"Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing!"

- John Wesley

I once heard a church member say about a conflict his congregation was going through, "I don't know if it's our pastor's fault or not, but if he leaves and we get a new pastor, things will go back to being good again."

It's a popular belief that a congregation's difficulties can be fixed by changing pastors. That's the reset button: control+alt+delete one pastor, and reboot with a new one. It's a fix sometimes requested by lay leaders. Conference leaders, even if they know it's not the healthiest solution, rely on it as a quick and easy one.

This idea rests on beliefs that, first, conflicts are in some way more attributable to the pastor than other causes; second, that pastors come and go anyway, so it's no skin off of the pastor and family to be forced to leave; and third, that it's better a pastor be sacrificed than that the whole church suffer.

Except it's not always a solution. Take away the pastor, and you're still stuck with the congregation. When you look back through a congregation's history and see a series of conflicts, a series of pastorates ending badly, it's hard not to conclude there's something in the group's personality that makes this happen time after time. I once sat in on a professional church analyst's evaluation of a congregation. In studying their history he saw (and pointed out to them) that they had a pattern of feuds with pastors, with one another, and even with other congregations almost since their beginning. Pastors had left discouraged, whole families had periodically self-purged from the group. The pattern was continuing, and the remnant seemed almost proud of their pugnacious personality.

Sometimes it is the pastor's fault. But not always. Perhaps not often. Most pastors I know are conscientious and very well-intentioned. Healthy groups should have the ability to deal with conflict and get past it. It's
seldom handled that way, though. We default to solutions that don’t require the exercise of spiritual maturity on the part of any of us, and so the pattern repeats.

The strength of the Seventh-day Adventist personnel system is that a good pastor can get transferred to another parish. (For decades we believed frequent moves for pastors a virtue: don’t stay anywhere long enough to encounter problems.) Pastors themselves may see leaving as the only possible way to bring peace, even if it means an upset for the family.

That may also be the reason we’ve never nurtured skills for resolving conflicts in situ. It’s just too easy to reboot.

What do you think? Comment on our Facebook page.

WHEN YOUR MISSION GETS IN THE WAY OF YOUR MARRIAGE

By Roger Hernandez

For the first ten years of my ministry, I was a terrific pastor and a terrible husband. I neglected my wife. I passed the responsibility of raising my kids on to baby sitters. I led a church well and it grew at a rate of 100 people per year, yet I was not present as a leader in my own home. This was my story. Too bad is repeated constantly. My “mission” got in the way of my marriage. It can happen to you too.

Ministry is hard enough. Add the stress of issues at home. Many leaders and pastors have real trouble in their families that gets ignored, relegated or forgotten. Private problems almost always come back to affect public performance, usually in the worst possible moment. Here are three principles that have helped me that could also benefit you:

1. Don’t force.
One of the mistakes I made was using my family to achieve personal ministry goals. It was more about me, than them. Now I believe in involving the family in ministry, according to their gifts. My wife doesn’t play the piano. My son doesn’t preach. My daughter does. I had to learn to be encouraging without being demanding. Plug in your family according to their gifts, not your personal hobbyhorse. Respect the “no’s”. If you have more than one church, keep your family in the best possible church. Stop hauling your family like nomads from church to church, forcing them to be the only pathfinders, just so you can say you have a club. Let them develop relationships. People will criticize you for that and accuse you of preferring one church over another. Let them. Ask your family where they feel the most comfortable. Leave them there.

2. Don’t forget.
My family is my ministry. That doesn’t mean I become lazy, or forget that I also have a job. But in the rare case that I have to choose, I choose my family. I have missed meetings to go see my daughter or son play, (even though the teams they were on were terrible). Next year, my kids will go to boarding school. My wife and I will drive the 1.5 hours to Calhoun to see them play. They are with us for a short time. So I will make the sacrifice. I have found that if you choose the important, God takes care of the urgent. Important fact: the moment I decided to be a real father and husband, my church grew more.

