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MINISTRY®

International Journal for Pastors
12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600 U.S.A.
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Cover Illustration
316 Creative
Layout
316 Creative

MINISTRY® has been published monthly since 1928 by the Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Ministry is a peer-reviewed journal.

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Printer
Pacific Press® Pub. Assn.,
1350 N. Kings Rd., Nampa, ID 83687
Standard mail postage paid at Nampa, Idaho. (ISSN 0026-5314)
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Vol. 83 Number 10 © 2011
Printed in the U.S.A.

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Is God absent while we suffer?
I read *Ministry* regularly and enjoy it. However, I was disappointed with Callia Rulmu’s article “The Good but Absent God? The Dilemma of a Christian Cancer Survivor” (June 2011).

I, too, am a cancer survivor for 11 years and the cancer has not gone into remission, therefore the battle is continuing; so I think my response is valid. God is not absent from me!

Before sin, God met with our first parents daily. After their fall, sin set up a wall between humans and God (Isa. 59:1, 2), but God has always been “just over the wall,” not absent!

The author needs to read the book of Job. In the presence of all the representatives at a summit of the universe in heaven, Satan represented planet Earth because Adam had sold out to him. Satan accused God of unfairly prospering Job. God, in response, permitted Satan to attack Job and his family, but not to kill Job. Satan would wipe out the worshipers of God if God was “absent”!

As for my own situation, I see the specialist and a radiation oncologist regularly. People pray, “Thy will for Frank be done.” I am happy for their prayers. I pray, too, that God’s will be done—not my will. God is there for me—I don’t know why God allowed this to happen; but I know that God is not absent from me. He is not absent from the author, either.

—Frank Arthur Johnson, email

The Great Controversy Project
In response to the interview with Delbert W. Baker (“The Great Controversy Project: An Interview With Delbert W. Baker”—June 2011), I am now inspired to read the whole book (678 pages!), which I realized I had only read in parts before.

In this day when people are reading less, I wondered if there was a condensed version that would appeal to more people and also meet the needs of secular people. What about those who might be offended by the use of strong language, such as referring to the bishop of Rome as a representative of Satan (50), or the pope as antichrist (142)? What she wrote for Protestant America during a time of strong anti-Catholic feeling might need careful preparation for our time or for little towns in which the only church is a Catholic church.

Ellen White speaks approvingly of Ulrich Zwingli’s tactful method of reaching the people of Zurich with the good news of the Reformation. “Little by little, as they could bear it, he opened the truth to his hearers. He was careful not to introduce, at first, points which would startle them and create prejudice” (180).

—Ron Nickerson, pastor, Northern New England Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

Continued on page 28
Growing up as an Adventist, my parents exposed me to aspects of church life they felt were in my best interest: our church schools, Pathfinders, and Sabbath School, to name a few. I eventually graduated from two of our schools, and my children are also products of Adventist education. Although I didn’t remain in Pathfinders for very long, regular Sabbath School attendance was ingrained in me.

I enjoyed Sabbath School as a child for two reasons: it allowed for an in-depth exploration of Scripture, which fortified me to face my ever-increasing challenges; and, through mission stories and Mission Spotlight, I was able to travel to far-away lands and experience cultures different from my own. While my imagination carried me to many countries each week, it seemed that as soon as the mission story ended I was back in my local setting—with my world being no larger than the small church my parents and I attended on a weekly basis.

**Spotlight on the world**

In 2007, my colleague Nikolaus Satelmajer and I decided to take pastors and other ministers on a similar tour—an excursion to see that Seventh-day Adventism around the globe has many similarities that transcend linguistic and cultural differences. We felt it was important to do so because we, as ministers, need to remember how big both our church and the world are. We can fall into the trap of managing the day-to-day operations of our institution without realizing the needs of individuals in our communities, and of people elsewhere throughout the world, who are dying both physically and spiritually.

We started in October 2007 by featuring writers from and topics relating to the African continent. In the following years, we did the same with the Caribbean islands and Central and South America (2008), Pacific Rim countries and territories (2009), and India, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh (2010). While the differences that distinguish one part of the world from another are as vast as the miles that separate them, the similarities bring them together—contributing to the tapestry that is the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Throughout the world field exists a dedicated core of volunteer laborers who faithfully fulfill the Great Commission—elders, Sabbath School teachers, youth directors, and countless others. Men and women engaged in community ministry, following Christ’s example as stated by Ellen G. White,1 to bring God’s love to people who need assurance of an eternal hope. And pastors, administrators, and other clergy stand committed to the call of Christ, spending time with Him before going forth to serve (cf. Mark 3:14).

**Spotlight on Europe**

As stated earlier, Ministry has spotlighted almost every region of the world field. Only two remain. In October 2012, we will focus on North America.2 But, in this issue, the focus is on the European continent and other fields that have been administratively attached to headquarters based in Europe. While the official membership of the three divisions featured this month seems small in comparison to other parts of the world field, the territories in question encompass half of the world’s time zones.

Unity composes a prominent element of this month’s articles. Bernhard Oestreich addresses the unity that existed in the first century Christian church—in spite of the vast territory and diversity within those many countries and cultures; Humphrey Walters contemporizes the topic a bit more, showing how such can transpire in Europe and elsewhere today. Radisa Antic, through a study of Psalm 23, displays how God unites us with Him in His house forever. Galina Stele shares a fascinating historical survey of how pioneers brought the Advent message to the Russian Empire more than a century ago. Dowell Chow tells the story of how Adventist World Radio has brought divine light to the Ukraine. And, as always, the editors of Ministry interview the presidents of the divisions being spotlighted.

When I see such remarkable unity worldwide within my church, I am proud to be a Seventh-day Adventist in general and an Adventist minister in particular.

Tell us what you think about this article. Email MinistryMagazine@gc.adventist.org or write to 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904.
A conversation with Adventist Church leaders in Europe

Editor’s note: The editors of Ministry interviewed the presidents of the three church divisions that cover various portions of the European continent. Guillermo Biaggi is president of the Euro-Asia Division, which covers Russia and much of eastern Europe; Bruno Vertallier is president of the Euro-Africa Division, which covers portions of western and central Europe as well as the African countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea; and Bertil Wiklander is president of the Trans-European Division, which covers a large area ranging from the British Isles to the Middle East.

Willie Hucks (WH): During the past five years, what are some of the positive events and significant developments that have taken place in your areas?

Guillermo Biaggi (GB): The Euro-Asia Division now has the opportunity in the former countries of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) to reach thousands of people with the gospel of salvation through the satellite programs. So, we have been blessed by speakers such as Mark Finley; Artur Stele and his wife, Galina; Moses Ostrovsky; Michael Kulakov; Peter Kulakov; and Eugene Zaytsev.

This year, many thousands of people attended at our locations, watched at home, or watched through the Internet. More than one thousand people followed each evening just through the Internet, and we are thankful to the Lord for that. By mid-March, we recorded 1,054 baptisms.

Bruno Vertallier (BV): What we have been doing in the Euro-Africa Division, and I want to say with great hope and satisfaction, is the start of the new Islamic Hope Channel. We are now on the air 24/7. This is a great accomplishment. It took a long time to prepare this event, because we were challenged to have more than one thousand programs ready before entering into the process. I’m glad to say that, due to our division’s collaboration with the Trans-European Division (TED), we have the pleasure of seeing thousands and thousands of people responding to these programs. We believe the people in these Muslim countries need to know the gospel. With this in mind, we broadcast in Arabic, Turkish, and Farsi, among other languages. We also have witnessed the start of Adventist World Radio (AWR) in Spain. From there, they will reach out to Morocco.

In Paris, we are glad to also have opened an evangelistic center where programs are run almost every day of the week. This is especially important for reaching the secular population.
We have also been focusing on our schools and universities and becoming greatly involved in the quest for revival and reformation. The work is hard, but we have to praise the Lord that He has given us the means, people, and resources to carry on.

**Bertil Wiklander (BW):** We are very grateful for the fifteen percent growth in the Trans-European Division’s membership in the past five years. Many unions grow in Europe, particularly the British Union, due to immigrant evangelism. People come in from the outside with a very religious perspective. But they grow by witnessing. Integrating the different nationalities into one homogeneous church is a challenge. But we are very grateful for what God has done for us in terms of growth.

