-you letters from Bradbury -- one written when the author was headed to Paris for vacation and another when he arrived.

The following Christmas, Miller says, he received something else from Bradbury.

"Every Christmas afterward, he sent me a card," Miller says. "I guess the religious implications of the article meant a lot to him."

Will space travel destroy our belief in God?

The religious implications of space travel also mean much to Bradbury.

Bradbury has been a relentless supporter of space exploration. Ascending to the heavens won't destroy God; it'll reinforce belief, he says.

"We're moving more toward God," he says. "We're moving toward more proofs of his creation in other worlds he's created in other parts of the universe. Space travel will increase our belief in God."

As he approaches the end of his journey, Bradbury is still conjuring his monsters and angels. His latest book, "Summer Morning, Summer Night," was released last month.

Many of his best friends, though, are not around to read him anymore.

"My personal telephone book is a book of the dead now," Bradbury told Weller in his book of interviews. "I'm so old. Almost all of my friends have died, and I don't have the guts to take their names out of the book."

Bradbury is also concerned about something beyond his own mortality: humanity's survival.

Space travel and religion seek the same goal -- immortality, Bradbury says. If humanity remains on Earth, it is doomed because someday the sun will either explode or flame out.

Everyone -- not just the characters in his story -- must eventually explore the stars, he says.

"We must move into the universe. Mankind must save itself. We must escape the danger of war and politics. We must become astronauts and go out into the universe and discover the God in ourselves."
My last conversation with Ray Bradbury

By John Blake, CNN

The voice on the other line was slurred and halting. My childhood hero, I realized, was nearing the end of his life.

“Hello, Mr. Bradbury,” I shouted into the phone, so loud that one of my colleagues sitting nearby raised his eyebrows.

The call was supposed to be professional. I had called Ray Bradbury’s daughter to tell her that I wanted to write about a different side of her father: What did this science fiction giant think about God and the afterlife?

But that request was a smokescreen. I just needed an excuse to talk to the man whose books and stories had enriched my childhood. Would he be as fun to talk to as he is to read, I wondered?

He was better than I imagined. In more than 20 years of journalism, I have never encountered anyone quite like him.
Bradbury, who died at 91 Tuesday night, is already earning plenty of tributes. The author of classics such as “Fahrenheit 451” and “The Martian Chronicles” was one of the last living links to an era in early 20th century America in which children got lost in stargazing or pulp magazines like “Weird Tales” instead of video games.

There was something magical about Bradbury that went beyond his stories. Talking to him was like taking a Happy Pill. I had a loopy smile on my face hours after talking to him. I felt as if I had hitched a ride on a red balloon floating to the stars.

Part of it was his joy and spontaneity – he overflowed with both. It seemed to give him courage in his art and his life.

“I don’t think about what I do. I do it,” he told me. “That’s Buddhism. I jump off the cliff and build my wings on the way down.”

Then there was his boyish wonder. He sounded like a kid eating chocolate ice cream for the first time. He even lived like a boy until the very end, surrounding himself with stuffed dinosaurs and tin robots in a Los Angeles home painted dandelion yellow in honor of his favorite book, “Dandelion Wine.”

Most of us can relate to the effect children have on adults. Even the grumpiest expressions on adult’s faces evaporate when they see a child giggling and playing. It doesn’t matter if they know the child or not.

Talking to Bradbury made you smile. We only talked about 30 minutes because his stamina wouldn’t allow more. There was no guile or calculation in anything he said; he just felt it - and expressed it.

Here was a man who, upon meeting Walt Disney, said, “Mr. Disney, my name is Ray Bradbury and I love you.” Here was a man who was married 56 years to his muse and late wife, Maggie. Here was a man who loved to eat, laugh and sometimes open his books at night and cry out thanks to God because he was so grateful for his career.

I wanted to tell Bradbury how “The Martian Chronicles” had inspired me when I was in high school. I used to write wooden sci-fi stories and force my pouting younger brother to read them.

I never worked up the courage to tell him that, though. I suspect he heard plenty of tributes like that over the years.

But maybe the best tribute that can be paid to anyone is the reaction I had when I learned he had died. I didn’t feel sad. I smiled and thought, what a wonderful life.

Bradbury never stopped stargazing. Near the end of our conversation, he told me that mankind would eventually have to follow his example. We would have to explore the stars because the sun would flame out.
“We must move into the universe. Mankind must save itself,” he said. “We must become astronauts and go out into the universe and discover the god in ourselves.”

I like to think Bradbury is now taking that journey. Liberated from his body, I can imagine his wide-eyed wonder as he hurtles past stars, comets and all the alien worlds he wrote about.

Somehow I think the man who jumped off cliffs and built wings on the way down is still soaring.

[John Blake] - CNN Writer

Is this a vampire from Stephen King’s “Salem’s Lot” movie or a character from one of the author’s "sermons"? Both, pastors say.

**The Gospel of Stephen King**

By John Blake, CNN

(CNN) – When the horror novelist Stephen King was once asked why he wrote such gross stories, he said he did it because he had the heart of a small boy – which he kept in a jar on his desk.

With his beady eyes and I-just-killed-the-cat grin, King looks and sounds like a horror novelist. But when the Rev. Paul F.M. Zahl read several of King’s novels, he learned something new about the author: There’s a lot of faith behind his fright.

Zahl says some of the most stirring affirmations of Christian faith can be found in the chilling stories of King. The horror master has been preaching sermons to millions of readers for years, only most of King’s fans don’t know it, he says.

“People tend to think that Stephen King is anti-religious because he is a horror writer, but that’s completely mistaken,” says Zahl, a retired Episcopal priest who has written about King’s religious sensibility for *Christianity Today* magazine. “Several of his books are parables of grace in action.”
Want to read a powerful meditation on Jesus’ sacrificial love? Check out how King links the death of the mammoth death row inmate John Coffey (note the initials, J.C.) to Jesus’ crucifixion in “The Green Mile.” King’s “Storm of the Century” is a creepy retelling of Jesus’ eerie encounter with the demon called “Legion” in the Gospel of Mark’s fifth chapter. And King’s epic apocalyptic novel, “The Stand,” reads like a contemporary retelling of the Book of Revelation, with a little Exodus thrown in, Zahl says.

Zahl’s claim about King's faith may sound ludicrous. King, who just released his latest novel, “The Wind Through the Keyhole,” has written at least 50 horror novels such as “Carrie” and “Misery.”

Yet there is an actual body of literature devoted to King’s religious sensibility. Several pastors and authors say King displays a sophisticated grasp of theology in his books, and his stories are stuffed with biblical references and story lines taken straight from the Bible.

“If God brought lawsuits, Stephen King would face a charge of plagiarism,” says J.M. Rawbone, an English horror novelist who has written an essay about the Christian themes in “The Stand.”

King, whose publicist did not answer a request for an interview, has talked about his faith before. He describes himself as a Christian on his website and elsewhere has said he was raised as a “hard-nosed” Methodist taught to believe in the Antichrist.

Some of his literary influences are Christian authors. In one interview, King said he was shaped by C.S. Lewis, author of “The Chronicles of Narnia,” and J.R.R. Tolkien, author of “The Lord of the Rings.” Both Lewis and Tolkien were devout Christians who layered their fiction with Christian themes.

“I’ve always tried to contrast that bright, white light of real goodness or Godliness against evil,” he said in a 1988 interview. “I’m not a proselytizer, and I hate organized religion. I think it’s one of the roots of real evil that’s in the world. If you really unmask Satan, you’ll probably find that he’s wearing a turnaround collar.”

The best way, though, to understand King’s faith is not through his words, but through his stories. There are at least three biblical themes that run through them.

**A child shall lead them**

Every horror writer seems to write a vampire story eventually, and King is no exception. “Salem’s Lot” is one of King’s most popular novels. It depicts a vampire’s attempt to colonize a modern-day New England town.

Traditional vampire stories are loaded with Christian symbolism, but King inserts another biblical theme into “Salem’s Lot” that would reoccur in many of his books.
It comes in a scene showing a standoff between a priest and vampire. Father Callahan tries to protect a teenage boy with him by brandishing a cross. The vampire dares the priest to toss the cross away and face him on faith alone.

Father Callahan hesitates, his faith long diluted by alcohol and skepticism. The vampire wrenches the cross from the priest’s hands, while the boy escapes and becomes one of the vampire’s most formidable enemies.

When the Rev. David Squyres read this passage from “Salem’s Lot,” one of Jesus’ most popular sayings flashed before him: “… Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

In the moral universe of King, children get God better than the adults, Squyres says.

“The vampire humiliates the priest because the priest doesn’t have real faith, but the kid has real faith,” says Squyres, pastor of the Palms Baptist Church near Palm Springs, California.

“The priest represents the Pharisees. They believe in relics. But the children, and the teenager, have a simple faith. They don’t put their trust in institutions. They trust in the Lord,” says Squyres, who has written about King’s Christian sensibility at his website, "talkstephenking."

Many of King’s most popular novels are filled with young heroines driven by faith. It’s a reflection of a famous passage from the Book of Isaiah in the Old Testament: “And a little child shall lead them.”

In “The Talisman” and “It,” King features adolescent heroes who risk their lives battling evil, according to Marylaine Block, who wrote about King’s religious sensibility in an essay called "Something Wicked This Way Comes."

“In both novels, the adults are incapable of understanding the evil that is about to envelop and destroy their world. They see the signs, but choose not to understand them. Only the children know what is happening, and know that it is up to them to save the people they care about,” she wrote.

God can be cruel

King’s most explicit Christian novel is “Desperation,” which features another adolescent hero driven by faith. The boy, David, is converted by a miracle and prays to God for help. King depicts his faith without irony and with reverence.

“Desperation,” though, contains an unusual description of God that reveals some heavy theology from King, several pastors say. During the bloody climax of the story, a character tells the boy that God is “cruel.”