3. Don’t forget (part 2):
My wife told me about a month ago: “Honey, we are always doing these family weekend retreats, and preaching messages about families. Why don’t you and I go to a retreat, not to preach, but to learn and grow? Great idea. I booked a weekend in a Family Life Weekend to Remember. No kids. No responsibilities. No sermon prep. Nothing to fix, present, or prepare for. Just 72 hours of marriage enrichment. Pastor, below is the link. It’s free! (Church leader, it’s not free for you, but still affordable.)

Don’t forget what is really important. After the kids have gone, and after the church work has ended, you will still have your spouse. Work on your marriage first.

Discuss this on our Facebook page!

BEST PRACTICES WEBINAR - JUNE 18

WANTED: A FEW GOOD SERMONS
Have you lost your passion to preach the gospel? Do you desire to sharpen your preaching skills? Would you like to know some keys for better sermonic preparation?

THIS WEBINAR IS FOR YOU!
Dr. Hyveth Williams, Professor of Homiletics at the Andrews University Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan, will address, “Prophetic Preaching.”
What makes a sermon connect with the listener? What are the essentials for making a sermon so clear children remember?

Find out how to preach with contemporary relevance and how to maintain your passion for preaching. Join us with your preaching interests.

Date: Tuesday, June 18, 2013
Time: 1:30 PM - 2:30 PM EDT


After registering you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the Webinar. There will be no WEBINAR in the month of JULY due to the camp meeting schedule for pastors.

READING FOR PASTORS

Could the Sabbath be the means for saving the planet? Matthew Sleeth thinks so. Quote: "I believe that the church has sat on the real estate in time called sabbath for thousands of years and that essentially we've given up the lease on that. I do not believe that the church will survive without it. I think we'll either reclaim it or we will lose the church."  

Maybe shorter sermons are more effective than long ones? Quote: "The reality is, there are few people who can preach longer than 30 minutes without losing their audience. A good philosophy is to leave them wanting more, not wanting to get out!"

Bivocational ministry may be the future for all of us, says this church leader. Quote: "I am arguing that the church as a whole, not just individuals, must recover our gift of founding institutions, generating entrepreneurship, innovating in ways that are faithful to the gospel and fund ministry."

According to LeadershipFreak, sometimes passion isn't enough. "Passion keeps you doing the same ineffective things."

Everyone is surprised that the Bible is now a best-seller in Norway. Quote: "Church attendance is a poor measure of the Norwegian state of faith, Religion is a very private thing for Norwegians."

If Boy Scouts is in trouble with conservatives, could Pathfinders fill the gap?

In adoption overseas, Evangelical Christians can find themselves in the midst of complicated problems.

Religious liberty: is prayer OK in public meetings? Quote: "The rare handful of cases, over the course of a decade, in which individuals from other faiths delivered the invocation, cannot overcome the impression, created by the steady drumbeat of often specifically sectarian Christian prayers, that the town's prayer practice associated the town with the Christian religion."

TO THE POINT: PERSISTENCE

"Success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm."
- Winston Churchill

"Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan Press On! has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race."


- Calvin Coolidge

“I haven’t failed. I’ve found 10,000 ways that don’t work.”
- Thomas Edison

“Knowing trees, I understand the meaning of patience. Knowing grass, I can appreciate persistence.”
- Hal Borland

“I think and think for months and years, ninety-nine times, the conclusion is false. The hundredth time I am right.”
- Albert Einstein

“I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions I have been entrusted to take the game winning shot…and I missed. I have failed over and over and over again in my life. And that’s precisely why I succeed.”
- Michael Jordan

“There are no shortcuts to any place worth going."
- Beverly Sills

“When you have exhausted all possibilities, remember this: you haven’t.”
- Thomas Edison

IDEAS, EVENTS, RESOURCES, ANNOUNCEMENTS

Just a reminder that articles from Best Practices for Adventist Ministry can be shared in your newsletter, website or Facebook page, with attribution to Best Practices and the author of the piece.

The Revelation of Hope meetings (June 7-15 in New York City) will not be streamed live as planned. They will be recorded and broadcast at a later time as a series on the Hope Church Channel.

Turning Point - a half hour inspirational program on Hope Channel and The Adventist Channel will feature an interview with Don Livesay, president of the Lake Union Conference tonight, June 5 at 8:30 and 11:30 p.m. ET on Hope Channel.