We have also devised a program called “Relay Christ.” A team travels from union to union, training forty to fifty young people in each union. Then the unions involve the eager youth in specific projects. For example, in Poland four hundred young people from eighteen churches go knocking on doors and ask questions like, “Would you like to have a Bible study?” Many say “Yes.” They then produce an address list of people who have an interest in being visited. They visited twenty-six thousand homes, and had numerous addresses that they handed over to the local church pastors. Out of this has come a growth that is tremendous. So, in the Polish Union, they, right now, have a higher membership than they’ve ever had before. And last year, they baptized more people than they’ve done for many, many years.

In Sweden, the same trend among young people has led to a growth so that Sweden, who had negative church growth for many years, has now had positive church growth for several years in a row. It is a very secular country, and it is said that to lead someone to Christ in Sweden, you need seven years to work with them. In Greece, we also started the Two Hundred Missionary Movement where they’re trained to go out and witness. We see trends in Europe that lay people, young people especially, want to take ownership of the mission of the church. We also have a special emphasis for children that we call “Kids in Discipleship.” It’s something created in North America, that we brought to Europe, and now have in every union.

Another significant development is the TED Media Center where we produce excellent programs. We have also the Al-Waad Media Center, which means “the promise” in Arabic. It is based in Beirut, and they have produced new programs in Arabic for a year. This is now being translated by the Hope Channel. We also have a private ministry, which has become a supporting ministry of the church—LifeStyleTV in southern Sweden, which covers northern Europe with their productions. And we have developed a life-connect ministry, which uses the Internet as an interactive tool.

In the Middle East, a sheikh gave us permission to build an Adventist church, which means that we can now obtain visas, and a whole new day is going to dawn on the work in that region. We have been given very generous funds from the General Conference to enter three different countries where we don’t currently have a presence: Syria, Yemen, and Northern Cyprus. We call it the SYNC project. And the most people baptized in our division are baptized in the Sudan. These are just a few
highlights of what God is doing in our division.

Derek Morris (DM): What are some of the greatest challenges you face?

GB: The greatest challenge we face revolves around training our pastors and elders. We have plans during the next three years to implement newly established courses to assist in this process.

BV: Leadership development for pastors, elders, and other laypeople remains an important issue in our territory. Also, our pastors express a deep interest in theology and want to know more—they want to be better able to address current issues.

There is also the issue of secularism. Pastors need to be aware of the multiplicity of cultures, and we have to work on this because it is not uncommon to have at least ten languages spoken in any given large city. I believe our pastors in Europe sometimes get depressed because of the lack of success. They do their best, but hardly baptize anyone. They must remember that what they sow will be fertilized by the Holy Spirit. We must always encourage our pastors to not give up, because theirs is a wonderful ministry.

BW: The European mind-set is so different from the traditional Seventh-day Adventist mind-set. In order to speak to people about our faith, we need to find a common language, know where these people are coming from. And that is sometimes painful. There are many things we take for granted as Seventh-day Adventists: knowledge of the Bible, and the beliefs we hold and love. But many Europeans are secular. They place confidence in science and do not believe there is a God. There are also many postmoderns who are always open to the fact that God may exist, they just want to be convinced of His existence. We have to find other ways besides the Bible to convince them. In developing various methods to reach different people in Europe, some Adventists are unhappy because they feel that we’re not preaching the message that we’ve been given to preach. Of course we are, we’re just taking a longer time to do it. It takes up to seven years for a pastor to lead someone to Christ in Europe, which, of course, as Bruno mentioned, is a very tough experience for pastors. The pastors need a lot of encouragement.

The mind-set of Europe is that Christianity is something of the past. In America, you might see people praying in a restaurant before they eat. You wouldn’t see that in Europe. If you say you are a Christian, they will look at you and say, “Are you crazy?” It’s a very post-Christian society that has left Christianity behind. Christian values no longer have a place in the public dialogue. We have all the freedom in the world, but we are marginalized in Europe. And that is the atmosphere in which we have to witness.

Mostly, our churches in Europe are small, between fifty and one hundred members, with very little resources and very few people who can make things happen in the local church. That’s a challenge. We also are challenged with many different cultures because people immigrate into Europe. How do we create an atmosphere of belonging, being one people?
We also have a challenge in that we have many small unions. We have thirteen unions in the Trans-European Division. Eleven of those are in Europe. The British Union has thirty-two thousand members, but all the others possess memberships ranging from twenty-five hundred to eight thousand. The smaller the union, the greater is the financial burden they bear, and the departmental directors carry additional responsibilities.

WH: As we focus on revival and reformation, a personal question to each of you: How do you, amid the busyness of your daily schedules, manage to maintain a vital connection with God?

GB: That is the challenge that all believers have, to spend more time with the Lord. Psalm 5:3 says, “Early in the morning You hear my requests.” We need to come to the Lord early in the morning each day. We are trying to adopt, in the Euro-Asia Division, a program developed in the South American Division to spend forty early mornings with the Lord in order to establish a good habit of spending each morning with God. The material, in two books, has a devotional for each of the forty days. So, I have been praying in my personal life to have the desire every morning to have separate time with the Lord. Early in the morning, I try to meditate in the Lord, and repeat in my mind about forty different Bible texts. One of the ways I find very interesting is to memorize Bible texts following the alphabet. So I start with A, what Bible texts start with A, and then with B, and then with C, and so on. I follow all the letters. It’s a way of meditating in the Lord. In that, we find a wonderful source of strength in the Holy Scripture, to help and strengthen us during the day in service for the Lord.

BV: Apart from praying and reading the Bible, studying, preaching, I have challenged God on one thing: “Lord, revival must start within me!” This is something I really want to experience. But also in a practical way, I find it important to connect with people. I find such to provide revival for me, a refreshing experience.

BW: I have taken this call to revival and reformation as an invitation to review my life and change things I did not feel were working the way they should. One such thing I noted was that I was working too hard, and got worn out. Working too much does not help my spiritual life. I have become more aware of the length of time I am working, and try to put life back into balance. I try to exercise, and also feel that the Sabbath blessing can sometimes, in our job, be under threat, because we travel, visit, preach, and meet with people. When you’re at a church on Sabbath, perhaps preaching twice on that day, then talking to people about their problems—that is not really resting. It is service, active work. But I think watching those things is important.

Many have mentioned prayer, meditation, and Bible study; I think also witnessing and sharing your faith. So now every time I have an opportunity to do that, I talk sometimes to official people who are outside of the church. When I travel, with passengers around me, I try to use every opportunity to share my faith with others because talking to others about what we believe has an impact on me spiritually. You feel that the Holy Spirit is talking through you. I have found that when I preach, which I do gladly, I go to my archives and use some old sermons, it doesn’t really inspire me that much. Now, I have made a point of trying to prepare new sermons every time. When I discover the Word of God, and really study it to preach about a good passage of Scripture, that really puts me close to God. It’s important to do that thorough work. It blesses me. I also think to keep reading a devotional book all the time, to have that beside you, so that everyday you come back to a devotional type of reading, is important. And finally, I think that if you are close to your office team, it is normal and natural for you to just go on your knees and pray together at any time.

DM: Powerful insights. Thank you so much for sharing with us. I know that there are many pastors and spiritual leaders who will read this interview and be encouraged, not only by your words, but by your example in seeking a personal spiritual relationship with God. Ultimately, our prayer is that the readers of Ministry would experience revival and that we would see the outpouring of His Spirit in new and profound ways both in Europe and around the world. 

Tell us what you think about this article. Email MinistryMagazine@gc.adventist.org or write to 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904.
The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32, NRSV). Thus, Luke describes the unity that prevailed among the early followers of Jesus at Jerusalem. “With one mind” comprises another of Luke’s favorite expressions to portray a church enjoying peace and harmony (Acts 1:14; 2:46). Indeed, the apostolic church was a united church.

However, Luke does not fail to mention several incidents that show discord and struggle among the followers of Jesus. The most obvious are the controversies about the food supply for the widows (Acts 6:1); the conflict about Peter’s visit to Cornelius, a gentile (Acts 11:2, 3); the council of Jerusalem about circumcision (Acts 15:1, 2, 7); the dispute between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36–40); and two other instances that we shall note later.

What is the strategy behind Luke’s way of depicting the early church—on the one hand, describing the unity of the church, and on the other, not hesitating to express the strife that existed among the believers (e.g. Acts 15:2)?