That line caught the attention of Zahl, the Episcopal priest. It speaks to what he calls “the answerable sovereignty of God.”
Zahl says King is depicting a side of God that’s woven into the Bible. It is not the God whose eye is on the sparrow, but the Holy Other, incomprehensible, the one who allowed Job to suffer.

It’s the same side of God that the narrator in “The Green Mile” reflects on when he reminisces about the death of the innocent John Coffey, the Christ-like figure who never hurt anyone, but perished while a villainous guard lived on.

Zahl points to this passage from ”The Green Mile”:

“Yet this same God sacrificed John Coffey, who tried only to do good in his blind way, as savagely as an Old Testament prophet ever sacrificed a defenseless lamb. ... If it happens, God lets it happen, and when we say, ‘I don’t understand,’ God replies, ‘I don’t care.’ ”

Zahl says King can say things about God in books that pastors can’t say in the pulpit. In King’s novels, people often suffer while doing good.

“Americans generally want to hear that everything is really terrific all the time,” Zahl says. “Americans want to control and manage everything, and they’re eager for anything that pumps them up. When you preach a message from the Bible that life is much more difficult, and there’s a huge amount of suffering, those messages don’t always go down well.”

'God chose the weak things'

As a teenager, King used to collect scrapbooks filled with newspaper clippings detailing the crimes of serial killers, says Stanley Wiater, co-author of “The Complete Stephen King Universe: A Guide to the Worlds of Stephen King.”

King's mother grew so concerned that one day she asked him why he kept the scrapbook.

Wiater says King answered with: “I think there’s evil out there. I want to know what it is, so when it comes, I can recognize it and get out of the way.”

In King’s books, characters can’t avoid evil. They have to confront it, but they often don’t fit the conventional definition of heroes.

“The Stand,” another explicitly Christian novel, illustrates this pattern. A plague has wiped out mankind, and a group of unarmed survivors are dispatched via a vision from God to confront a satanic figure called the Darkman.

The group seems to have no chance. One is an elderly, genial professor; another a deaf mute, and a third figure is a genial man with the mental capacity of a child. Against them: the Darkman’s ruthless army, which literally crucified its foes.

The makeup of the group underscores another popular religious theme in King’s work that’s reflected in this line from the apostle Paul in the first Book of Corinthians: “God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.”
Zahl, the Episcopal priest, says so many heroes in King’s books are broken people: physically frail, alcoholic, disabled and lonely. Even the evil people are rendered with compassion.

“King understands grace at a deep level,” says Zahl, author of "Grace in Practice." “He typically concentrates on the marginalized and the outsiders who ultimately carry the day. God often does his work where people are the most messed up.”

King may have converted Zahl, but the priest and others admit there’s a risk invoking the horror novelist in the pulpit.

When Zahl mentions King in church, he says many listeners think first of books they want to keep away from teenagers.

Still, there are secret converts.

“Half of the other people in the congregation have read Stephen King, though they may not want to shout it out to the world,” he says. “They know what I’m talking about. They come up later and they say I’m really thrilled that you know about him.”

The doubters shouldn’t be surprised that King’s stories contain religious themes, says Rawbone, the English horror novelist and author of "Bunker."

The Bible is filled with terror: demons, ghosts, floods wiping out mankind and the rising of the dead.

“Good horror examines the struggle between good and evil,” he says. “The Bible is the history of that struggle.

“The Bible is in many ways the ultimate horror novel.”

John Blake - CNN Writer

http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/06/02/the-gospel-of-stephen-king/
Quiz: Lessons from growing churches

Opening new churches and moving into new territory are tactics common among growing church organizations, a new study shows. Take our quiz to learn more about how churches grow.

by David Briggs

The comedian Lewis Black joked that he saw his own vision of the apocalypse when he was standing in front of a Starbucks in Houston and turned around and saw ... another Starbucks.

“There is a Starbucks across the street from a Starbucks,” Black said. “And, ladies and gentlemen, that is the end of the universe.”

Or a sign of the times -- in both the corporate and the religious marketplace.

Although many church leaders are concerned about decline, the 2010 U.S. Religion Census showed that some religious organizations are experiencing substantial growth.

The ones that showed big gains, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, nondenominational congregations and some Pentecostal churches, tended to grow as they expanded into new geographical territory.

And expansion is not limited to Christian groups. Muslim and Buddhist congregations were reported in all 50 states, and Hindu houses of worship were found in 49 states.

What lessons can mainline leaders draw from this data?

For starters, the U.S. religious “marketplace” has gotten a lot more competitive.

Nondenominational and independent churches, for example, now can be found in 88 percent of U.S. counties. If their numbers were added together, they would be among the top five religious groups in 48 states.

Hartford Seminary researcher Scott Thumma says independent churches have become “an alternative to denominational religiosity in every market.”
In a nation where people tend to move more frequently and are less likely to be loyal to denominations, religious traditions that are not in sizable markets are at greater risk of losing members to other groups.

On the positive side, planting congregations in new areas seems to pay off.

Census maps of three fast-growing denominations show that the new counties populated by the three groups are scattered across the country, not just in traditional strongholds.

The study found that from 2000 to 2010, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reported a 45 percent increase in adherents; the Seventh-day Adventists, 30 percent; and the Assemblies of God, 15 percent.

Overall, the religious groups “that were showing big gains also were entering into new territories,” said Dale Jones, a researcher on the study.

The good news for everyone is that even denominations with stagnant or declining growth are finding success outside their traditional bases.

For example, the Catholic Church showed an overall decline in adherents between 2000 and 2010. But it grew more than other Christian groups in 11 states, including Georgia, Nevada and Oregon -- outside the church's base.

Fast-growing denominations also tend to close a higher percentage of churches than do declining denominations.

From 1985 to 2005, the Church of the Nazarene, which was growing, closed an average of 1.2 percent of its congregations annually. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which was experiencing substantial membership losses, closed just 0.66 percent annually during the same period. Kevin Dougherty and Jared Maier of Baylor University and Brian Vander Lugt of Grand Rapids, Mich., reported the results in the Review of Religious Research.

Overall, evangelical groups have shown a greater willingness to close congregations that are unsuccessful in one area and move to another in response to demographic changes, Jones said. They also are more likely to start new churches, even though new congregations, like new businesses, have a higher failure rate.

In the end, “starting new churches is the most effective way of gaining new people,” said Jones, who is director of research services for the Church of the Nazarene Global Ministry Center.

The numbers also show that there is still a great untapped market out there for all religious groups.

There were more than 340,000 congregations in the U.S. in 2010, with about 150 million adherents. That’s less than half the total U.S. population, leaving a lot of people without a spiritual home.

And those people have far more opportunities to worship than to stop by a certain coffeehouse; even though Lewis Black might think they’re ubiquitous, there are only about 13,000 U.S. Starbucks.

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Even when you find your work gratifying, feel called to serve the Lord, and -- with the notable exception or two -- have reasonable colleagues, you still experience days when sitting at your desk seems the epitome of unproductive drudgery.

Consider this: Move to a results-oriented workplace. What that means is that you can do whatever you want, whenever you want to do it, as long as your work gets done. The work is an agreed-upon set of goals set forth by your supervisor.

You might think you already work this way. After all, isn’t that what deadlines and a yearly performance review are for? Certainly. But where are you supposed to do the work? Chances are, you’re expected to be in your office or cubicle for a set amount of time each day or week.

A Results-Oriented Work Environment (ROWE) does away with all of those expectations. Companies that embrace ROWE often do away with flex time, personal time, sick time and vacation time. You can work whenever and wherever you want, as long as the work gets done.

Maybe your best sermon preparation happens at Starbucks, or you’re most productive in the wee night hours, or your preschooler has an afternoon event you’d like to attend. Does it matter where or when work happens as long as it gets done?

Our view of time at work is antiquated. It’s left over from the Industrial Era and not conducive to the innovative productivity currently driving the Information Age. By shifting our expectations of work from being physically present in the office to measuring productivity by results, we’re able to work more efficiently, collaboratively and creatively.

Here are three reasons a Results-Oriented Work Environment can help you work smarter:

**A better work-life balance.** Capitalize on a warm day by working for a few hours and then going on a hike. Get your errands and appointments done when it’s convenient. ROWE researchers found that employees who participated were healthier in general and more apt to visit a doctor when sick. That’s big, considering ministry can be an unhealthy career option.

**We have the technology.** Home wireless service is now akin to paying for electricity. With that availability you can Skype with a writing partner in Switzerland, have a meeting via Google+ hangouts, sync calendars with your team and utilize project management software for most initiatives. All of this from wherever you connect to the internet -- a tea shop, the Laundromat, your kid’s gymnastics practice or your beach getaway. We have access to the technology; let’s use it!

**Create space to network, collaborate, recharge and innovate.** When focused on results and not attendance, you can devote time for soul-rejuvenating activities that will help you do your job better, be happier, and produce new ideas. You’ll finally have time to join that pastor network, engage in spiritual direction, bounce strategy ideas off
other like-minded professionals, pursue a new project or glean new ideas for your ministry.

Beyond ditching the office, it’s hard to argue with a healthier, happier, more creative employee that maximizes resources and meets key goals.

But ROWE helps supervisors too. It makes them more accountable for setting concrete goals for their team and provides an easy way to measure the results of poor performers.

Yes, the church is about being faithful. But faithfulness also means using the talents God gives us. Working in a ROWE capitalizes on those talents and gives you the chance to expand your missional impact and be fully present to those you encounter and serve.

What do you think? Is a workplace focused on results feasible for your church or organization?