The Center for Creative Ministry has just released its newest resource: Sharing Scripture Mobile. It’s inspirational content for individuals on-the-go; refreshed every week and available on any smart device. The theme correlates with that week’s topic and Scriptural focus found in the Adult Quarterly of the Sabbath School Lesson. Sharing Scripture Mobile is for the person who wants to reflect on God’s grace any time, any place, whether or not he or she attends a church group.

Women’s ministries emphasis day June 8: get resources for the service here.

Previous resource links:

- New PlusLine at AdventSource
- NY13
- Pastor’s convention, NAD Ministerial Department
- The Seven Campaign to stop child abuse
- Andrews University Press, Homosexuality, Marriage, and the Church
- General Conference International Field School of Evangelism
- Jesus 101 Biblical Institute with speaker/director Elizabeth Talbot
- The ADVENTISTS - 2, by Journey Films
- The Great Controversy Project e-newsletter
- Real Family Talk
- Interactive health program on Hope Channel
- Meet Hiram Edson
- Free guide to using Facebook for your church
- 7 critical church security issues
- Tony Romeo’s church banners

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Matthew Sleeth answers: What does sabbath have to do with caring for the earth?

Illustration by Jamie Farrant

June 4, 2013

Matthew Sleeth

Vocation: Environmental leader, executive director of Blessed Earth

Background: A former chief of medical staff at a large hospital, he now writes, preaches and teaches full time about faith and the environment

Books: “Serve God, Save the Planet,” “The Gospel According to the Earth”

What does sabbath have to do with caring for the earth?

I started keeping a sabbath about 10 years ago, and I’ve had the experience of seeing what it’s done in my own life. In regard to creation care and the environment, in the Old Testament the rules about taking care of the land fall out under the set of laws called the sabbatical laws.

The fourth commandment tells us not only to put it in park one day a week ourselves but to extend that to everyone who is within our home, who works for us, who is a stranger in the land, our children, even the beasts of the field. So there’s an intimate connection.

Two things result from that: one, an acknowledgement that God is the owner of the lease on this piece of real estate called earth; and two, that God is a God of restraint. After creating the heavens and earth in six days, God didn’t go on and do something else. In that restraint we see a godly quality.

I would say that many of our environmental problems result from our showing no restraint whatsoever and simply taking license with a planet that we do not acknowledge ultimately belongs to God.

Keeping a sabbath stops me from consuming one day out of the week. Although the definition of rest and work has changed over the centuries, the definition of consuming and commerce has not. To get away from being somebody defined as a consumer to being a human being is a freeing thing. It’s something that I find that I take with me during the rest of the week -- that feeling of freedom.

In a world where we are constantly bombarded by messages, by advertisements, by things that tell us we’re not thin enough, rich enough, pretty enough, don’t have enough friends, live in a good enough home, sabbath is that time where you just hear you’re loved. I think the world needs that desperately now.

I believe that the church has sat on the real estate in time called sabbath for thousands of years and that essentially we’ve given up the lease on that. I do not believe that the church will survive without it. I think we’ll either reclaim it or we will lose the church.

I tell people to really wrestle with sabbath -- to explore what it would be like to know that once a week for the rest of their life they are going to enter into this quiet and renewing and holy time and to envision what that would look like in their family and in their church and to work toward that, because that’s the kingdom of heaven on earth.

We are a people of hope, and we, in my view, are simply given good work. A kindergarten teacher doesn’t look at the new class in the fall and say, “I have to wipe out illiteracy.” What the kindergarten teacher says is, “I need to teach this group their ABCs and to begin to read simple words.”

As a follower of Christ, I’m not responsible for the outcome of all of history and human endeavors. I’m simply given good work, and that
gives me a kind of peace that if I’m doing that work, then I am where I’m supposed to be. Yes, things are overwhelming, but I have to say I’m more optimistic now than I’ve ever been, and that’s that hope in Christ.

*The preceding is an edited transcript.*
Few people can preach longer than 30 minutes without losing their audience.

One of the greatest opportunities I’ve had in life was working at Fellowship Church and being a member of the creative team that helped Pastor Ed Young plan creative messages. I remember hearing Ed often say he never preached a 25-minute sermon he didn’t like. I agree.