In order to understand Luke’s reporting of unity and conflict, we need to focus on three features. First, the context in which Luke speaks of the church’s unity reveals that most of the statements of harmony come as summary statements. These are short passages that do not relate to singular events but general descriptions of time periods (Acts 1:14; 2:42–46; 4:32–35; 5:12–16; 9:31). One could say that Luke frames his conflict stories with summary statements of harmony. In other words, the church did not live in unchallenged harmony but was able to achieve concord time and again. Harmony was not an immovable condition but a permanent goal that was often reached.

Second, in all of the conflict passages Luke not only states the problem but also narrates how the conflict was overcome under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Luke was interested in showing conflict resolution. An exception might be the dispute between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36–40), which resulted in a separation. But the outcome was a doubled missionary effort since both went to different places to spread the gospel.

Third, Luke’s strategy includes his interest in showing how, after the conflict was overcome, the gospel was proclaimed even more strongly and that the church grew (e.g. Acts 5:12; 6:7; 11:19).

These features lead to the conclusion that Luke’s concern was not to depict a situation but to describe a way, a movement towards a goal. He does not simply relate history but imparts to his listeners the conviction that unity is possible. He encourages them not to put up with conflicts, not to separate from those of different opinion (Acts 15) or resort to blaming others (e.g. Acts 6:1–7), but to rely upon the effect of the Holy Spirit and to strive for unity. As we can see in Acts 15, the means of achieving consent consists of mainly discussion (v. 7), paying attention to God’s guidance (vv. 7–12, 14), and consulting Scripture (vv. 15–18). We experience encouragement today as we see that the early church struggled with problems similar to our own and that through God’s guidance they were able to overcome the dividing issues.

**Asking for God’s decision**

Luke relates two incidents of the early Christians’ lives in which, not the interpretation of Scripture, but the direct intervention of God prevented the church from being disrupted. The issue in these quarrels was a struggle for social status. It seems that matters of status are as dangerous for church unity as doctrinal differences (Acts 11:1–18; 15:1–33) and questions of conduct (Acts 6:1–7; 15:36–40). Interestingly enough, these two events are not always recognized as conflict scenes.
The first event involves the selection of Matthias in Acts 1:15–26. In the early church, the 12 apostles were the most powerful representatives of the followers of Jesus. They enjoyed the greatest authority. After the death of Judas, Peter suggested that the gap should be filled and a new witness for the ministry of Jesus selected. Luke reports that about 120 followers of Jesus were assembled in Jerusalem (Acts 1:15). According to Peter’s proposal, they agreed to a set of criteria for the one who would qualify for the task: one who has been with Jesus from the beginning and was a witness to His resurrection (vv. 21, 22). These criteria are indicators of high social status.

They nominated two candidates: Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias (v. 23). What does it mean to have two candidates? In a society accustomed to democratic elections, to have two or more candidates for an office is a normal or even a desired situation. A vote of the community then decides who will be elected. It is different in a society where the leading authorities determine the way of the community, as was the case in ancient Jerusalem. To have two candidates means that the leading figures have not been able to agree on one—the community is split over the candidates—but both of them have their supporters and their opponents. A democratic vote, in effect, would create a loser. In a traditional society of the first century, at the end the loser would not only be without the honorable office, he would also lose face.

In every society, individuals recognize the importance of not losing face and of gaining respect and honor. In the Greco-Roman culture of the first century, this was an even more important issue. Honor was a most desired good, more important than money. And honor was a limited good. That means that one could gain honor only at the expense of others. If someone received the honor of being elected for an important position, the other candidates ended up damaged. The first Christians in Jerusalem faced a difficult situation that easily could have led to an open struggle over status in the group.

How was this struggle prevented? Luke reports that they first prayed that the Lord would indicate which of the candidates He elected, and then they cast lots between the two. This is the only place in the New Testament that casting lots was used for electing someone into an office, and it seems that this was not a common practice. If casting lots had been normal, they would not have taken pains to work out criteria and name candidates. Praying for God’s decision and casting lots was the way of getting out of the dilemma they faced when they were not able to reach a consensus over the candidates. At the end, Matthias received the office, not because of his achievements, but because of God’s sovereign decision.

To understand the culture of the first century, we need to recognize the importance of differentiating between acquired honor and ascribed honor. Of course, these actions would always leave behind the persons that lost the contest and were put to shame.

Ascribed honor was not the result of personal effort; rather, by birth or family connections. It was inherited, as it were, or given to the person by the sovereign decision of a person of high power. There was nothing one could do for it. Consequently, ascribed honor did not put to shame the one that did not receive it, because he was not responsible for it.

That Matthias became one of the 12 apostles was not because of his or his supporters’ actions or power. He did not acquire this honor; God Himself ascribed it to him. When the group of Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem came up with two candidates and faced the possible outbreak of a status struggle among them, they resorted to the highest authority.

Praying and casting lots was an unusual but very wise decision, to preserve the unity of the group. Luke indicates this by framing the report...
of the election of the twelfth apostle with summary statements about the harmony of the church. Before the election, he said that they were all together unanimously praying (Acts 1:14). And, after the event, they were all together at one place (Acts 2:1) and received the Holy Spirit. This means that the group of Jesus’ followers was not living in constant harmony but was able to overcome a situation where the group could easily have been disrupted.

God’s intervention

The issue of the struggle for status comes up again in the incident of the death of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 4:36–5:11). This time the struggle was not prevented but broke out openly. By God’s intervention, one party of the rivals lost not only their honor but, at the end, also lost their lives as well. What was the issue? The early church took great effort to supply its poor members with food. They had common meals and thus looked after the ones in need (Acts 2:44–46; 4:32–35). Members who were better off provided enough food so that the poor would receive care. But after a while, there was not enough food for all. This led some wealthier members to sell some of their property and give the money to the apostles. Thus, they were able to continue with the common meals.

In the Greco-Roman culture of the first century, it was a well-known practice for rich members of society to sponsor common meals and other needs of the community. A positive attitude towards public needs was a virtue in the ancient world. The wealthy even had a certain obligation to do something good for society. Research has shown honorary inscriptions with the names and actions of sponsors who provided for professional, ethnic, and religious voluntary associations.2

The early church did not demand that everyone hand over their property to the apostles (e.g. Acts 5:4; 12:12). That “no one claimed private ownership” (Acts 4:32, NRSV) summarizes Luke’s ending statement (Acts 4:32–35)—a general description of the inner attitude of the wealthy church members towards their belongings, not a description of the legal conditions of property. After the summary, Luke relates two examples of sponsoring the food program of the church. First, he mentions the positive example: Joseph who earned public honor and received an honorary name. This is a case of acquired honor and a well-known practice of recognizing a sponsorship. The apostles gave him the name Barnabas, meaning “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36, 37), probably because of his generous gift to the church during a difficult financial situation. The honor that Joseph Barnabas received gave him an advantage of status over other members in the church who were on the same social level. Other owners of real estate were now in a lower position because Joseph received the honor, not them. In that ancient society, there was a constant rivalry between members of the same social level for honor. As any individuals in the ancient world would have felt, Ananias and Sapphira felt challenged to contend with Barnabas for the same or even greater honor. This means, we have here an open struggle for status in the early church.

The Holy Spirit enables Peter to see that Ananias and Sapphira do not care for the welfare of the church but are concerned with their own interest. They want the exceptional honor without the exceptional sacrifice.3 To obtain honor by fraud was generally considered as an offense. The audience of Luke’s work must have understood the situation in this light. That the struggle for status was a constant issue in the early church is indicated by the repeated admonitions by Jesus and Paul not to strive for honor (Luke 14:7–10; Gal. 5:26; Phil. 2:3; Rom. 12:10, 16).

The conflict was overcome by divine intervention, not by human action. Peter does not pass a sentence but only speaks for God. He pronounces the facts of the case and points to the consequences. The solution in the conflict includes bowing to the authority of God, who acts as a superior Judge and ends an unfair power struggle in the church. The correct hierarchy of honor is restored in the church. In the end, it is God who saves the unity of the church. This shows the lesson of this conflict. The task of individuals in the church is, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to recognize the work of God. Again, Luke places a positive summary statement before and after the account of the conflict (Acts 4:32–35; 5:11–16). As a consequence of God’s action, the whole group gained public honor. The people were full of respect for the church and held its members in high esteem (Acts 5:13).