Jennifer Vander Molen is an electronic media associate for the Reformed Church in America. She is a graduate of Northwestern College. She worships at Fifth Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

3 Comments

need the meatspace
Posted by Josh Leo at May 24, 2012 11:00 am
I totally agree with this in concept (a lot of people just show up and call that work) but I find so much value in sharing space with my coworkers to help answer questions, brainstorm, and form relationships, if we all worked random schedules that we wanted we would never have those interactions (an instant message or even phone call cant beat a whiteboard brainstorm session sitting together)

RCA
Posted by Guest at May 24, 2012 12:28 pm
Hi Jennifer! Great article. Maybe there’s a way to convince the RCA of this innovative idea? LOL! Keep up the great work. Jeanette

I agree...
Posted by Rev. Robin Swieringa at May 30, 2012 12:39 pm
I had either the good or the misfortune of working in a ROWE as my first job out of college. After a few months, primarily because I like to create efficient systems to do repetitive tasks, I had mastered the logistics and content of the job as I entered it. Because I did have the freedom to do something different, I went on to revamp and improve (according to organizational long-timers) almost everything having to do with the job.

Later, I discovered that in too many workspaces, if you get done with your work quickly, you are required to help out someone who can’t get theirs done on time. For myself and others, this is one of the top reasons people move on to new jobs, or move on to their own businesses, and so many organizations stifle the creativity they claim to desire.

As a supervisor, when an employee was getting things done quickly, I invited them to identify a work-related project they wanted to do, with excellent results.

Thanks for the thoughts!
INTERVIEW
Matt Perman on how Christians should think about productivity.


Matt Perman wants to help you get your inbox to zero. He wants you to effectively multi-task, organize your desk, and schedule your day. But Perman, who blogs at whatisbestnext.com and is working on a book on productivity, is interested in more than managing workflow. CT spoke with Perman, who is senior director of strategy at Desiring God, about how his tips to manage productivity connect to theology.

Do you think Christians downplay the importance of productivity?

Yes, I think some do. Because we can think, Oh, it's not spiritual. You have to make a living and learn to do that job well. So I realized that I need to know more than theology; I need to know how to do my job well. That made me realize the importance of learning about the practical.

How does productivity fit with theology?

Theology gives significance to the practical. The practical helps advance theology. It's not that we have theology over here, here's practice, rather, we can think theologically about the practical. That means we realize that the practical things we are doing are part of the good works that God created us in Christ Jesus to do. So when we're doing practical things, we're actually doing good works. That's a theological understanding of the things we're doing every day.

Is it somewhat an American ideal to be productive? Could you take your message to another country and communicate a similar idea?

I want to define it as getting the right things done. Sometimes that means just being with people rather than accomplishing tasks. Being productive on a Tuesday night might mean saying, I'm not going to do e-mail tonight. I'm just going to hang out with my family. Biblically speaking, productivity is about fruitfulness and serving people. So there doesn't need to be a tension between being productive and having relationships, because productivity exists for the sake of people. We need to define productivity not simply in terms of work products—get as much done as possible—but what are the things, tangible and intangible, that serve people and make life better.

People who are in creative fields might need to spend time just thinking about their next creation. Where does idea generation fit into productivity?

Here's one of the ironic paradoxes of productivity. Usually the most productive thing you can do is not have your schedule jam-packed. You need to have white space in your schedule. That's where a lot of the ideas come from. With graphic design, one thing you realize is that white space is a good thing, on the page or onscreen. It's the mark of an amateur to try to cram as much as possible on the page and leave no white space. You don't want to crowd everything you possibly can into every possible moment you have.

Let's say it's 2 p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon and I'm just spinning my wheels at work. I might go home for the day. We have sort of a results-oriented work environment; the idea is do what you need to do to get the job done. So I'm going to go home and hang out with my kids and go for a walk. Sometimes I might go to a movie. That creates the space for ideas to come. Solutions to hard problems result from that. Then, because I took two hours to just say I'm not going to be productive, I get ideas which might save 20 hours or more later.
Do you have tips for ministry leaders or people who are trying to be effective in their ministry?

Here's one. Put the most important things in your schedule first and do those first. The less important things will find their places, or maybe they shouldn’t be done at all. Some advocate an opposite approach, like David Allen's approach [in Getting Things Done]. What I found is that his approach inclined me to do the small things, the sand and the gravel, because I’d have a list with 50 things on it. I looked at that list wondering what are the 20 smallest things I can do to shorten my list? What I found after weeks and months of that was the most important things were sliding because I wanted to get stuff off my list.

Who decides what the most important things are?

You need to have and understand your priorities. This is one of the differences between David Allen and Stephen Covey. Stephen Covey takes a top-down approach. He says figure out your mission—figure out your roles and goals. David Allen wouldn’t disagree with that, but he says he finds so many people are immersed in the details that they can’t get to the top. So he says, let's start down here and handle this stuff and then climb up.

Jim Collins is a business thinker who talks about something called the hedgehog concept, for a company to decide what issue to focus on. I think something like that is helpful for individuals too. Collins talks about three intersecting circles of what you can be best in the world at. What are you most passionate about? And what drives the economic engine? What am I most passionate about, what am I gifted to do and can be effective in? Where do those three circles overlap? We need to think in terms of all of our vocations in life.

Are the young restless reformed crowds who are interested in systematic theology more likely to be drawn to these kinds of systematic personal productivity systems?

I do think there's a natural tie. There is a tie between sound doctrine and doing good works, since productivity is about good works, and being part of the reformed mindset naturally leads to being good for the sake of others. I don't know what to what extent most people are consciously making that tie. There might be some people inclined to learn about productivity because it can be logical like theology. I would want to even reshape some of the motives because you want to do good, appealing to the emotions just as much as to the reason.

The main tie in the interest in productivity is that sound doctrine leads people to want to do zealous, radical, good works. That’s also applicable to the reform-minded who love God just as much and are just as interested in learning about doing good. The Catalyst movement and Saddleback, I love what those guys are doing.

It does come back to the tie between sound doctrine and right living. The point of William Wilberforce’s book was not exhort people to change their behavior but to lay out what the gospel really is, the primary doctrines of Christianity. Sound doctrine causes joy, which is the fuel for obedience and love. I would say, that’s the connection between the young restless reformed, who are loving these great doctrines, that creates joy which wants to have an outlet for doing good for our neighbor. Productivity practices are helpful tools to make us more effective in that.

How does technology fit into productivity? Can't it become a burden?

I would say technology amplifies our ability to do good. We have the ability to reach far more people with what we do, to partner with more people and collaborate with more people. Clay Shirky talks about this a little bit in his book Cognitive Surplus—about how the Internet allows us to do these things. We’re such a wealthy nation and have so much free time, and because of the Internet we’re unhooking from the television, coming together and doing productive things in our spare time. There’s also a pitfall. Now we’re getting 100 e-mails a day. There are days when I come home and I wasn’t able to get my e-mail inbox down to zero before I left. I’m at home with my family, but my mind is distracted because of the way my e-mail [fosters that]. Productivity practice has been helpful to help minimize those ill effects.

What does that have to do with the gospel?

Ironically, we need to realize that we are accepted by God apart from our productivity, on the basis of what Christ has done through faith. Now that we are accepted by God, the gospel causes us to be productive. I define productivity really as good works. So what happens is the gospel frees us to be able to do good works and drives us to do good works. We are so thrilled about what God has done for us through Christ—so excited about that—that we want to do good to our neighbor. We want to serve our neighbor because of what God has done for us. The gospel causes us to want to engage in a life of good works, which is what productivity is. The specific skills of productivity help amplify our good works.
Are there Christians who have exemplified this?

Two incredible individuals in Christian history who exemplify this are William Carey and William Wilberforce. Wilberforce led a life full of good works. Here's the interesting thing: Wilberforce wrote one book in his lifetime, and it was not on social reform. It was on the doctrine of justification by faith apart from works. He did it because he realized that the way to produce a life of good works and social reform is not to focus first on good works and social reform, but on the source of those good works—which is the gospel. The fact that we are accepted by God apart from works then drives us to do good works because of our gratitude and joy. May all of us be little Wilberforces.

William Carey left his country in order to bring the gospel to people who do not have it, making a radical sacrifice. There's a book called The Legacy of William Carey about everything he did. He brought innovation to their banking system over there. He brought innovation to various social reforms. He was into botany even. He didn't limit his life to the socially spiritual; he was a holistic Christian, and the gospel drove him to be that way.

How does social justice fit into the idea of being productive?

One of the important things about social action is we need to be informed about the way we do it. We need to understand things like economics so we can be informed about what choices we get behind in terms of addressing issues like global poverty. A recent book that talks about the importance of going about social justice in a way that helps is When Helping Hurts.

We need to have an expanded perspective on productivity. Productivity is not simply personal. Social action is really just part of productivity in this larger sense. There's a lot of opposition to addressing needs, things like 52 unanswered e-mails in my inbox when what I really need to do is talk to my neighbor down the street. I need to be able to manage those effectively so I can be meeting the needs of real people. Productivity skills help us overcome obstacles that get in the way of helping people. They also amplify our ability to do good.

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Related Elsewhere:

Matt Perman blogs at www.whatsbestnext.com on being more effective at doing good in life, work, business, and society.

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The 50 Best Christian Places to Work | The survey highlights companies that focus on building a culture of trust. (May 1, 2004)
I’m nearing the 10-year mark of being a church employee. That practically makes me a veteran. Ten years, four churches and millions of cups of Starbucks later [I’m convinced that’s the drug of choice for church workers] I’ve had a first hand-look at how the church works [by work I mean how it functions day-to-day in the church office] and after reading REWORK I’m convinced we’ve got some things that drive me crazy that need to change.

Before I continue, let me say this: I love what I do. Every single day [except meeting days] I’m excited to be a part of the life of the Church. It’s an immense privilege to be able to do what I do and I wouldn’t trade it for anything… well, most of the time.