The reality is, there are few people who can preach longer than 30 minutes without losing their audience. A good philosophy is to leave them wanting more, not wanting to get out!

Here are 10 tips for creating shorter and more effective messages:

1. **Cut Your Introduction.**

Don’t spend so much time trying to set things up. Get in and get out by avoiding too much detail and long stories. A good idea is to shoot for a three-minute introduction.

2. **Minimize Lists.**

Long lists of examples can add length, especially if you comment on each one. Try combining similar points and using these examples in a sentence rather than a list.

3. **Stick to the Point.**

Define what the main thing is you want people to walk away with and stick to this thought. Cut information that is not relevant to this idea. Remember, you can always use it later!

4. **Plan the Landing.**

Know how you want to land the plane and don’t ramble at the end of your message. Focus on one main challenge/thought, develop a power statement, or perhaps refer back to your introduction by stating how the problem can be solved.

Troy Page is the Worship Arts Pastor at West Ridge Church in Dallas, Georgia and is also a ministry consultant with TonyMorganLive.com. For over 15 years Troy has served on the senior leadership teams of Fellowship Church (Dallas/Fort Worth) and West Ridge Church. He has played a variety of pastoral leadership roles including Single Adult Ministry, Spiritual Development, Missions, Creative Arts, Communications and Marketing. He has also served as a lead teacher communicating with audiences of 20,000+ people.

More from Troy Page or visit Troy at troypage.com
Bivocational ministry was once seen as a sort of niche ministry, confined to rural and underfunded parishes, out in the wilderness. But surprise! -- it now looks as if some form of bivocational ministry is the future of the church of Jesus Christ as a whole. We may all be headed to bivocational ministry, like it or not.

So what can the wisdom of the ages of bivocational ministry teach us about faithful missional forms of church life in the future? In the ancient church, so many monks and nuns fled to the desert that, it was said, “the desert became a city.” What if the desert of bivocational ministry is becoming the city of God?

I want to distinguish such ministry very sharply from multitasking, our age’s great distraction. I am arguing that the church as a whole, not just individuals, must recover our gift of founding institutions, generating entrepreneurship, innovating in ways that are faithful to the gospel and fund ministry. I don’t have a magic bullet, but the church is very old and very wise and has resources we can draw on.

There are hints in the prophets and Jesus of a miraculous crop -- God’s doing, but the people still have to work for it. Irenaeus looks forward to vines of 10,000 tendrils, each with 10,000 bunches of 10,000 grapes, each producing oceans of wine, which would make for quite a Eucharist. Work is a basic human good, original to Eden, continuing in the eschaton, dependent on God’s blessing. Human work is a reflection of God, the first worker.

Psalm 104 describes in detail God’s work of creation:

You stretch out the heavens like a tent, you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind, you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers. (Psalm 104:2-4 NRSV)

Looks here like God is the original tentmaker, stretching out the heavens like a tent. The ancient church would have read the winds, fire and flame as references to the Holy Spirit; God always works as Father, Son and Spirit, not as a cumbersome committee, but as a communion of persons in perfect mutual regard.

Every imaginable human act of ingenuity is taken up in the Old Testament to be blessed. They’re all used to describe God as a worker. God purifies Israel like a refiner, like a fuller. David is so bold as to think he’ll build a house for God, but God says, “No no no, I’ll be building the house for you.”

So God’s a builder, a temple maker, a priest houser. And amidst all this work God also rests. God is not ceaseless labor; God is also useless delight, seen most clearly in practices of sabbath. The sharpest patristic scholarship these days points to the importance of the Son’s working wherever the Father is. “Whenever my Father is working, I am also working,” Jesus says over and over in John 5. Who can do the works of God? Only one who is himself divine.

David Jensen, a theologian at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, writes that “isolation in work is foreign to the triune God.” But our human work is not foreign to the triune God. Jesus joins our labors. Then he works on our behalf in salvation in a way we could never work. In salvation, God is like an artist in the zone, creating beauty, all her media responding to her desires, making something beautiful of God’s world.