Conclusion

The church today faces similar challenges of disunity caused by hidden and open struggles of members to achieve status and superiority. Luke’s message is encouraging: unity within the community of faith is possible if all those involved in the divisive positions were to place their divisions at the altar of prayer and seek the will of God and the workings of the Holy Spirit. Status and positions are not to be sought or held at the risk of hurting the unity of the body of Christ. Christ is the Lord of the church, and His will means that the church must be one—even as the Father and the Son are One (John 10:30).

The Adventist message first came to the Russian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. In July 1886, the first Seventh-day Adventist congregation was formed at Berdebulat in the Crimea. This story, interesting in and of itself, reveals the colorful network of God’s providence, which had been set in place many years before.

The Russian Orthodox hegemony

At that time, the political and religious situation in the Russian Empire was complicated. Czars ruled with absolute power. The territory of the state was huge, comprising the lands of the future Soviet Republics, as well as today’s Poland and Finland. The Orthodox Church dominated religious life and strongly persecuted all who tried to convert its parishioners. Jewish and Muslim populations and people of other faiths “were accorded the right to practice the religion of their fathers, and the right to leave that religion and join the Greek Church. But woe to the man who should try to leave the Orthodox church and join any other.” Missionaries from other religions, as well as their converts, faced exile to Siberia, imprisonment, even torture. Though over the years some liberalization occurred, Orthodox beliefs and practices held a powerful sway over the Russian Empire.

In this context, to imagine how an Adventist church could emerge and survive would be difficult. And yet it did, but only through God’s providential means.

Early bridges

One crucial factor was that the multinational Russian Empire had many foreigners. Due to a great demand for technological progress, professionals flocked in from western Europe. In the sixteenth century, Germans organized a settlement in a Moscow suburb filled with Lutheran and Reformed churches. Peter the Great greatly valued the contribution of foreigners. His successor, Empress Catherine the Great, went even further. In 1763, she issued a manifest inviting people from Europe to come and settle where they wanted, promising them not only religious freedom but freedom from taxes and military service. In response, Germans from different European countries came and organized settlements, the most famous being in the Volga River area. These people kept their religion; thus, Baptists, Lutheran, and Mennonites were present in the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century.

Louis R. Conradi wrote, “So, around all this large country it is just one continued string of German settlements—about three millions of Germans in all. What have they been placed there for?—In order to receive the light of the precious truth of the last days and to carry it to the Russians; and the government can’t keep it out.”

In the second part of nineteenth century, facing threats to their privileges, many Germans left for different countries, including North America. Little did they know at that time what an important part they would play in spreading the Adventist message to Russia.

Literature evangelism

Many of these Germans who left Russia settled in Minnesota and the
Dakotas. Late in the 1870s, the work among German immigrants began with the publishing of Adventist literature in German. L. R. Conradi, an immigrant from Germany, was converted in 1878 and ordained in 1882. He began to work among Russian and German immigrants, and some accepted the Adventist message. The first German Seventh-day Adventist church in America was organized in South Dakota.

The converts then began to send tracts to relatives in Russia. One of the examples of the great power of these tracts was the conversion of Gerhard Perk. He shared his story at the General Conference Session in 1909: “In 1882 a tract entitled ‘The Third Angel’s Message,’ came into my hand. . . . This tract had been sent from America to one of our village neighbors, who kept it very secretly. . . . He came to me, and said, ‘For three years I have had some dangerous publications. . . . These publications are so dangerous that even an earnest member . . . might be led astray by them.’ . . . I asked my neighbor to let me have this literature. . . . For a long time he refused, but finally he consented. . . . I took the publication, and went into the haymow, and read it through three times. . . . I was at once convinced that the tract I had read was the truth.”

Thus, Germans in the United States of America (U.S.A.) became a vessel that carried the Adventist message to their relatives and friends in Russia.

**The first missionary**

Tracts, however helpful, were not enough. God then sent His first missionary.

The first Adventist missionary who came to the Russian Empire was a layman, Jacob Reiswig. He was a German Russian from South Dakota, about 80 years old, who emigrated from the Crimea to the U.S.A. in 1878 and accepted the Adventist message through a tract. One Sabbath, a letter from Russia was read in the church; it was an appeal to send somebody to Russia to teach them the message. After hearing the appeal, Reiswig decided to go, even at his own expense. Aged and poor, he prepared a good supply of literature and went to the Crimea in 1883, where he even had to sell his boots to pay for his expenses.

In spite of a speech impediment, he became a successful missionary, visiting people at homes, giving out tracts in the marketplace, and witnessing when and where he could. He stayed for two years, came back, and then returned in 1887.

The result of his devoted ministry was about 30 converts in the Crimea.

Conradi later commented on Reiswig’s work: “His visit only increased the desire of the Sabbath-keepers to have a laborer visit and organize them. They were obliged to wait long for help, and when I came, they gave me a warm welcome.”

**Organized churches**

At that time, Conradi was hired by the General Conference to work in Europe. After his arrival in the beginning of 1886, he received appeals from Russia urging him to come and help organize the Adventist Church. Conradi left Basel in June, arrived at Odessa, and was met by G. Perk, who had been already acquainted with his work. They visited several places, preaching for Sabbath keepers as well as for Baptists, Mennonites, and Lutherans. In July of 1886, the first Seventh-day Adventist congregation was formed at Berdebulat, “where our brethren and sisters from different places had appointed to meet because there was sufficient water here for baptism.”

Nineteen people formed the first congregation, most of whom came from Baptist and Mennonite churches. More wanted baptism,
including a native Russian, but Conradi was careful not to break government rules prohibiting the conversion of native Russians from the Orthodox faith. In spite of this, he was imprisoned, along with his translator G. Perk, for 40 days for promoting “Jewish heresy.” They were released only because of the help of an American ambassador from St. Petersburg who explained that this faith was Christian, not Jewish.12

This group of believers in Berdebulat was not the only one in Russia. Conradi said that in 1886 about 80 people had already accepted the Adventist message, and other believers were scattered all over the empire, including the Asian part.13 It is also known that the Adventist message came to Mennonite colonies in the Caucasus Mountains as early as 1885.14

How did the message start spreading so widely?

**Conversion stories**

In 1864, Michael B. Chekhovsky, a former Polish Catholic priest who accepted the Adventist message in 1857 during a visit to the U.S.A., returned to Europe and began to spread the present truth. In 1867, he preached in Chernovtz and later in Rovno and Volin. Though it took time, his message found followers. The formation of an Seventh-day Adventist group in 1888 in the village of Zharuvka is traced to his influence.15

Also, a translation of the Bible into the Russian language was completed during the reign of Alexander II, and God used it to bring His message to the Russian Empire long before the Adventist literature arrived. For example, there was an unknown officer of the Russian army who can be called one of the first Russian Adventists in the middle of the nineteenth century. His story became known after his death when his daughter wrote in a response to an Seventh-day Adventist tract in 1893. She stated how glad she was to have found believers of the same faith that she and her father had.

Her father, a Russian Orthodox layman, faithfully studied the Bible. On reading it, he discovered the truth about the Sabbath, and all his family began to keep it. The consequences were harsh: several arrests, persecution, exile, and imprisonment for about 30 years.

He was released in old age only because of intercession by a sympathetic general, and within the next five years he published a journal spreading his views among the Russians. Though facing another exile and imprisonment for his work, he died, but not before asking his children to keep holding onto God’s commandments and the hope of Christ’s second coming.16

Another convert from the Bible was F. Babienko from Tarascha (not far from Kiev, Ukraine). He was educated and helped the Orthodox priest read psalms during the service. He asked permission to take the Bible home and read it there. The result was his discovery of the Ten Commandments. In 1877, he organized a Bible study group. This led to his arrest and exile to Stavropol. But there he found another Bible and continued his studies.17 He became a Seventh-day Adventist even before meeting an Adventist minister for the first time in 1880.18 As a result of Babienko’s witness, Bible studies, and letters, about 13 people were baptized in 1887–1888, a church was organized in Stavropol, and groups of believers were forming in two nearby villages.19

**More growth**

The formation of the first church at Berdebulat was just a start. Gradually, alongside the conversions of Germans, the work among Russians began. In 1889, the printing of Seventh-day Adventist literature in Russian started in Hamburg. The result was the conversion of 35 people that same year.20

However, the work among the native population was not without cost. Conradi told a story about persecution in 1892 that “has removed our only preacher, with about twelve of our members, to a remote place...
near the Persian border; while others are on the way to regions even unknown to them, and others are awaiting their sentence.”21

The sister of this preacher was working for a Russian prince; after the arrest of her brother, she organized Sabbath meetings in her home. Eventually, she was exiled to a place where people did not speak the Russian language.22 Despite all this, by 1901, there was a small Russian congregation in St. Petersburg.23

Conradi was right when he wrote in 1886: “The Russian Mission has been opened. Not without cost, it is true. Dangers and difficulties are still in the way. Imprisonment and persecution threaten the laborer. The preacher is not at liberty to present the message. But as it is God’s cause, who can hinder?”24 25

Whom shall I send?