With that… here’s 10 Things That Drive Me Crazy About Working for a Church

1. We are really good at burning people out.

For some reason we feel like working long hours against ridiculous timelines and neglecting our personal lives, health, or families is a good idea… as long as it’s for God.
Not so much.

The average church employee stays at a church for about 2 years before they peace out.

“It doesn’t pay to be a workaholic. Instead of getting more done and being on top of your game, you actually start a chain reaction that results in decreased productivity, poor morale, and lazy decisions. And don’t forget the inevitable crash that’ll hit you soon enough.”

We all need to learn one simple word: NO. Even though something may be for a great cause, it’s not worth losing your soul to make it happen.

2. We focus way too much on what we don’t have.

One of the most common complaints I hear from church staff members has something to do with what they don’t have.

In the Gospel account of the feeding of the 5,000 all they had to start with was 5 loves and 2 fish, but in the end, there was more than enough.

“Constraints are advantages in disguise. Limited resources force you to make do with what you’ve got. There’s no room for waste. And that forces you to be creative.”

Celebrate simplicity. Remember God can take nothing and make it into something.

3. We are afraid of change.

I guarantee we’ve all been a meeting where the phrase, “well we heard people say ___________ about ____________…”

Fill in the blanks… the music was too loud, they didn’t like that message, they don’t like this, they don’t like that…

These conversations usually center on a sensitive topic in the church: change.

And how do we respond? We quickly turn down the volume, change our minds, or reverse a decision.

“Sometimes you need to go ahead with a decision you believe in, even if it’s unpopular... remember negative reactions are almost always louder and more passionate than positive ones... so when people complain... let them know you’re listening. Show them you’re aware of what they’re saying. But explain that you’re going to let it go for awhile and see what happens.”

Give change time and be more concerned with what the voice of God is saying to you and let that influence you more than the voices of other people.

4. We use “let me pray about it” as an excuse to get out of making decisions.

I absolutely believe it’s important to pray about major decisions that impact the life of the Church – we shouldn’t move unless we feel God leading us. But all too often we use the “let me pray about that” card to delay simple decisions.
“Whenever you can, swap “Let’s pray about it” for “Let’s decide on it.” Commit to making decisions. You’re as likely to make a great call today as you are tomorrow. Don’t make things worse by overanalyzing and delaying before you even get going.”

Pray about what’s important but don’t sweat the small stuff… just make the call and ask for forgiveness later if need be.

5. We LOVE meetings.

For some reason we love meetings. Planning meetings, prayer meetings, planning meetings for prayer meetings. I feel like we have entirely too many and lose valuable time we could be devoting to things that matter.

“Meetings are toxic. If it only takes seven minutes to meet a meeting’s goal, then that’s all the time you should spend. Don’t stretch seven into thirty. Think about the time you’re actually losing and ask yourself if it’s really worth it.”

What’s one meeting you could condense or remove from your schedule? DO IT!

6. We try to do way too much.

Most churches are hyperactive and never sleep. We thrive on activity. The whole “less is more” thing hasn’t sunk in yet.

What if we focused on doing a few things REALLY well instead of doing a million things half-aced? << that’s my PG version

“Cut your ambition in half. Lots of things get better as they get shorter. Getting to great starts by cutting out stuff that’s merely good.”

What are some good things you’re doing that could be sacrificed for great things that will make a greater impact?

7. We try to be something we’re not.

If I see one more 40somethings pastor dressed in Abercrombie so help me…

Ok, but for real… not just pastors but churches in general tend to have a problem of trying to be something they’re not.

“Don’t be afraid to show your flaws. Imperfections are real and people respond to real. There’s a beauty to imperfection. So talk like you really talk. Reveal things that others are unwilling to discuss. Be upfront about your shortcomings. It’s OK if it’s not perfect. You might not seem professional, but you will seem a lot more genuine.”

BE YOU!

8. We spend too much time looking at other churches.
We spend way too much time looking at what other churches are doing, be it a church across the country or the church across town. It’s great to watch and learn from others’ successes, but if you look at other churches as your competition your focus is waaaay off.

“Focus on competitors too much and you will wind up diluting your own vision. Your chances of coming up with something fresh go way down when you keep feeding your brain other people’s ideas. You become reactionary instead of visionary.”

Your church has a unique and specific role it’s meant to play in the life of your community. If your church ceased to exist, what would people miss? Whatever that is should be where you focus your time and energy.

9. We worry about people leaving.

We’re quick to cater to the needs [or demands] of people who have been around for a while instead of focusing the needs of people who are new.

We should spend more time figuring out how to create a wider front door instead of focusing on how we can “close the back door”… even if that means losing people who give us a lot of money [there, I said it].

“Scaring away new [people] is worse than losing old [ones]. Make sure you make it easy for [new] people to get on board. That’s where your continued growth potential lies. People and situations change. You can’t be everything to everyone. [Churches] need to be true to a type of [person] than a specific [person] with changing needs.”

10. We don’t feel trusted.

For whatever reason churches tend thrive in a weird culture of mistrust. It’s not or conducive to a positive working environment. Some churches have crazy rules, policies and procedures that create layers of red tape that, while probably well-intentioned, communicate a lack of trust.

“When you treat people like children, you get children’s work. Yet that’s exactly how a lot of companies treat their employees. When everything constantly needs approval, you create a culture of nonthinkers. You create a boss-versus-worker relationship that screams, ‘I don’t trust you.’”

This is one I don’t have a quick answer to but know it’s something I’ve experienced and something I hear about consistently from others who are in the trenches. BUT, I will say working in a church that has a trusting environment, I’ve never felt so empowered to do my job and that has fueled my productivity exponentially.

Final Thoughts…

Church work is tricky but I will say the blessings have far outweighed the frustrations.

The challenge of being on staff at a church lies in the fact that we don’t have the option to leave our work at the end of the day. Our work is deeply connected to what we believe and to our faith community. It’s easy to get passionate about what we do because we do is attached to something that’s incredibly personal to us. We’ve got to learn the discipline of drawing boundaries.

While the Church has endured throughout the ages, each generation has had its unique challenges and opportunities. I believe the challenge and opportunity facing next generation leaders lies in how we manage and steward the resources we’ve been blessed with.
We’ve never been more resourced than we are today… which is why things like REWORK are important for us to latch on to. We don’t need to change what we do [connecting people to Christ], we need to change how we work.

My prayer is that we can REWORK and do the work God has called us to do, not simply by applying business ideas, but by seeking God, being led by His Spirit and serving the Church with excellence and humility.

“Whatsoever you do, work at it with all your heart…” – Colossians 3:23

This post was inspired by reading REWORK by Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson of 37signals. It’s an important book that I think should be required reading for any next generation church leader.

I’m giving away three signed copies this week… Here’s how to win…

1. Tweet This: I just entered to win a signed copy of REWORK! Comment here and RT to enter: http://bit.ly/9DX3eD
2. Comment Below: With your Twitter handle [so I can verify you did step 1] and share something that frustrates you about the way the Church works.
3. Check back at 5 PM CST Thursday: I’ll randomly choose someone to win!

Congrats to @DaveSandell, you’re the winner!

You May Also Like…
Tim Schraeder

Tim Schraeder is passionately committed to helping churches effectively communicate the timeless message of the Gospel in a way that’s relevant to our ever-changing culture. He presently serves as the co-director of the Center for Church Communication and is the creator and general editor of Outspoken: Conversations on Church Communication, a field guide for church communication leaders. Tim calls Chicago home but is presently residing in Sydney, Australia. Subscribe via RSS | Subscribe via Email | Twitter | Facebook | Google+ | Sign Up for My Newsletter

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EJJohnson

Here's my word vomit on this. I love God, but I hate being on staff at church. I'm moving off staff in June and am thrilled. The work environment is unprofessional. Grace becomes a cop-out to not get things done on time, not respond back to people, etc. It's embarrassing. One person on staff can work exceptionally hard while one simply coasts. Accountability is invisible. You get concerned about bringing up a problem in your ministry (even though that's a fact of life). In our church, only outreach gets noticed. Homeless people are trophies. The kids from the block we adopted are valued more than "regular" kids. I hate how church staff act like martyrs and yet at the same time have an inflated view of themselves. The odd thing is this - I work at a great church. God is doing amazing things! But me? I'm done. I love God but as of right now never plan on working at a church.

Tim Schraeder

Hey Steve,

I totally agree with you. The church's real competition is the things people give their time and...
attention to outside of the church... I was trying to point out that oftentimes we look at the church across town as our competition... and that our focus is way off if we do that.

**Joseph Taylor**

What exactly is a "next generation church leader"? ... can't decide if I'm leading this generation, today's generation, yesterday's generation, tomorrow's ... sheesh I'm so confused ... - truly great church leaders are multi-generational church leaders ... one thing that drives me crazy about working for a church .... useless buzz words and mindless hyperbole ... now where's my Abercrombie shirt? :) Article makes some good points ... thanks ... seriously!

**Noah Lomax**

Tim,

This article is phenomenal. Especially with #1 & #6, I feel a lot of this is a cycle we create. We work to create a better program, this raises the level of expectation, which increases our level of work, ad nauseam.

Thanks for the great reminders!

**Josh Burns**

I needed this today. Thanks buddy. It's been a challenging week.

**Eugene**

So wonder if I disagree with you? Does it mean that you are right and I am wrong. Your perspective although has some validity in my judgement misses the big picture of why a person does what they do. There were plenty of things about the churches that irritated Paul also and he wrote most of th N.T. epistles dealing with these issues. Judging the motives of others is a tricky thing and should be done with great caution. The older I get the more I hate people judging my motives when they don't know my heart. I could counter most of your points with a a good biblical reason why ministers do something of the very things that you hate. Like hating that people leave or visiting other churches or dressing in a certain fashion. I hate it when people leave the church because they are offended at
another person and never resolve there issues...or burning out for Jesus...If you would have been at Microsoft in the beginning days there was a whole lot of burn out going on for Bill or if you were hanging with Steve in the beginning of Apples founding there was lots of meetings and working long hours. Just my opinion but I would rather focus on the 10 things I love about the church.