Only God really works. He lets us join in, blesses our labors, takes them up into his saving work. Because God works, we can work, too.
Here’s the thing: that portrait of God working in creation and redemption, of our joining in by grace, of a city of God at the eschaton that’s a hum of human activity, can, like all theological portraits, be misused.

My fear is that it presents an image of ceaseless human work, frenzied work, without sabbath or grace. And my fear is that bivocational work can do that, too. Ah, just work more, and we’ll turn this negative (not having parishes for you graduates) into a positive and claim your exhaustion is because you’re being like God!

Matthew 6:22 is translated in the King James, “If therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.” How do we work bivocationally with a single eye, not with diffused or exhausting labor, but with multiple forms of the same work?

At Leadership Education at Duke Divinity, where I have worked for some years, we’ve noticed a need to reclaim entrepreneurship as a gift from the Holy Spirit. Our institutions have to become more nimble, more entrepreneurial, more missionial, if you like, if they’re going to have futures.

It’s not the worst thing in the world to close, but if our heritage still has gifts to bear to the world, so that we need to stay open for a bit, how do we make space for that?

I don’t know. But I know it can be done. We’ve done it before in our history. And some people do it now. So I want to tell some stories of folks who have. Here are some folks whose work is double but whose eye is single, as Jesus commands.

I want to tell you about the world’s best church member. Bobby Sharp is his name. He’s an economist by training; runs the office at our local university that develops long-term strategy. He’s the kind of man at Appalachian State University that’s behind anything that actually gets done, and he’s the same way at our church, serving as lay leader, teaching a Sunday school class, chairing our worship committee, chairing our capital campaign exploratory committee. We vastly overuse him, because he’s so capable.

While he was in seminary, he worked at Duke’s Ormond Center on a sociological project on the changing nature of the church. That bore fruit, as he became a demographer in real life. He studies how our town and state are changing and how App ought to change in strategy to meet those changes.

Can you see why his day job is so valuable to us as a church? App employs him full time. He pays us to come to church. And that’s why he’s a treasure. You can’t have a church without women and men like this.

Being a strategist, Bobby thinks that more bivocational ministry is coming. It offers freedom. In his sector, state funding for public education is not going to come back. Drawing security from elsewhere means one can follow a strong calling. And it allows us, the church, to help people find their passion. “Folks will stay up at night and pursue a passion,” he says. As he has.

I want to tell you about another innovator in my town, named Carson Coatney, better known locally as Stick Boy. Carson grew up as a member of a group of sectarian Christians, first in Kentucky and then in the North Carolina mountains. The group has a peculiar genius for innovation. In our town, Boone, they run several profitable fast food and dessert places. Carson was put in management positions early on as the group noticed his energy and intelligence. They even blessed him as he gained admission to and went off to Duke University as an undergraduate.

There he noticed a business opportunity: students hate doing laundry. So for a fee, Carson and his multiplying business partners would pick up laundry and go sit at the laundromat, doing their homework as it cycled, before returning it to the dorms, folded and bundled, at a handsome profit. He made a killing.

He also broadened his religious views and realized he had to leave the group. He left without their blessing and without a dime to his name. He borrowed on credit cards to open the Stick Boy Bread Company, a bakery, in Boone. Not because he knew how to bake -- he didn’t. But he knew he could learn that, so he took courses, practiced and mastered it.

And Carson gives generously to his church, to the Christian school his kids attend, to his community. Stick Boy stickers adorn cars all over Boone. He has paid that initial slew of credit cards off and expanded. The store is a hodgepodge of local Booniana -- books by local authors, locally made pasta, a signed drawing by Eric Carle, who has a house in the mountains (“Eric Carle is the very hungry caterpillar,” Carson says). Stick Boy has a second store now in Apex, N.C.

I admire these initiatives, obviously. Christians applying their gifts, utilizing virtues of wisdom and hard work, banking on a little serendipity. Their ideas and partnerships often originate in the church. Their financial success certainly goes back and benefits the church. I’m also struck by their singleness of purpose. Their entrepreneurial efforts are not a matter of multitasking; their efforts are not diffused.
They have to concentrate to get good at what they’re doing. Even though they’re doing multiple things, they do them with Jesus’ single eye.