A small group of 19 people became a great movement of about 150,000 Adventists, who are sharing the good news about Jesus and the hope of His second coming in the huge territory of Euro-Asia Division 125 years later.

The lesson in all this is simple: God continues to use the same methods that can bring profound results in closed areas just as He did in the Russian Empire. In this great work, God uses ordinary men and women who, under His guidance, can become “‘streams of life-giving water’” (John 7:38, TEV). God’s question to the prophet Isaiah: “‘Whom shall I send?’” (Isa. 6:8, TEV) remains relevant. And our time to answer has come; soon eternity will show the results of what that answer has been.26

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In 1905, the Russian government issued the Edict of Toleration, which allowed people to change their faith. This brought great relief to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, although the church faced many hardships in the twentieth century when the Communist regime came to power. Nevertheless, despite all the opposition, the church continued to grow.

In 1890, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in this part of the world had 356 members; in 1900, 1,037 members; in 1916 (a year before the Bolshevik Revolution), there were approximately 6,720 members; in 1926, 12,282 members from 20 different nationalities; in 1929, 13,547 members from 20 different nationalities; in 1930, 20,415 members from 29 nationalities.24

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4 V. O. Kluchevskij, Kurs Russkij (Course of Russian history), vol. 3 (Moscow: Mir, 1988), 253, 254.
10 Conradi, “A Visit to Russia,” 256.
11 Ibid.
12 Zaitsev, Istoriya Tzerkvi Adventistov Sedmogo, 144.
13 Conradi, “A Visit to Russia,” 271.
14 Zaitsev, Istoriya Tzerkvi Adventistov Sedmogo, 145.
17 V. V. Telpan, Úzivotí Tzerkvi [From history of the church] (Kalinigrad: Vostjaniy Stoiak, 1993), 8, 10, 11.
18 S dobra vestu k svoim sootechestvennikam [With good news to our fellow countrymen], 8.
19 Telpan, Úzivotí Tzerkvi [From history of the church], 8, 10, 11.
20 Zaitsev, 156-157.
22 Ibid.
British Adventism: A journey toward unity in diversity in Christ

The majority of church leaders in Britain have a great vision to reach our nation for God. Our offices are filled with books on how to do mission in a postmodern, pluralist society, and we stress the importance of positive human relationships to our overall mission.

Unfortunately, we have not always done so well in modeling our Christian faith in the way we relate to each other. Some observers might find it hard to accept our gospel message since we struggle with issues of class, gender, culture, national origin, and race.

A case study

In western Europe, where many are highly distrustful of organized religion and have a rather negative picture of God and the church, tolerating poor human relations within our ranks is a luxury we can ill afford. By default, we Christians make our unchurched constituency feel fully justified in their close, critical scrutiny of the consistency between our profession and practice of how we get along with fellow members from diverse backgrounds.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Britain today might well qualify as a case study in human relations. Hundreds of thousands of individuals have come from other lands to settle here since the 1950s: people from Central America, Ghana, India, Kenya, South America, Nigeria, the Philippines, Rwanda, South Africa, South America, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and others. In more recent years, a new wave has come from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, as well as territories of the former Yugoslavia.

Because a sizable number of Adventists were among these immigrants, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Britain (particularly in larger towns and cities) has become, more than ever before, extraordinarily multiracial, multinational, and multicultural. While our community in this region is in no paragon of perfection, by God’s grace, we are, today, displaying something of the universality and diversity of the body of Christ. Mistakes have been made, of course, but we have learned from them. Thus, what I want to share are six principles that have helped us over the years to find the unity in diversity that is so essential to our witness—lessons, at times, we have learned through previous mistakes.

Open dialogue

In the early days, when challenges in the domain of human relations arose among us, such matters were generally discussed only within one’s own people group. Long ago, we discovered the enormous value of open dialogue on points of contention. Through difficult experiences, we have come to view the ignoring or denying of conflict within our ranks as irresponsible. Fortunately, we have become confident enough in the strength of our intercommunity relationships to speak openly and frankly to each other about perceived sources of conflict. It is obviously a considerable strength for the church to be able to demonstrate its capacity to deal with ethnic conflict in ways that are radically more constructive than those typically exhibited by the world.

Merger and integration

Broadly speaking, two approaches have been followed in relation to integrating new communities within the fellowship of the church in this country: (1) direct assimilation, and (2) culture or ethnic-specific church planting. Both approaches have elicited endorsement as well as objections. The assimilation approach has tended to result in many mainstream congregations undergoing rapid and radical changes in ethnic or cultural makeup. Although there are several instances where assimilation appears to have worked well (increased levels of diversity being affirmed and celebrated), there have been other cases where hurt, resentment, and alienation arose because some felt...
that they were being “taken over” and were losing a way of “doing church” that they had come to value.

On the other hand, others have viewed with alarm the planting of ethnic-specific churches on the grounds, as they see it, that this runs counter to the gospel of unity and reconciliation in Christ.

Though we have made great progress in this area, we are still learning and growing together as a church in regard to this important issue.

Mission advancement
Members of newly arrived Adventist communities have, in the majority of cases, been characterized by unmistakable energy and a commitment to mission. Many of these new arrivals are in the forefront of our work in unreached areas. In most cases, such endeavors succeed largely in reaching people from similar backgrounds as themselves, a result that we, of course, celebrate.

Relevant support
Support has been necessary for new communities as well as for native Britons. The following represents just a few examples of support needs: relevant pastoral and evangelistic aids and resources beyond what was considered adequate when diversity was less pronounced; training of the right individuals for leadership and pastoral care; suitable premises to conduct meetings; and finances, as well as other resources.

Those of us already based here have been helped by denominational leaders to negotiate the contours of our new situation. They have organized seminars and workshops for us that deal with crosscultural and racial awareness matters. Additionally, books, CDs, and DVDs, as well as other learning opportunities, have greatly helped us in this area.

Structural changes
As the new demographic shifts work their way through our territory and new subconstituencies emerge, church administration has to ensure appropriate representation for such constituencies. The message is clearly conveyed that we positively welcome the responsible participation of all. Thus, individuals from across our diverse territory have been appointed to all major advisories, boards, and committees. In recent years, responsibility for the operation of an office of human relations has been assigned to the secretariat at the union conference level.

The host community
As noted above, the church has undergone enormous changes. Despite mistakes in the handling of human relations, members...
of the church from the majority population have generally shown understanding and cooperation. Though intrachurch community tensions often simmered in times past, today differences among us are respected and celebrated.

This does not mean that there are no new challenges. Though tremendous improvements have taken place in human relations, hardly any improvement has occurred in the size of our indigenous membership since the 1960s. The majority population has become a minority within the church. Of course, this presents us with enormous challenges and opportunities in respect to human relations. At the risk of being misunderstood, one might suggest that this sector of our church needs “safeguarding.” How to offer this kind of special support without giving rise to misunderstandings, remains a challenge for church leadership.

**Conclusion**

For the apostle Paul, the marvel of the gospel was that Gentiles and Jews could experience genuine fellowship and solidarity in Christ. All cultural and traditional hostilities could be surmounted by the dynamic power of the gospel. The New Testament calls for the demolition of all enmity and alienation. The current composition of our church community here in Britain provides us with a great opportunity to demonstrate biblical ideals as seen in Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek [division based on ethnic differences], there is no longer slave or free [division based on class and status differences], there is no longer male and female [division based on gender differences]; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (NRSV).