Jeff

I think the greatest news to seeing that other churches struggle with this stuff is to find out that it is not just us! We rely so heavily on volunteers and I can't help but think that the approval process is a detriment to morale....

Go God!

Allison Maskell Hawkes

Excellent piece, all 10 are so true and relevant. Keep up the great work!

A Nonymous

man. I'm a church employee for a very well known church and I have had it - I'm moving on. Contrary to point 9, our church's focus is almost all based on new people and making them feel the welcome you'd want to feel in the most hospitable of homes.

But it's a very image and experience driven church with a very driven agenda to reach new people, which happens successfully and thank God for that. But at the core, I find being on staff the hardest thing because I no longer feel like my work is a sacrifice to God, but rather that church OWNS me, and I don't have a say about it. Like, I want to take off a Sunday (for which we get very few off in the year), to help my wife settle into our new place we're moving to on a Saturday, but I can't because we need all our team to be at church.

That just flips my lid and makes me so mad, because church isn't supposed to be a totalitarian rule that consumes everything to the point where I can't take time for my family when I need to. Correct me if I'm wrong, but my first ministry should be to my wife, not to a job that happens to be church work.

Talk about burn out - I'm not even burning anymore, I feel like dry ash blowing in the desert. Church doesn't feel like church, but like a job, and some people navigate it well for years but I can't do it anymore.
it really comes down to the individual institution. there are many churches that take advantage of people and there are possibly churches that nurture and protect their people. i have only heard of the latter, and experienced the former. some churches (leadership really) are so insecure that they are constantly re-identifying themselves & switching stuff up. it's tough enough partnering with a new work, but it's tougher still partnering with a church that's been around 35 years and is still trying to be like the latest & greatest. this is prevalent and this wears the staff out. Not mentioned in the post is how tough it is working for a church when appearance is key: Have you ever had to turn down a volunteer with M.S. who wanted to greet at the front door because it may "offend" or it wasn't the "image/ first thing we want the people to see" upon arrival? that wasn't mentioned in the post, but that's the kind of stuff many staff members are dealing with. or the worship leader having to place the heavier less attractive singers to side stage so they aren't in the TV shots... what about the paid in peanuts community outreach pastor that is "encouraged" to redo the wardrobe (designer jeans & embroidered shirts)... while his children can't afford to go to band camp. image is stressing staff out too. IMAGE. that should be on the list;

Once people learn that the right way is God's way, everything and everybody will line in order.

Unemployment would solve this guy problems and probably bring a attitude of gratitude back to his perspective.

great post.

i read your point number 1 and it felt like you were writing about my work :D although i do not work for the Church, my organization's schedule is about the same... at least for those staff members who care for the company.
the other points i agree on as well, 'cuz being on the Church board is sort of being "part-time employed"

thanks for jumping in!

glad you've learned the value of NO... we all need to improve in that area.

seems so silly doesn't it?

The paralysis of analysis. The Church, unfortunately, are pros at that.

Great insights and write-up Tim! I haven't been "on staff" at a church in a while, but most of the work I do is with churches and has me interfacing with staff of multiple churches. It's amazing to see how consistent the "inner world" of church offices are even if the outward worship styles (and denominations, etc) are different.

These points you've made are great for a variety of churches. Thanks again!

vikki1807

It bothers me so much to watch people protecting their piece of the pie. The politics and environment of distrust is so distasteful. I'd leave if I could afford to.
I'm @TonjaC. Many of my first responses have already been mentioned either by you or by commenters. Thanks for letting us discuss this - it's good to know you're not alone. One frustration is when churches try to cater to too many opinions and preferences and end up reaching no one well. Another is what I tweeted in response to you yesterday - it's frustrating to not be able to honestly publicly say what really frustrates you because you're afraid of being called an unspiritual whiner.

By the way - both this post and yesterday's both say to check back Thursday for the winner. Does that mean you're giving away two today, and I've missed out on the deadline for this one? Or did you mean to say Friday on this one? Just curious

It frustrates me when we church employees don't recognize that our volunteers are working full-time jobs, likely working extra hours there, and then volunteering several hours more at church each week. So we have to gladly give many more than 40 hours a week just to stay even with our hard-working volunteers.

Esther21467

I hate that just because you work at a church, people feel you're not allowed to have conflict with your coworkers.

@aaronalexander

The church definitely needs to be reworked. replanned. reorganized. One of my many frustrations from working with the church for many years was it's lack of preparation. Visionary pastors have this idea their going to build this great ministry but make their vision so black and white it becomes hard for those outside their perspective to fit in their vision. By that I mean, they only want to do things the way that they want to do them. And a lot of times the pastor will tell/demand what's being done for sunday's message in the prior Tuesday's staff meeting. No way to avoid burnout like that. You get
stressed over worked to constantly meet a deadline you should realistically have 4-6 weeks to prepare for. That's my rant over lunch today on church work!

Twitter: @yarby

Kyle Reed
@
kylereeds
That it meets in a building

Kyle Willis
@
kylewillis
Good post Tim. As one who works for the church, definitely could relate to some of those and guilty of more!

Steve Fogg
Tim, great post.

One point I'd disagree with is part of point 8... that other churches are our competition.

Our 'competition' is Golf, Basketball, Football, not other churches ;-) 

I resonate strongly with the fact that we look at other churches... the grass always seems greener. mo money, mo edgier sermon series, mo media exposure. You get the drift.

The thing that drives me crazy about working for a church is the lack of budgets [although you argued against it in point 2 and in your closing comments]. But there are lots I WANT to do, but aren't able to do which is very frustrating... especially when so many of it is elementary church communications stuff.

Another thing that drives me crazy is the time sometimes to get things done. Committees to convince, people who don't understand the power and potential of good communications in assisting them to do
their job.

That said. I love my church. Love the volunteers that serve with me and for me.

I wouldn't have it ANY other way.

Sigh. Winge over. Out.

james

i'll jump in! (@jugglingnutcase)

i'm glad someone else is drawing connections like this, i've long thought about how their business advice (often) fits so well into life and faith...

my favorite would be your comment on the value of NO. Just because God can do anything and everything doesn't mean we don't have limits!

in college i ran into my inability to say no, so in working with a college ministry i allowed myself to be completely overwhelmed...

as long as i'm on the topic, have you ever read any Henry Cloud, i think his stuff lines up quite nicely with a lot of ideas.

last bit: i think my main frustration (fits in with 6) would be that often we're so busy doing church things that we don't have lives and aren't regular people anymore.

Jeremy Landon

@gpyouthguy

Scott

I think the saying (paraphrased) that "churches often organize God right out of the picture" is, unfortunately, true.
It's interesting that the concept of "organization" implies that the participants have a "handle" on their "road map". Whereas our goal, as Christians, is to have God "take the wheel"... the resulting tension is predictable, isn't it.

@signdealers

@dianabog

so true.

@valerieed

@valerieed I think forgetting that not everyone thinks about the church all week, except for those in the ministry, is hard to remember...And needs to be recalled when the volunteers don't seem to "get it" (whatever IT is)

@Jennay00

Great Article! I really enjoy reading your articles, and thank you for sharing and a chance to win Rework :)

jama burch

@jamaburch

5 years being on church staff -- people think we have to do everything the church down the street (and around the corner, across the country) does.

Tim Schraeder

there's definitely something wrong with that.
AMEN.

i had a longer comment about the burn out topic and surrounding yourself with volunteers and a replacement (ie. a Timothy), but I guess it didn't go through. To sum it up, you can avoid a lot of burnout issues by building up a passionate team of volunteers and training a replacement for yourself (Timothy). Having someone to replace you does not put you out of a job, but allows you to further the vision of your church even more, ultimately furthering the Kingdom of God.

i wish i could wear a robe to work!

Definitely loved "Getting Real."

definitely a tension we have to carefully navigate!

welcome to the church world... don't let this scare you out of what you are doing... just let it inform you on what to expect and how you can respond!
your welcome!

Hey Kari! welcome to the madness. glad to have you here!

absolutely agree with you on our fear of hurting or bothering people. I think sometimes that causes us to be dishonest by not being completely truthful in different situations. challenges, challenges!

if any book will do it, it's this one!

that's a fantastic idea... training your replacement. i think we should always be in the practice of reproducing ourselves!

Always frustrated by how loooong the decision making chain can be, especially when you need to act quickly.

@ivarskupcis

@laurynw
I'm with you on #1. Just because it's "ministry" doesn't mean your workers should have to do more than their fair share. No wonder so many people are leaving service in the church.

Great post! <Added to my Reader> And thanks for the contest!

@tlamarca

I also hate that often times it is tough to go to church when you work at a church. When you're there, you are working on the weekend rather than growing in your walk and developing relationships with the community. It's something I struggle with.

Bianca Juarez

@BiancaJuarez

Thank you for this amazing insight! I love it :)

Erin

Thank you.

@tlamarca

Great post.

I think think the burn out one probably hits home for more people than anyone realized. I have worked at the same church (whether it be intern, part time, or full time) for the past 8 years and I have watched as fellow interns and other workers have burned out. I'm not saying that it's the church's fault or the workers' fault. It just tends to happen. Sometimes it's because someone doesn't know how to say no. Other times it's one person doing the workload of 3 and they don't know how to get help.

I think one of the best solutions to avoid getting burned out is to train your replacement. We call it our "Timothy" here. Training a replacement does not put you out of a job, but allows you to expand what you do (and/or move up in the "company") without the pressure of always having to do the smaller...
tasks that add up to big burn out. Along with training a Timothy is surrounding yourself with volunteers (often times including "Timothy") that are passionate about the vision of the church and particularly how your role furthers that vision. I lead production teams at my church made up of volunteers. Before we got to the point of having as many volunteers as we have now, I was running myself ragged. Now, even when I have an incredible long work week, I feel refreshed because I know that it is not all up to me to keep the ministry running. I have volunteers and a Timothy that are working along side of me.