Christians have, deep in our bones, a memory of practices of entrepreneurship. This can be used for good or for ill. But it’s a sign of our creation in the image of a triune God who is forever working; of our descent from Adam and Eve, for whom work became a curse; of our lineage with the prophets, who promised a day of rewarded work; and of our formation in the body of Jesus, whose work is for our salvation.
When Passion Makes Fools of Leaders

Passion drives blinded leaders to repeat self-defeating behaviors.

The danger of passion is it blinds sincere leaders.

Passion for their strengths blinds you to their weaknesses.

If you could just get them doing what you think they should do, their weaknesses or immaturity won’t matter. Sadly, some weaknesses destroy strengths.

1. Great vision; crummy planning ability.
2. Technical skill; no people skill.
3. Strong on toughness; weak on tenderness.

Passion for their potential blinds you to their present passion.

Never get so excited about what you want them to do that you lose sight of what they want to do. You think they’re falling short. They don’t. Help them reach their dream don’t impose yours.

Passion closes minds.

Passion keeps you doing the same ineffective things.

Foolish Passion:

1. Repeated frustrations point to foolish passion. Passion-driven frustrations are the result of doing the same ineffective thing with more determination.
2. Repeated topics point to foolish passion. How many times will you bring up the same problem before you realize you need a new approach?
3. Repeated disappointments point to foolish passion. When will you just say it’s not working?

Repeated frustrations say passion has gone wrong.

Keep passion; change strategy and technique.

Stop circling the same tree! Ask:

1. What am I really trying to accomplish? Redefine and clarify success.
2. What should I stop? Stopping is harder than starting. You’re falling short because you’re repeating things that don’t work.
3. What would new leaders do? Invite new eyes to look at the situation. If what you’re doing isn’t working, try something else. Start small but do something different.

Have you seen passion make fools of leaders?

How can leaders manage their passion?

Tags: , ,
For keynotes and workshops:

dan@leadershipfreak.com
The Holy Bible, NIV

By Stoyan Zaimov, Christian Post Reporter

June 6, 2013|5:45 pm

The Bible has become the best-selling book in Norway, which some say is one of the most secular countries in Europe. Moreover, a successful six-hour play inspired by the Bible is further evidence that the country has not lost its interest in religion and faith.

"Church attendance is a poor measure of the Norwegian state of faith," said post-doctoral fellow Thorgeir Kolshus at the University of Oslo, according to The Associated Press. "Religion is a very private thing for Norwegians."

The Holy Book sold close to 160,000 copies in 2012, which some officials said is thanks to a good marketing campaign that appealed both to teenagers and adults.

"It's easier to read," said Helga Haugland Byfuglien, presiding bishop for the Church of Norway. "There is no over-interpretation of the text."

Although the CIA World Factbook lists 85.7 percent of Norway's population as belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Church, parliament voted last year to end the church's status as the official state religion. Statistics suggest that only 1 percent of the population regularly attends church, and only 43 percent of respondents to a 2010 survey affirmed that they believe in God.

Still, to the surprise of some, the Bible earned its place as the best-selling book in the Scandinavian country, even beating out popular titles such as Fifty Shades of Grey.

The Norwegian language version of the Bible apparently became so popular that it spun off as a six-hour fictional stage production called "Bibelen," which drew 16,000 spectators during its three-month run.

"Thoughts and images from the Bible still have an impact on how we experience reality," said Karl Ove Knausgaard, a Norwegian author who helped with the translation of the Bible.

Dag Smemo, project manager for publisher the Norwegian Bible Society, previously explained that working on a new translation of the Bible was always a touchy issue.

"People say they like it the way it is. But we had a very thorough procedure, involving authors and poets, secular people and believers, and discussing the whole translation word by word, so there is not only a good translation of the Greek and Hebrew but also a very good flow of the Norwegian language," Smemo said.

"People are saying that it's very good, and we are seeing this from both conservative groups and more secular groups. It's definitely not only Christians buying it. It's atheists too – people are saying the Bible is important for us, for our culture, and for the nation."

Another possible reason for the popularity of the Bible is the increased immigration rates, suggested Anne Veiteberg, publishing director of Norway's Bible Society. AP noted that more than 258,000 immigrants have relocated to Norway in the past six years, many of them Christians.