In a world confronted by all sorts of discordant tensions, we are grateful for the opportunity to respect and value the presence and contribution of diverse groups within our community as we work to attain the common aims and objectives of spreading the gospel throughout Britain. Indeed, our sense of belonging to one British Seventh-day Adventist Church continues to grow stronger as we recognize that what unites us is far more important than what separates us. Today, the vision of a united international church at the end of time, as presented in the book of Revelation, demands that Christ’s redeemed community live in ways that demonstrate its capacity to transcend barriers that exclude, divide, or separate. This truth becomes even more important when we realize that people within our society will often make up their minds about the character and claims of the God in heaven largely on the basis of their perception of His family here on earth. ☯

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The basic pictures of God in Psalm 23

Psalm 23 has gained immortality by virtue of the trust and confidence expressed by its author in God—the Lord of history and consequently of human life, who, through His providence, leads the flow of history to a future climax. The sweet charm and religious feelings expressed in Psalm 23 speak about a heart that has passed through many bitter experiences and battles as well as the perfect peace of mind that comes from a childlike trust in God. As is the case in many other instances in the Old Testament, the personal experiences of the author of Psalm 23 may be seen as collective: the local becomes universal.

What makes this psalm one of the most successful texts in human history is not only its present importance for the spiritual life of a believer, but the possibility of understanding its meaning eschatologically. The author uses Exodus terminology—the redemption from Egypt—in order to point to the final, eschatological exodus of those “living in the land of the shadow of death” (Matt. 4:16). Psalm 23 also talks about the spiritual transformation of the believer who is ready to walk on a daily basis with God, and who eagerly looks forward toward the day when the Lord of history will come and will dwell with His people.

Several suggestions have been made concerning the structure of Psalm 23. Some have suggested that the two basic pictures feature God as the Shepherd and God as the Host, while others have suggested a tripartite division: the Shepherd, the Wanderer, and the Host. However, a structure utilizing four basic images seems closest to the reality of the text: the Shepherd, the Comforter, the Host, and the Father of the house. This structure expresses a movement: from the advancement of the intimate relationship between believers and their God to the final culmination when “God himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev. 21:3).

God the Shepherd

The metaphor of God the Shepherd (Ps. 23:1–4) is pregnant with meaning illustrating the character of the relationship between the psalmist and his God: God provides and protects. This metaphor is often used in the Old Testament to describe Yahweh as the “Shepherd of Israel” (Ps. 80:1). To understand the concept of God the Shepherd, we must remember that some of the main characters in the Bible were shepherds: Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others. Jesus Himself said, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (John 10:14). However, for the right comprehension of “Shepherd” in Psalm 23, we need to recognize the importance of understanding what kind of shepherd David, the psalmist, was. See how he described to King Saul his attachment to his flock: “Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it” (1 Sam. 17:34, 35).

The incidents described here happened in the Judean desert, where no one witnessed David’s bravery and courage. However, David loved his flock with such a passionate love that he was ready to risk his own life in order to save his sheep. And David knew to whom to give the credit; hence, “The Lord is my Shepherd” (Ps. 23:1). Jacques Doukhan writes, “Here the love is authentic or it does not exist.”

David’s “Shepherd” is the most caring and wonderful Being in the universe. God, for him, exists not as a Platonic “timeless” God who, by the virtue of His nature, is not able to interfere in the events of human history; nor is He the deistic God of Voltaire, uninterested in the affairs of human beings. David’s God loves His children fervently and almost fanatically. His love is the very foundation of the moral structure of the universe. His love remains beyond human understanding and is

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the true source of all the virtues that give meaning and beauty to human existence. He shapes the general process of history and is involved in particular events as well as in the lives of human beings.

David also uses the metaphor of the Shepherd to remind Israel of God's act of liberation from Egyptian bondage and His care for them during the long journey in the wilderness. David continues that if such a magnificent and amazing Being is our Shepherd, we “shall not be in want.” Koehler, in his translation, emphasizes this consequential relationship between verse 1a and 1b in the following way: “‘So long as the Lord is my shepherd, I suffer no lack.’”

Verses 2 and 3 put the emphasis on the Exodus theme again, on God’s nurture and support for His people during their journey in the desert. Because of God’s goodness, the wilderness experience is seen as an account where there were no shortages: “You have not lacked anything” (Deut. 2:7). The pastures are green, the waters are still (or “waters of rest”), and the paths are without dangers. It seems, in the metaphorical sense, that some special diet—the Creator’s diet—is suggested here, implying that human beings have been created with some specific sets of laws in mind. The emphasis is not primarily on the physical food we eat but on those realities in life that have a strong influence on our mind and spirit, God’s diet and the restoration of our souls are put in direct connection. As God’s creations, we are not allowed to feed our minds with the food that is not on God’s menu, such as hatred, selfishness, pride, or self-sufficiency. Moreover, we are created to walk in the “paths of righteousness” (tsedeq) or “just paths” or “paths that lead to happiness.”

Our feet are comfortable only on the path that God has designed for human beings, and that path is the Jesus way. Every other boulevard of human existence means not only estrangement from God but also from our God-intended nature.

Thus, verses 1–3 portray the first picture of God, that is, God the Shepherd who leads His people and walks beside them; a Being who lives there all the time for them; One who risks everything in order to save them because He loves them passionately and fervently. Since He has already demonstrated His love for His people in the event of the Exodus from Egypt, His people can have confidence and trust in Him that He will deliver them in the future.

Psalm 23 acknowledges the tragic reality in which humans find themselves but also shouts about the present remedy and future solution.

God the Comforter

However, the pastures are not always green, the waters are not always still, and the paths are not always peaceful. Sometimes human beings have to go through “the valley of the shadow of death” as they experience the touch of suffering, loss, and death; life appears meaningless. This kind of experience has led many to dismiss God from their existences and reject His involvement in the events of history. But the psalmist dares to claim, on the basis of his own experiences with God, that when humans are passing through the valley of darkness, God the Comforter comes even closer to them.

Verses 1–3 are written in the third person singular: “He makes me lie down...” Suddenly, in verse 4 He becomes You: “You are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” A profound theological proclamation is found in this change of He to You, saying that while the pastures are not always green, the waters are not always still, and the paths are not always peaceful, God remains with us and comforts us.
were green, the waters still, and the paths peaceful, God was in front, behind, and above His people. But now, when a human being passes through the valley of tsalmuth, God the Comforter comes so close that He almost touches the human, He consoles (nacham). This proximity of God, the touch of His rod at the moment of total despair, means everything to a mortal person.

Nacham is probably the key word in Psalm 23, carrying within itself the message of hope, meaning, and the future. Nacham speaks about the special, deep relationship and friendship between God and humans that continues to emerge out of darkness and hopelessness. It may also be an allusion to God’s protection during the Exodus wanderings in the desert, described in the book of Jeremiah as “a land of drought and darkness, a land where no one travels and no one lives” (Jer. 2:6).

In some forms of idealistic Hegelian philosophy, evil is seen as an illusion or as necessary to the perfection of the whole. When one stands and looks at a painting, according to this view, one realizes that the dark colors are necessary to the perfection of the whole. Contrary to this view of evil, Psalm 23 acknowledges the tragic reality in which humans find themselves but also shouts about the present remedy and future solution. The believers can already now count on the presence of the Almighty God when they are passing through the valley of tsalmuth, and they also know that evil comes as an intruder into the reality of the universe. The day is coming when, as the next verse tells us, only happiness and joy will fill the vast cosmic space.

God the Host

Verse 5 introduces one of the most delightful and enjoyable scenes in the entire Bible. God the Shepherd and God the Comforter become God the Host. Beyond the present reality of God’s care and provision, is it not safe to conclude that this verse, in keeping with the teaching of the rest of the Scripture, looks forward to the eschatological “wedding supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:9)?

After the green-pasture experience and after having been touched by God in the valley of death, God has yet another surprise for those who have made the decision to walk in the paths of righteousness. He organizes a big banquet, invites all His friends, and He Himself serves them. The description of this banquet is so imaginative and brilliant that one has the impression of being present and smelling the heavenly flavors and tasting the cosmic drinks. The oil represents a perfume, the symbol of rejoicing; and when God serves, there is abundance of everything: the “cup overflows.”

All of this happens “in the presence of . . . enemies.” This sentence belongs to the diplomatic language of that time, as has been found in
of liberation of His people. In New Testament terminology, the Exodus points to the second coming of Jesus, the time of immeasurable and infinite bliss.