@holycowcreative Love when books move you to act. Great post Tim.

@rfbryant

I've been on staff for about 11 years, and what frustrates me the most is the feeling that no matter how much time I spend in the Word and in seeking God's purpose for me and my ministry, it just doesn't matter. Just don't think - do what we've always done and that's fine. (As if what GOD wants done doesn't matter.)

My second most frustrating thing is when the staff and other leadership worry more about whether people might be "hurt" or "bothered" by us what God says than we are about just doing it. I mean, shouldn't we listen to what God says and do it? I think He's already got the skinny on who might be upset by it and He might just want them upset!

Kari

Great post. (I'm new here... and hooked.)

@philoday

This is a great post. I can see elements of all 10 of these in my ministry. #3 is particularly interesting because the external pressures on ministry which are driving change are exponentially accelerating. The Church's response tends to be either to plow over people with change or dig heals in and resist
change. The severely complicating factor is that, unlike the business world, we have the ultimate unchanging message. A significantly messy aspect of doing ministry is that the Church seems to have about an equal number of change catalysts and change curmudgeons.

great article. i just started working at a church in january, but my parents have worked in churches for many years and i've been around them long enough to see these trends. great article. (twitter: @chrisrouse)

I think a lot of the things that make working in a church difficult come from the fact that churches are called to be different than businesses. Businesses are all about the bottom line, but churches are about loving God and loving people. Church staff have to not only think decisions through logically but pray and listen to God. In churches, relationships matter more - we actually make time in our meetings to listen to how everyone is really doing. A lot of churches try to make decisions by consensus. And for churches each person is a real person, not just a customer or a statistic. All these factors make working in a church harder, slower, and more complicated than working in the business world, IMO.

I am really enjoying your adaption of the book into the church. When I used to work for FCC (soon after you left to work with RCC) it was overall a great experience but so many of the things you pointed out reminded me of why I didn't like working for a church. Not saying working in the corporate world is much different but like @isaacdowning said it was so hard to try anything new or just make a decision.

Working mostly with the worship and multimedia there seemed to be even more red tape. You can put a lot of time and effort into those things for one person so say ______ about ______ and nothing changes. I would really love to see this mind set really make its way into the church. For everyones sake (not just the people that work there).
Great post. I loved 37 signal's "getting real" ebook as well. @chadconnally

LOL!

Faith worketh by Love.

And I see neither in churches I visit.

What's the purpose in outreach and membership programs if you fail to demonstrate the love of God, as Christ loved us, to attendees, new or old.

What's the point of your plans and programs if you fail to be ambassadors of the Good News, reconciling men to God through Jesus? I don't want your smiling fake attitudes. I don't want your "try not to offend" sensibilities. Politeness is a counterfeit of satan. A sinful substitute for lovingkindness.

I'm not interested in your plastic entertainment. i can stay home and watch American Idol and get more value from that deception. Meat. Meat. Meat. Churches don't even serve milk. Blue John, I believe is what they used to call it.

The lack of fluidity in the leadership culture.
Once again, great thoughts, Tim!

My number one gripe with church work is the bureaucracy. People are so afraid of making the wrong decision, that they bury the decision making process in heavy layers of boards, committees and congregational votes - and the end result is no momentum and no progress! (a little too honest, maybe...)

Also, I hate meetings. I completely agree with Jason Fried's mindset - you aren't just losing one hour, you're losing 10 hours, because you pulled 10 people away from what they were doing to attend a meeting that almost always could have been handled via email.

@adamsterner

1, 3, and 9 run rampant. Great way to reevaluate. Thank you for the article, and a chance to win a signed copy of Rework. @adamsterner

Andy S

@notandysmith

As a youth pastor, I spent more of my time in meetings and prepping for meetings than I did being a pastor to youth.

Anders

I really loved this piece! Am positively surprised to see this kind of thinking within the not-always-thought-of-as-modern world of the church. My Twitter handle is @atroenblad

cole wilson

tim- great stuff here. not in it anymore but i remember all of those things.

@jonnyfishstix
The Church is (generally) about 15 years behind the rest of the world in art, business, taste, culture, etc. That in itself doesn't bother me so much as the reasons:

1. The Church is steered by a fear of criticism.

2. The Church draws too big of a distinction between what it's doing and what the rest of the world is doing. Like it or not, the leaders in art and business are what the church labels as "secular". And as long as out-of-date Churches are only willing to go to out-of-date Christian organizations and artists and consultants for their inspiration, their grip on reality and the culture around them will keep slipping - along with the world's respect for the Church and ultimately Christ.

This is a generalization.

The way Church works in America is a bit weird. In the UK pretty much none of these things happen - it's pretty much a guy in a robe talking about God and being really disorganised.

One thing that frustrates me about the way Church works is how easy it is to get distracted doing what we do for the wrong reasons.

Often quantity of programming seems more important than quality of programming. The menu of ministries, classes and programs on most church web sites is overwhelming.
that sometimes it's too busy doing church instead of being the church
Tim Schraeder is passionately committed to helping churches communicate the timeless message of the Gospel in a way that's relevant to our ever-changing culture. Read More >>

Latest Tweets

- @eliza_delgado i will! Thank you! 15 minutes ago
- @vanessa1919 thank you :) 15 minutes ago
- Headed to @HillsongCollege's City Campus this AM to talk w/worship & creative arts students on social media + faith! Prayers appreciated! 27 minutes ago
- @dgoodmanson ;-) thats great! about an hour ago
- Putting the final touches on my presentation for @hillsongcollege tomorrow. Honored to speak to students at http://t.co/SXvrpasA about 8 hours ago

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St. Luke Episcopal Church of Kalamazoo pays $468,000 severance to pastor accused of shoving elderly parishioner

Published: Tuesday, June 05, 2012, 7:00 AM   Updated: Tuesday, June 05, 2012, 11:06 AM

By Julie Mack | jmack1@mlive.com

KALAMAZOO, MI -- The Rev. Jay Lawlor, who resigned from St. Luke Episcopal Church in March 2011 after he was charged with assault for shoving an elderly parishioner, has been given a $468,000 severance payout by Western Michigan Bishop Robert Gepert.

Gepert — who took over the church a year ago after accusing the congregation of fiscal mismanagement — paid the $468,000 from the church's fund reserves, according to a report on VirtueOnline.org. Two church members confirmed to MLive/Kalamazoo Gazette that the amount in the report appeared to be correct.

The church's current rector, the Rev. Randall Warren, declined to comment. The bishop's administrative assistant said that there would be no comment from the diocese.

Founded in 1837 in downtown Kalamazoo, St. Luke's is one of the area's oldest and most prominent congregations.

Lawlor, 42, who was cleared in a jury trial of the assault charge, served at St. Luke's for 21 months. The payout was equivalent to more than a three-year severance package.

Lawlor's 2010 compensation was $125,000, which included $85,000 in salary, plus housing and benefits.

That year, the church had a $630,650 operating budget and $1.9 million in investments at the end of the year, according to records shared last year with the Gazette.
The congregation learned this spring about the severance payment to Lawlor, but members Eric Breisach and Charles Mercadal said that members were not eager to revisit last year's controversy.

"The sum (of the settlement) is large, but people have accepted it," said Mercadal, a member of the St. Luke vestry, which is the board of lay leaders.

Breisach, who was one of a half-dozen members of the congregation to testify against Lawlor in his assault trial, said the settlement "is what it is."

"It's not something that we had control over," Breisach said. "We're focused on moving forward.

"Whether people are upset about the amount, at this point, they're happy that this is the end of that chapter," Breisach said.

Lawlor became pastor of St. Luke's in June 2009, and almost immediately there were clashes between the rector and the congregation over church finances and other aspects of the church operation. There were complaints about Lawlor's leadership and pastoral care, while he accused the lay leaders of overstepping their authority.

After an investigation of the conflict, Gepert announced in March 2011 that was he was personally taking over the church, disbanding the vestry and putting Lawlor on a four-month paid leave.

Gepert also said the church had been fiscally irresponsible by consistently running a deficit in its operating budget, and ordered Lawlor to lay off the church secretary, the facilities manager and the music director.

A few days later after Sunday Mass, several parishioners got into a heated conversation with Lawlor about the changes.

Lawlor stalked away from the conversation, but in the process, witnesses say, he used his arm to shove 76-year-old Marcia Morrison out of the way. He pushed her hard enough that witnesses said Morrison stumbled back for several feet before she caught hold of a pew.

Morrison filed a police report, and Lawlor was charged with assault and battery, a misdemeanor. After a daylong trial two months later, a jury decided the incident did not rise to the level of criminal behavior. By that time, Lawlor had already resigned from the church.

According to his online Google profile, Lawlor has "decided to stop working as a full-time priest so he could focus on his writing and other projects." Lawlor has written extensively in the past about how Christians should address global poverty.

Meanwhile, St. Luke's has their new minister and the congregation seems to be growing again.
Warren "is the perfect person at the perfect time," Breisach said. "We're so blessed to have him."

Mercadal agreed.

"He had some wonderful ideas about how to grow" the church, Mercadal said.

He said that after a tumultuous period at the church, things are now quiet and the attitude is positive. Gepert still remains the church's official rector, but is re-establishing the church's self-governance.

"It's amazing what time and forgiveness can do," Mercadal said.

Julie Mack is a reporter for the Kalamazoo Gazette. Contact her at jmack1@mlive.com or 269-350-0277, or follow her on Twitter at Twitter.com/kzjuliemack For all posts by Julie Mack, click here.