"Now that we're exposed to other faiths, Norwegians have gotten more interested in their own faith," Veiteberg offered.
Churches grapple with whether to cut Boy Scout ties

Gloria Goodale

Churches are huge sponsors of Boy Scout troops, which is what made the debate over the new policy on gay boys so difficult. Churches are split on whether to abandon the scouts.

By Gloria Goodale, Staff writer / May 30, 2013

Los Angeles

Religious groups sponsor nearly 70 percent of Boy Scout troops nationwide. But the reaction among these groups was as diverse as the congregations themselves when the Boy Scouts of America recently voted to allow openly gay boys to join.

Many members of Evangelical and Baptist groups say their affiliation with the BSA is over.

“We believe that the BSA policy change will lead to a mass exodus from the Boy Scout program, as Assemblies of God and many other churches can no longer support groups that are part of an organization allowing members who are openly homosexual,” the Pentecostal denomination stated, after nearly two-thirds of the 1,400 BSA voters affirmed the new policy on May 23.

While the National Catholic Committee on Scouting issued no immediate position, with plans to confer with bishops and diocesan scouting committees, it also stated: “Open and avowed homosexuals promoting and engaging in homosexual conduct are not living lives consistent with Catholic teaching.”

By contrast, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the single largest sponsor – behind nearly a third of the troops nationwide – deferred to its existing guidelines, saying, “Young men … who agree to abide by Church standards” are “welcomed warmly and encouraged to participate.”

The Mormon church, which had not campaigned for or against lifting the ban, said in a statement: “We have followed the discussion and are satisfied that BSA has made a thoughtful, good-faith effort to address issues that, as they have said, remain ‘among the most complex and challenging issues facing the BSA and society today.’”

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Other religious organizations, such as the National Jewish Committee on Scouting, the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Christ campaigned for a full repeal of the ban.

“There is a great deal of rhetoric and concern being expressed in church-based scout troops right now,” says William Leonard, professor of church history at Wake Forest University, “but how that washes out we still don’t know, and it will take a while for these communities to sort this out.”

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Eager to Adopt, Evangelicals Find Perils Abroad

By ERIK ECKHOLM

BOZEMAN, Mont. — As a girl, Danna Hopkins dreamed of having 20 children. Today, she and her husband, Brian, the pastor of an evangelical church here, are building a large family, but not in the way she had imagined.

Ms. Hopkins gave birth to four children, now ages 7 to 11. A few years ago, inspired by compassion and a biblical mandate to aid “widows and orphans,” the couple adopted two teenage boys and a young girl from Ethiopia. Then in 2012, they adopted another girl from Ethiopia.

Last year, when they read about the dismal orphanages in the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo, they started adoption proceedings for four young sisters whose parents, an agency said, had died of malaria and typhus.

“I believe it’s what God called us to do,” said Ms. Hopkins, 34.

She and her husband, and the Journey Church where he is lead pastor, are part of a fast-growing evangelical Christian movement that promotes adoption as a religious and moral calling. Its supporters say a surge in adoptions by Christians has offered hope and middle-class lives to thousands of parentless or abandoned children from abroad and, increasingly, to foster children in the United States as well.

Hundreds of churches have established “orphan ministries” that send aid abroad and help prospective parents raise the tens of thousands of dollars needed to adopt.

But the movement has also revived debate about ethical practices in international adoptions, with fears that some parents and churches, in their zeal, have naïvely entered terrain long filled with pitfalls, especially in countries susceptible to corruption. These include the risk of falsified documents for children who have relatives able to care for them, middlemen out to profit and perhaps bribe officials, and even the willingness of poor parents to send a child to a promised land without understanding the permanence of adoption.

In March, sending shudders through adoption agencies and would-be parents, the State Department issued an alert about Congo. It warned that several children whose adoptions had already been approved by the Congolese government had been “taken from orphanages by a birth parent or relative,” indicating that those children were not orphans eligible for American adoption in the first place.