The signs of the times show that history is rapidly heading for its end. The moral chaos, nuclear dilemma, change of climate, political mistrust of nations everywhere, and disasters of every kind point to an end of life and history as we know. Time itself is on its brink. But at such a time as this, after the banquet prepared by God Himself, in order to celebrate the successful arrival at the so-long-desired goal, a four picture unfolds before us. God the Host becomes God the Father of the house. “Goodness” and “love” personify here the God who will always be with His children. Revelation pictures this: “‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away’” (Rev. 21:3, 4).

God and humankind dwell forever under the same roof. God, at last, is established as the Father of the house of the universe. Time becomes eternity.

**“Goodness” and “love” personify here the God who will always be with His children.**

As noted above, the language of the Exodus and wilderness permeates the whole of Psalm 23, and here, in verses 5 and 6, the liberation comes to its climax. God the Shepherd liberated His people from Egyptian slavery, God the Comforter cared for them in the “‘land of drought and darkness, a land where no one travels and no one lives’” (Jer. 2:6), and now, at the end of time, He engages in the act of eschatological exodus. This climaxes as the final, universal act of liberation as the final, universal act of eschatological exodus. This is the end of time, He engages in the liberation of His people. In New Testament terminology, the Exodus points to the second coming of Jesus, the time of immeasurable and infinite bliss. The signs of the times show that history is rapidly heading for its end. The moral chaos, nuclear dilemma, change of climate, political mistrust of nations everywhere, and disasters of every kind point to an end of life and history as we know. Time itself is on its brink. But at such a time as this, after the banquet prepared by God Himself, in order to celebrate the successful arrival at the so-long-desired goal, a four picture unfolds before us. God the Host becomes God the Father of the house. “Goodness” and “love” personify here the God who will always be with His children. Revelation pictures this: “‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away’” (Rev. 21:3, 4).

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**God the Father of the house**

If taken literally, verse 6 could express the psalmist’s trust and happiness that He found in the temple or it could be understood as metaphor of continual communion with God. However, if the whole psalm is permeated with Exodus themes, then it has to be understood as an eschatological reality.

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The Ukraine touched by the Voice of Hope

The Ukraine is a country of 46 million people located in mideastern Europe. In 1922, this country was one of the founding republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which disintegrated in 1991. The Ukraine is the largest contiguous country in continental Europe, and is the home of Chernobyl, a city known for one of the most devastating nuclear accidents, which cost many lives and has lingering effects on the people. Only 2.2 percent of the population professes any type of Protestantism. Currently, there are around 61,000 Seventh-day Adventists church members in the Ukraine.

An Adventist World Radio (AWR) affiliate studio in the Ukraine airs a 15-minute program four times a week on the national radio network. The cable radio network, installed in every public building, including every hotel in the country, still functions, so through this network, our programs potentially reach millions of listeners there.

In 2010, more than 10,200 people contacted the AWR affiliate studio, with 5,219 requesting a Bible correspondence course. Most listeners are young people and children who really love their age-appropriate segments.

The following stories come to us from Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, and the nearby city of Chernobyl.

“Those good words were not for me”

“Those good words were not for me.” This is what Andrej Bilek said when he first heard the Voice of Hope broadcast in his native Ukrainian. “They just were for somebody else,” he continued.

Andrej was living a good life as a former military person. “I was quite prosperous, had a house, a car, money, and friends.” He had even taken a short training course at an Orthodox seminary, so he had some knowledge of the Bible, but his life was still not complete. There was something lacking.

A turning point

After listening for some time to the AWR Voice of Hope radio programs, he felt the urge to sit down and write a letter, asking to be enrolled in the Bible study course. By studying the Bible course, he began experiencing the beauty of God in the Bible and the world around him. He compares his condition to a blind boy that “regained his vision and, looking at the blue sky and flowers around him, asked his mother, ‘Mother, why didn’t you tell me earlier that the world was so beautiful?’”

During his study of the Bible, Andrej noticed some steady changes in his own character and lifestyle. Along with other bad habits, he was a heavy smoker. He really wanted to overcome these problems, and asked God to help. After some time, by God’s grace, Andrej quit smoking and gave up other habits that taunted him for years. Now free from his enslavement to these addictions, he concentrated more on the study of the Bible; discovered the truth about the Sabbath, among other things; and began attending the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Dowell Chow, MBA, is president of Adventist World Radio.
The test and triumph of faith
That is when problems began between his family and him. Until then, they were a united family with one common faith: Ukrainian Orthodox. There were six Orthodox priests in his family who were considered the guiding lights in spiritual matters. Needless to say, they were all against Andrej and his newfound faith. This produced a tension that had never been felt before among the family members. Andrej was at a crossroad and had to make some tough decisions.

Although he loved his family dearly, Andrej was determined to follow the Word of God. As he sought comfort and direction in his life during this difficult time, he recalled reading the Bible text in Isaiah 30:21 that says, “Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’”* Andrej says, “That voice behind me was the Voice of Hope radio broadcast.”

A new life
After some time, Andrej made his decision to fully surrender his life to God. He was no longer the person he used to be; his life had changed dramatically from where he started earlier. He was no longer under the slavery of his addictions, and he knew that only God could have brought him through that far. He was determined to live the rest of his life for Jesus.

Six months after he made that crucial decision to surrender his life to God, he was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He then became an active missionary to his acquaintances in the Orthodox church. He claimed the words of the apostle in Acts 4:20, “For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” He decided to do something with his newfound faith.

Andrej wrote many articles and two books that he uses in his missionary efforts. The bishop of the Orthodox church and the bishop of the Greek Catholic church gave positive feedback and reviews on his books and even allowed them to be distributed in their churches!

After some time, Andrej also found a life companion, and out of that marriage came a son that brightens up his family.

All these things, Andrej says, “Just started by listening to the radio for fifteen minutes a day.” He laments that we all sometimes have so little time to hear God’s voice. How true! We can be so very busy, dealing with our own problems, that we cannot hear what God says or listen to each other.

They are for you also!
At first, Andrej thought these words were not for him. “They just were for somebody else.” But later he discovered they were meant for him also. He rejoices in the fact that many people can hear God’s voice and are encouraged to think about eternal values through the Voice of Hope radio programs.

We are reminded of what Paul wrote in Romans 10:16, 17: “But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’ Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”

Andrej says he is glad that the Voice of Hope was, for him, a beacon through which he met God, heard His voice, and believed in Him.

And we, too, rejoice with him!

“My journey with God and to God”
“My journey with God and to God,” this is how Maria Goryuk describes her life.
Tragedy strikes Chernobyl

Maria lived in a small village close to the Chernobyl nuclear power station where she worked. Maria’s parents were away on a holiday over the April 26, 1986, weekend, so Maria stayed home, not knowing what had just taken place at the plant.

The following Monday, as she always did, Maria went out to the bus stop to catch the bus to work. After a much longer than usual waiting time, the bus did not show up, so she decided to walk to work—a 45-minute hike to the station. Then she noticed that there were no cars on the roads or people walking around. Everything seemed so strange and suspicious, but she still did not know what was going on. Maria sped up her steps to get to work as quickly as possible.

As Maria turned the last curve on the road leading up to the plant, the fourth nuclear reactor building quickly came into view. Suddenly, she could only see black ash covering everything around her, even blocking the road. She stopped, trying to figure out where this ash was coming from. It was not there two days ago. Then she looked up and saw that the fourth nuclear reactor was actually destroyed!

_I am going to die_, was the first thought that came to her mind. She knew what radiation was and the consequences of exposure. She ran away as fast as she could with the thought pounding in her mind, _I am going to die; I’ll be dead soon._

By the time she reached her house, she was very thirsty. The water tasted bitter. She had some food, but that, too, had an awful taste to it. She tried some sugar but that was bitter also. Maria was only nineteen years old. She wanted to live. She made up her mind to not tell anyone where she had been.

The evacuation and relocation

The next day, her parents returned from their holiday; and they were all evacuated from the area, and checked by doctors at a nearby hospital. Although the doctors told her she was fine, she did not believe them because she had been in a highly contaminated area.

Life after the accident

Some years went by, and Maria got married and had three daughters. However, the thought of dying from her exposure to the radiation haunted her continually. She watched news programming showing how many people had died and how many were still affected by that terrible accident. She wondered why she was still alive. Both of her girls were healthy and beautiful, but she still wondered.