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In U.S., 46% Hold Creationist View of Human Origins

Highly religious Americans most likely to believe in creationism

June 1, 2012

by Frank Newport

PRINCETON, NJ -- Forty-six percent of Americans believe in the creationist view that God created humans in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years. The prevalence of this creationist view of the origin of humans is essentially unchanged from 30 years ago, when Gallup first asked the question. About a third of Americans believe that humans evolved, but with God's guidance; 15% say humans evolved, but that God had no part in the process.

Gallup has asked Americans to choose among these three explanations for the origin and development of human beings 11 times since 1982. Although the percentages choosing each view have varied from survey to survey, the 46% who today choose the creationist explanation is virtually the same as the 45% average over that period -- and very similar to the 44% who chose that explanation in 1982. The 32% who choose the "theistic evolution" view that humans evolved under God's guidance is slightly below the 30-year average of 37%, while the 15% choosing the secular evolution view is slightly higher (12%).

The Most Religious Americans Are Most Likely to Be Creationists
Gallup’s question wording explicitly frames the three alternatives in terms of God’s involvement in the process of human development, making it less than surprising to find that the more religious the American, the more likely he or she is to choose the creationist viewpoint.

Which of the following statements comes closest to your views on the origin and development of human beings?

By church attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church Attendance</th>
<th>Humans evolved, God guided process</th>
<th>Humans evolved, God had no part in process</th>
<th>God created humans in present form within last 10,000 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attend church weekly</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend church almost every week/monthly</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend church seldom/never</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

May 3-6, 2012

GALLUP

Two-thirds of Americans who attend religious services weekly choose the creationist alternative, compared with 25% of those who say they seldom or never attend church. The views of Americans who attend almost every week or monthly fall in between those of the other two groups. Still, those who seldom or never attend church are more likely to believe that God guided the evolutionary process than to believe that humans evolved with no input from God.

Majority of Republicans Are Creationists

Highly religious Americans are more likely to be Republican than those who are less religious, which helps explain the relationship between partisanship and beliefs about human origins. The major distinction is between Republicans and everyone else. While 58% of Republicans believe that God created humans in their present form within the last 10,000 years, 39% of independents and 41% of Democrats agree.

Which of the following statements comes closest to your views on the origin and development of human beings?

By political party ID

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party</th>
<th>Humans evolved, God guided process</th>
<th>Humans evolved, God had no part in process</th>
<th>God created humans in present form within last 10,000 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

May 3-6, 2012

GALLUP
Those With Postgraduate Education Least Likely to Believe in Creationist Explanation

Americans with postgraduate education are most likely of all the educational groups to say humans evolved without God's guidance, and least likely to say God created humans in their present form within the last 10,000 years. The creationist viewpoint "wins" among Americans with less than a postgraduate education.

Which of the following statements comes closest to your views on the origin and development of human beings?

By education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Humans evolved, God guided process</th>
<th>Humans evolved, God had no part in process</th>
<th>God created humans in present form within last 10,000 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or less</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

May 3-6, 2012

Implications

Despite the many changes that have taken place in American society and culture over the past 30 years, including new discoveries in biological and social science, there has been virtually no sustained change in Americans' views of the origin of the human species since 1982. The 46% of Americans who today believe that God created humans in their present form within the last 10,000 years is little changed from the 44% who believed this 30 years ago, when Gallup first asked the question.

More broadly, some 78% of Americans today believe that God had a hand in the development of humans in some way, just slightly less than the percentage who felt this way 30 years ago.

All in all, there is no evidence in this trend of a substantial movement toward a secular viewpoint on human origins.

Most Americans are not scientists, of course, and cannot be expected to understand all of the latest evidence and competing viewpoints on the development of the human species. Still, it would be hard to dispute that most scientists who study humans agree that the species evolved over millions of years, and that relatively few scientists believe that humans began in their current form only 10,000 years ago without the benefit of evolution. Thus, almost half of Americans today hold a belief, at least as measured by this question wording, that is at odds with the preponderance of the scientific literature.

Survey Methods

Results for this USA Today/Gallup poll are based on telephone interviews conducted May 10-13, 2012, with a
random sample of 1,012 adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia.

For results based on the total sample of national adults, one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum margin of sampling error is ±4 percentage points.

Interviews are conducted with respondents on landline telephones and cellular phones, with interviews conducted in Spanish for respondents who are primarily Spanish-speaking. Each sample includes a minimum quota of 400 cell phone respondents and 600 landline respondents per 1,000 national adults, with additional minimum quotas among landline respondents by region. Landline telephone numbers are chosen at random among listed telephone numbers. Cell phone numbers are selected using random-digit-dial methods. Landline respondents are chosen at random within each household on the basis of which member had the most recent birthday.

Samples are weighted by gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, region, adults in the household, and phone status (cell phone only/landline only/both, cell phone mostly, and having an unlisted landline number). Demographic weighting targets are based on the March 2011 Current Population Survey figures for the aged 18 and older non-institutionalized population living in U.S. telephone households. All reported margins of sampling error include the computed design effects for weighting and sample design.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

View methodology, full question results, and trend data.

For more details on Gallup’s polling methodology, visit www.gallup.com.

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Death of snake handling preacher shines light on lethal Appalachian tradi...
Death of snake handling preacher shines light on lethal Appalachian tradition

By Julia Duin, Special to CNN

(CNN) – Mack Wolford, one of the most famous Pentecostal serpent handlers in Appalachia, was laid to rest Saturday at a low-key service at his West Virginia church a week after succumbing to a snake bite that made headlines across the nation.

Several dozen family, friends and members of Wolford's House of the Lord Jesus church in tiny Matoaka filled the simple hall for the service, which lasted slightly more than an hour. At the request of pastor's widow, Fran Wolford, media were forbidden inside the building. Wolford's own dad was a serpent handler who died from a snake bite in 1983.

Mack Wolford, who was 44, was bitten by his yellow timber rattlesnake at an evangelistic event in a state park about 80 miles west of Bluefield, in West Virginia’s isolated southern tip.

He enjoyed handling snakes during worship services, but it’s a tradition that has killed about 100 practitioners since it started in the east Tennessee hills in 1909.
In recent years, Wolford feared the tradition was in danger of dying for lack of interest among people in their 20s and 30s. It’s why he drove to small, out-of-the-way churches around Appalachia to encourage those who handle snakes to keep the tradition alive.

“I promised the Lord I’d do everything in my power to keep the faith going,” Wolford said last fall in an interview I conducted with him for the Washington Post Sunday magazine. “I spend a lot of time going a lot of places that handle serpents to keep them motivated. I’m trying to get anybody I can get.”

He hadn’t much hope for churches in West Virginia, where serpent handling is legal. Some surrounding states, including Tennessee and North Carolina, have outlawed it. He had his eyes on a Baptist church near Marion, North Carolina, where, he said, “there’s been crowds coming” and its leaders wanted to introduce serpent handling, the law be damned.

“I’m getting the faith started in other states, where I am seeing a positive turnout,” he said. “Remember, back in the Bible, it was the miracles that drew people to Christ.”

Wolford wanted to travel to the radical edges of Christianity, where life and death gazed at him every time he walked into a church and picked up a snake. That’s what drew the crowds and the media; that’s what gives a preacher from the middle of nowhere the platform to offer the gospel to people who would never otherwise listen.

“Mack was one of the hopes for a revival of the tradition,” said Ralph Hood, a University of Tennessee professor who’s written two books on snake handlers and is probably the foremost academic expert on their culture. “However, I am sure others will emerge, as well.”

Indeed, others are emerging, including a growing group of 20-somethings clustered around churches in La Follette, Tennessee, and Middlesboro, Kentucky. Their individual Facebook pages show photos of poisonous snakes and “serpent handling” appears on their “activities and interests” lists.

Pentecostal serpent handlers - they use "serpent" over "snake" out of deference to the Bible - are known for collecting dozens of snakes expressly for church services.

At church, they’re also known to ingest a mixture of strychnine - a highly toxic powder often used as a pesticide - and water, often from a Mason jar. These same believers will bring Coke bottles with oil-soaked wicks to the church so they can hold flames to their skin.

Key to understanding this culture are a pair of verses from the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament: “And these signs will follow those who believe: in My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

Mainstream Christians - Pentecostals included - do not believe Mark 16:17-18 means that Christians should seek out poisonous snakes or ingest poisonous substances.
But experts say that several thousand people – exact numbers are hard to come by – in six Appalachian states read the verse differently. Known as “signs following” Pentecostals, they see a world at war with evil powers and believe it’s a Christian’s duty to take on the devil by engaging in the “signs.”

Thus, a typical service in one of their churches will also include prayers for healing and speaking in tongues.

But it’s the seeming ability to handle poisonous snakes without dying from their bites that makes these Pentecostals believe that God gives supernatural abilities to those willing to lay their lives on the line. If they are bitten, they refuse to seek antivenin medication, believing it’s up to God to heal them.

At the Church of the Lord Jesus in Jolo, West Virginia - one of the country’s most famous “signs following” churches - a group of worship leaders passed around a rattlesnake at a service last year on Labor Day weekend. The snake twisted as it was passed from man to man.

The women clapped, and one tried handling the serpent but quickly gave it back to a man. The pastor, Harvey Payne - who has never been bitten by a serpent - posed for the cameras, the reptile twisting and curling.

“My life is on the line,” he exulted. “All Holy Ghost power!”

If a believer is bitten by a snake and dies, these Pentecostals reason, it is simply their time to go.

“It devastated me,” one Tennessee serpent handler confided to me about Wolford’s death last week. “It just shook my very foundation. But (handling snakes) is still the Word of God.”

Vicie Haywood, Wolford’s mother - whose husband died 29 years ago from a rattlesnake bite during a worship service - is heartbroken. But she has no doubts about the righteousness of serpent handling. “It’s still the Word, and I want to go on doing what the Word says,” she told the Washington Post on Wednesday.