The American Embassy in the Congolese capital, Kinshasa, said last month that it had stepped up its own investigations of prospective adoptions, resulting in delays of up to six months. The Hopkinses are now anxiously waiting for the Embassy to approve visas for the four Congolese girls, whose adoptions have been approved by the Congolese government.

The movement has been promoted by theologians and, in one milestone, it was endorsed in 2009 by the Southern Baptist Convention, which called on churches to create an orphan ministry in response to “the horrors of a divorce culture, an abortion industry, and the global plagues of disease, starvation, and warfare.”

Many of the adoptions involve couples, like the Hopkinses, who already have children. “The orphan crisis is the greatest humanitarian issue in modern times,” said Jodi Jackson Tucker, 51, of Durham, N.C. As their children left home, she and her husband adopted four children from Uganda over the last three years.

The presence of evangelical Christians is especially evident in international adoptions, which have declined over all as more countries restrict or ban them because of scandals or politics. In 2012, some 8,668 adoptees entered the United States, down from a peak of 22,991 in 2004.

Though no one collects data on the religions of adopting parents, couples encouraged by the new Christian movement account for “a significant and growing minority of international adoptions,” in the words of Adam Pertman, executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, a research group.
Critics of the movement include Kathryn Joyce, the author of a new book, “The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking, and the New Gospel of Adoption” (Public Affairs, 2013), which charges that a “sense of mission has frequently obscured the harm.”

David M. Smolin, director of the Center for Children, Law and Ethics at Samford University in Alabama, said the movement had often fallen into the same traps that led a succession of countries, including Cambodia, Guatemala, Nepal and Vietnam, to halt foreign adoptions after baby-selling scandals.

“Now people are repeating the same mistakes in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” he said.

Amanda Bennett, an evangelical Christian and a lawyer in Chicago, and her husband, had a heart-wrenching encounter with fraud in Congo last year. Through an American agency, they signed up to take three young siblings from an orphanage.

From the start, they spotted red flags: contradictory accounts about the family, indications that the mother was alive, the sudden firing of the orphanage director.

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Warren Richey

Officials in Greece, N.Y., set up a system for prayers before town meetings. The US Supreme Court on Monday agreed to examine whether the practice violates the First Amendment's separation of church and state.

By Warren Richey, Staff writer / May 20, 2013

The US Supreme Court on Monday agreed to examine whether offering a prayer before a town meeting violates the First Amendment's separation of church and state.

The issue in Town of Greece v. Galloway (12-696) is whether city officials violated the First Amendment's ban on government endorsement of a particular religion when it set up a system that allowed local volunteers to offer a prayer prior to the town's monthly meetings.

Although non-Christians delivered a few of the prayers, the vast majority of volunteers offered – and delivered – pre-meeting prayers that featured Christian religious references.

At least two regulars at town meetings objected to being forced repeatedly to listen to Christian prayers. They complained to town officials that they felt marginalized by the town's prayer policy.

One of the complaining residents in the New York town was Susan Galloway, who is Jewish. The other was Linda Stephens, an atheist.

After the town refused to change its prayer policy, the two filed suit in federal court. They said that by consistently presenting Christian prayers prior to its meetings, the town was intentionally discriminating against non-Christians. They also argued that the pre-meeting prayers were advancing a single faith over other religions or nonreligion.

"Christian clergy delivered each and every one of the prayers for the first nine years of the town’s prayer practice, and nearly all of the prayers thereafter," the appeals court said.

It added that "the rare handful of cases, over the course of a decade, in which individuals from other faiths delivered the invocation, cannot overcome the impression, created by the steady drumbeat of often specifically sectarian Christian prayers, that the town’s prayer practice associated the town with the Christian religion."

This put audience members at town meetings who are nonreligious or non-Christian in an awkward position, the court said.

The town defended its prayer policy, saying it was neutral and nondiscriminatory. The town created a list of anyone who might be willing to present a prayer prior to the town meeting. An official went through the list until someone agreed to deliver a prayer.

"Members of many different religious traditions accepted the opportunity to offer a prayer, including Catholics, Protestants from several denominations, a Wiccan priestess, the chairman of a local Bahai congregation, and a lay Jewish man," Washington lawyer Thomas Hungar wrote in his brief on behalf of the town, urging the high court to take up the case.

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