Touched by the Voice of Hope

In the autumn of 1998, Maria, along with her daughters, tuned the radio from one station to the other, looking for something interesting to listen to. “Suddenly, we stopped on one of the frequencies [on] which we heard a talk about God. At the end of the program there was an appeal, ‘If you would like to study the Bible, send a letter to the radio [program] the Voice of Hope, and request a Bible correspondence course.’ ”

Every Sunday morning at 7:45 a.m., they anxiously awaited the program. The girls were so enchanted, they would “hold their breath just to listen carefully to what [was] said.” Indeed, the programs were filled with love, life, and hope; they always pointed the listeners to the Bible and a new life beyond this world.

The turning point

After listening week after week to the programs, one day the girls said to Maria, “Mum, we have chosen to follow these Bible studies.” When they began studying the Bible, Maria confessed, “I did not know Him, but He knew me from the very beginning of the world, and He has answered my question, _Why am I still alive?_” Maria took comfort in the words of the psalmist: “ ‘My God, in whom I trust’ ” (Psalm 91:2).

Finding the church

Through the study of the Bible, Maria and her daughters found the truth that led them to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. After attending and learning more about Jesus, Maria surrendered her life to God and was baptized. She was 30 years old.

Later, the girls were also baptized. During this time, Maria had a fourth child, a boy. Maria says, “I’m very grateful to [Jesus] for He saved me from the nuclear contamination and gave me four wonderful kids. But most of all I am grateful to God because, through the broadcast of the _Voice of Hope_, I have this hope of an eternal life with my Savior, Christ, and the hope of His soon coming.”

Today, Maria is active in her church and has become a successful literature evangelist.

The stories of Andrej and Maria exemplify the incredible impact that the programs from Adventist World Radio have on the lives of many listeners. They also underscore the enormous influence the Bible correspondence school has on those who request the free Bible courses and complete them. These two elements—the broadcast and the follow-up—lead people to Jesus and His church.

These stories also tell us how God meets every one of us where we are. But He does not leave us there; God takes us to an ever-increasing understanding of His will for us, leading us to fellowship in the church and to be faithful colaborers with Him in reaching others with the saving knowledge of His Word.

As He did for Andrej and Maria, He can certainly do it for you too. 

* All Bible verses are from the New International Version of the Bible.

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“PK Forum”—A groundbreaking program for pastors’ kids

Manhasset, New York, United States—Pastors’ kids (PKs) have many challenges. The majority of PKs face an extraordinary pressure to be exemplary, regardless of whether those expectations are realistic, or even healthy. Many give up under the pressure, leave the church, or feel forced to regularly smile no matter what they feel. Still other PKs experience the perpetual absence of their minister parent, who is called upon to meet the needs of others.

Addressing questions, thoughts, feelings, and concerns of PKs was the purpose of the first ever “PK Forum” held at the Greater New York Conference office on Sunday, June 26, 2011. Hosted by Steve Cassimy, Family Ministries and ministerial director of the conference, the forum was created for PKs of all ages. The format allowed older and younger PKs to share experiences and lessons learned, so that all could benefit.

G. Earl Knight, president of the Greater New York Conference, gave the opening devotion. His powerful admonition to “be yourself,” while remembering that being yourself does not mean having to be unlike Christ, marked an excellent beginning to the program. Rohann Wellington, director of Communications, provided tools to assist PKs in navigating challenges, as well as addressing the reasons so many PKs leave the church. The feedback from the program’s attendees was extremely positive. The overwhelming consensus was that every PK should be encouraged to attend future “PK Forum” meetings.

Dedication ceremony during Annual Council

Silver Spring, Maryland, United States—The dedication ceremony for The Great Controversy Project will take place during Annual Council, October 7–12, 2011. This ceremony will include all division and union presidents bringing forward books that have been translated and printed in their areas of the world. Prayers to dedicate the books to God will be given. Please keep this special project in your prayers.

[Wilmar Hirle]

LETTERS

Continued from page 4

Later, she regretted the methods used in France when the Reformers, wanting to “strike a bold blow . . . that should arouse the whole nation” had “placards attacking the [Catholic] mass . . . in one night posted all over France.” Her comment about this was, “Instead of advancing the reform, this zealous but ill-judged movement brought ruin, not only upon its propagators, but upon the friends of the reformed faith throughout France” (224, 225).

So I fully support your plan that stated “[c]ertain divisions in the world field will have different versions of The Great Controversy.” And, “some may publish a portion of this.” There are very good reasons for this. Dr. Baker, in the interview, told the story of a man he once pastored who ran across a portion of The Great Controversy and eventually was baptized. I wonder if the larger book would have attracted him as much as the inviting portion did.

My prayers are with you as you carry on God’s work.

—Helen Fearing, Mt. Vernon, Washington, United States
As a pastor and church historian, I found God’s Ambassadors to be a scintillating read that I could hardly put down! E. Brooks Holifield, one of my favorite historians, examines in detail the history of clergy—both Protestant and Catholic—within American religious history.

From the very beginning, argues Holifield, clergy have derived their authority from three sources: special status, divine gift or calling, and/or rational authority. From the colonial period up to the present, ministers have appealed in varying degrees to one or more of these sources.

Ministry in America took on a distinctive form from the beginning. Clergy were in short supply. Protestant pastors dominated the landscape (many of whom had previously been Catholic priests). Communities fortunate enough to have ministers would strive to keep them: 79 percent of clergy spent their entire lives in a single parish. Such ministers tended to be highly educated—as evidenced by the fact that 10 percent of New England clergy also practiced medicine (49). Many of the myths of ministry originated during the colonial period: the amazing ability of clergy to be able to study all day, every day, in their offices, contrasted with the realities of Cotton Mather’s admonition that every minister should “visit, visit, visit.” And I especially appreciated learning that the leading cause of ministers getting themselves in trouble (and even dismissed) was insistence on trying to get their congregations to sing together in harmony (87).

The sermon dominated the ministerial landscape: most members could expect to hear 7,000 sermons during their lifetimes, ranging in length from one to two hours. “Clerical education assumed paramount importance among Protestants because their emphasis on preaching required a clergy able to interpret biblical texts” (32). The shortage of clergy elevated the sacred office and, as a consequence, many colleges were begun in America to produce more pastors.

Revival and revolution significantly altered American ministry: most members could expect to hear 7,000 sermons during their lifetimes, ranging in length from one to two hours. “Clerical education assumed paramount importance among Protestants because their emphasis on preaching required a clergy able to interpret biblical texts” (32). The shortage of clergy elevated the sacred office and, as a consequence, many colleges were begun in America to produce more pastors.

Religious diversity and populism continued to alter and shape ministry within the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Holifield masterfully traces the diversity, especially the rise of Roman Catholicism, which quickly dominated the religious landscape. The 1940s saw perhaps the height of clerical influence in American religious history. One 1942 opinion poll cited clergy as one of the three top professions for “doing the most good” (236). For the first time in American history, “church
membership surpassed 50 percent of the population” in the 1940s, and the mid-1950s showed an increase of close to 60 percent (238). The professional ideal—with a highly educated ministry—gained broad support.

The cultural crisis of the 1960s and 1970s altered the influence of American clergy once again. Holifield argues that stereotypes fail to capture the complexity (327). Divisions between “traditionalists” versus “progressives” extended to both Catholics and Protestants. The debate over ordination continued as some denominations, frustrated by the lack of progress, circumvented official channels with unofficial ordination services. New issues during the 1990s, especially gay clergy, held the greatest potential to split mainline churches. Despite this, no generation of clergy since the American Revolution had such a high percentage of college or seminary graduates. Yet the populist impulse in America remained strong; some preachers with little or no education at times attracted greater public presence than seminary graduates (332).

Holifield tells of the long-lasting influence of clergy in America in a compelling way. Despite new challenges in a secular age (341), surveys painted a mixed picture of the past three decades that highlighted both the peril and, at other times, the promise of ministry. Still, Holifield cites research that the vast majority of clergy state “that they would choose priesthood or ministry again if they were starting over” (344).

Ministry has certainly changed greatly through American religious history. From the very earliest beginnings up to the present, ministers have worried about their declining influence. Yet it appears that clergy continue to have a significant influence within American society. I highly recommend this book to any pastor who wants to better understand his or her role and influence.

— Reviewed by Michael W. Campbell, PhD, pastor, Wichita Seventh-day Adventist Church, Wichita, Kansas, United States.

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