Last fall I asked Wolford if handling serpents wasn’t tempting God, a common question from mainstream Christians.

“Tempting God is disbelief in God, not belief in Him,” he said, citing an incident in the Old Testament in which Moses slapped his staff against a rock to provide water in the desert rather than speak to the rock as God had commanded.

By using his own resources – a stick – rather than counting on God to act when Moses simply spoke to the rock, the patriarch was condemned for lack of belief and forbidden to enter the Promised Land.

He added that he regularly drinks strychnine during worship services, to show God has power over poison.
“In my life I’ve probably drunk two gallons of it,” Wolford said. “Once you drink it, there is no turning back. All your muscles contract at once. Your body starts stiffening out. Your lungs; it’s like you can’t breathe.”

He’d gotten sick from strychnine a handful of times. “I was up all night struggling to breathe and move my muscles and repeating Bible verses that say you can ‘drink any deadly thing and it won’t hurt you,’ ” Wolford told me, recounting one episode. He said a voice in his head taunted him as he struggled to recover.

“The devil said, ‘You’re going to die, you’re going to die,’ ” he said. “You can’t go to the hospital. There is not a lot they can do. But (seeking medical help) means you’re already starting to lose faith.”

After he was bitten last Sunday, Wolford may have thought his faith would bring him through that trauma, as it had so many times before. He had four spots on his right hand from where copperheads had bitten him.

When he finally gave his family permission to call paramedics, about eight hours after being bitten, he must have known his battle was near over. By the time he arrived at the local hospital in Bluefield, he was dead.

The Editors - CNN Belief Blog

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?
Jeff Scoggins  How I wish that the Adventist Church would convene a summit to discuss and define what spiritual formation and re-formation means in an Adventist context. There's no reason for this to be a dividing point among us if we would just define our terms.

May 13 at 6:34pm via mobile

Larry Hamm  Very good question. The only thing we can do is to be a witness and example of Christ's character. AKA - We can only plant the seed. The rest is up to the Holy Spirit.

May 13 at 6:42pm

Kessia Reyne Bennett  Wow. I love some dear people who have just that same problem. It's heartbreaking. Is it possible that our emphasis on last-day delusions and trust-no-man theology has helpfully led us to stand firmly in defense of Bible truth against huma...

See More

May 13 at 8:47pm via mobile

Victor M. Reyes-Prieto  Perhaps, the issue is not so much about definitions and semantics but a disconnect between the pulpit and the fellowship hall. Perhaps, the way we do "church" has something to do with this. Perhaps, we need to dig deep to understand why t...

See More

May 13 at 10:30pm

Best Practices for Adventist Ministry Kessia  I think you've identified one of the problems, and that is a paranoia built into the heart of our theology. I was told as a child that our pastors and teachers would turn against us (which makes me wonder why I went into ministry anyway!), and so we could trust no one. - Loren

May 14 at 7:43am

Carl Buchanan  "mind control. I will only say in my defense that if I was using it on them, it didn't work!" Thanks for the laugh.

May 14 at 7:51am

Jeff Scoggins  I agree that definitions won't turn around people intent on fear. However, definitions would allow balanced leaders to at least speak the same language on these matters, and that would be a giant step that we need to take.

May 14 at 8:02am via mobile

Best Practices for Adventist Ministry Good point, Jeff.

May 14 at 8:51am

Paul Coneff  I've run into this mindset a lot in ministry. Jesus spoke to a group of people, (His own disciples), who were afraid for their lives because of a conspiracy theory that was reality...

May 14 at 9:11am

Paul Coneff  Jesus spoke to them after He rose again from being tortured and murdered. Jesus talked to His disciples on the road to Emmaus and those hiding in the upper room. Jesus revealed to both groups the same truths: ...

See More

May 14 at 9:23am

Best Practices for Adventist Ministry Paul, it's true that paranoia sometimes proves true. Perhaps you've heard the saying, "Even a stopped clock is right twice a day." I'm just asking how much we are to base our faith on our fears.

May 14 at 9:23am

Delwin Finch  Loren: I see this attitude of fear and paranoia as a subset of our American society in general. Just as there is a deluge of information and "spin" about anything and everything in the general media all day long, so also there is now a stea...

See More

May 14 at 9:45am

Paul Coneff  I see Jesus ministering to His disciples fears, (fears based on the reality that their Messiah had been killed and they could be attacked soon as well), by sharing the Suffering Messiah, with His wounds, as a fulfillment
of prophecy. There ...

See More

May 14 at 9:46am · 2

'Ovidiu Radulescu' It's another symptom of our identity crisis... Thank you, Loren.

May 14 at 10:28am

Carrol McBroom Grady As long as our church has to use fear to keep members "in line" we have disregarded what the Bible says: "Perfect love casts out fear."

May 14 at 10:39am · 5

Nancy Chadwick It's amazing how the kingdom of darkness pervades the thoughts of God's children to keep them from having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, to make them afraid to pray or be intentional about creating space and time to be with the ...

See More

May 14 at 10:41am · 3

Bradley Williams Best Practices...Loren. On your post to Kessia:

Kessia, I think you've identified one of the problems, and that is a paranoia built into the heart of our theology. I was told as a child that our pastors and teachers would turn against us (w...

See More

May 14 at 11:49am · 2

Best Practices for Adventist Ministry Someone just pointed out to me that I wrote "neolinguistic" when I meant neurolinguistic. I knew the correct word when I looked it up; not sure what went wrong in my brain. Maybe my mind was being controlled... :-)

Loren

May 14 at 12:13pm · 2

Christiane Marshall I just want to make the point that it isn't really limited to our denomination. I've had encounters with many people with similar fears in other protestant groups. Lots of KJV only groups. Lots of people convinced there are jesuit spies in ...

See More

May 14 at 12:21pm · 3

Tom Reynolds It saddens me to have watched this happen first hand in a church where I attend. As I view this problem and read about it a common thread that always comes up is individuals who took there eyes of Jesus. We sometimes are too much like Pet...

See More

May 14 at 6:23pm · 2

Brak Bnei What we are seeing is simply the fruition of the main fallacy in Protestantism: The idea that a person can read the Bible, and the Bible alone, and be able to fully understand its truths in a vacuum without any guidance from "man".

It is b...

See More

May 14 at 8:39pm · 1

Gary Reece Loren, I recently read a passage that comes to mind as I read about your dilemma with members leaving the church. I'm sure you will recognize the author. "We have a most solemn, testing message to give to the world. But too much time has be...

See More

May 14 at 10:22pm

David Brown Pastor Seibold, How true your words are! Satan is leaving no stone unturned to divide the house of God and turn it against itself. It is astounding to me that they would flush the whole church for......... what............the country? He...

See More

May 15 at 10:49am

Dean C. Read I have been where some of our brethren are today, pondering what's wrong with the church. However, I have always held onto Jesus, and always will. Ellen White's words, about the church that it will appear that it is going to fall, but IT WI...
**Dean C. Read** I have one and only one solution as "we" who want to make a good difference in the lives of our brethren, whether they agree or disagree with our position. It is Mark 9:29--"This kind comes out only by prayer and fasting." The disciples at...

**Kermit Netteburg** Loren,

May 30 at 5:33am

I see I am very late to this discussion. Everyone else was done weeks ago. Should we truly believe, "Better late than never"?  

May 30 at 5:33am

We're trying a couple of things at our church to help people focus on facts rather than fears. One of the things is publishing a passage of Scripture for people to read in the days leading up to the worship service. We don't call it spiri...

**Jeff Scoggins** "fascinating commentary on the life of Christ..." love it! I'm going to use it.

May 30 at 6:09am via mobile

**Cyril Millett** True, I don't believe you ever practiced "neolinguistic programming." Why did I guess this? I have not heard of "Neolinguistic Programing" before. What I think you are referring to is "Neuro-linguistic Programing" or NLP.  

Yesterday at 6:44am

**Don Shelton** This is an interesting discussion that is a flash back to the late 80s and early 90s. The same charge of mind-control and the use of neuro-linguistics was being leveled by a prominent "sky is falling" pastor in Florida when the denomination was involved with "listening skills" taught by a Dr. Savage(sp.?). We seem to recyle these "fears" every so often!  

Yesterday at 9:35am

**Steve Cinzio** Perhaps the problem with disfunctiona things that blur church memebers is that their induction into the church is defective. and when this is substituted by end time frenzy a need for excitement is created which feeds on more and more on the often on misunderstood and confused notions of what it means to be a Christian. If it's new it's rarely true and if it's true it's rarely new.

14 hours ago
Note from Loren: In the May 14 issue of Best Practices for Adventist Ministry, I wrote a piece about my experience with a church member whose family wanted to drop their membership because of the influence of independent ministries. I apologize to 3ABN for mentioning them in the story without talking to them privately. The story was mine, and did not reflect the feelings of the NAD leadership.

Like · Comment

John Knobloch didn't see anything wrong in the way you wrote it, Loren. I've seen the influence of certain independent ministries, and how they dovetail very nicely with the work of Satan [angel of light], to disaffect folk from our church. Are we getting to the place where we can't say anything, without stating that it's not the feelings of the NAD leadership, when I'm sure a lot of them would agree with what you said? When the fruit of certain independent ministries is akin to Christian terrorism, in my opinion, in the name of "defending the truth".

June 8 at 6:41pm

Don Shelton Has it always been the case that one of the easiest ways to raise money for a ministry is to talk about the Jesuit priests (or some other evil influencer) who have infiltrated the church at it's highest levels?! It almost seems that there is a sinister side of every saint that deep down wants to believe that the church is infiltrated by the forces of demons. Wouldn't it be nice if we would rally around the true mission of the church, focus on what is right about God's body of believers and move forward to accomplish the task of hastening His coming?!

Yesterday at 9:40am