Something worth celebrating

The 2013 Manifest Creative Arts Festival begins in less than two weeks! There is good reason to be excited about an occasion that explores, encourages and celebrates faithful creativity. Art that is inspired by God and uplifts Him is the most important type of artistic content of all. So join us at Avondale College of Higher Education (Lake Macquarie campus) from March 20-23 as we celebrate our Creator and the creatives He’s inspired. Visit www.artsmanifest.info for more information.

New program drives changes for refugees

A new program offered by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) is helping to tackle some of the biggest issues facing refugees and migrants in Australia.
The Oliver interview—Part 1

So, you think you know what’s on Dr Barry Oliver’s mind? You may be surprised as you read this interview with the president of the South Pacific Division.

Not alone at uni

Have you chosen the right course? Will you enjoy what you have chosen to study? Will your Adventist faith still be intact by the time you graduate? There are so many uncertainties when you enrol at university. How is one to cope?

Read Adventist World

Abel Kirui won a silver medal in the marathon in the 2012 London Olympics. But that's not what makes him a champion.

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A new program offered by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) is helping to tackle some of the biggest issues facing refugees and migrants in Australia.

National Programs director Rita Karraz said the aim is to assist new arrivals to more effectively integrate into life in Australia “and allow them to live independent of ongoing assistance from community services”.

“Our program is really about helping new migrants access the opportunities and services they need, but often miss out on,” she said.

“Employment is certainly the most significant of these. Providing driving lessons is a very practical means to that end.”

Through the program, new migrants are matched with drivers who share a common language or cultural background, and they are supported through the learn-to-drive process.

A pilot program run in Adelaide, SA, has supported 22 refugees over the past six months. Of these, six have already gained employment as a result of holding a licence and a further 58 have been referred to other services, including legal support.

“We target young people who live alone, single mothers and other vulnerable people,” said the South Australian project’s volunteer manager John Mugabashaka.
“And, by linking with the Refugee Council, we can offer our service to refugee groups that would otherwise go unnoticed and unserved.”

Local ethnic community leaders are now contacting Mr Mugabashaka, seeking out this unique project. So far, he and the other volunteers have assisted Burmese, Burundians, Congolese, Liberians and Rwandans.

“Apart from having a very positive effect on the integration process for immigrants,” Mr Mugabashaka said, “it also empowers and gives them confidence that they can achieve something. The impact is huge.”

Following the success of the pilot program, ADRA is offering its resources and support to churches across the country.

“A few volunteers in a local church can make a significant difference to the refugee communities surrounding them,” Mrs Karraz said.

“If there are churches wanting to make a difference in their community, and there is a refugee population in need of support, we are here to help.”

In addition to the Migrant Settlement Driving Program, ADRA operates and offers resources and support for church-based community projects in the areas of crisis relief, elderly support, youth resilience and community gardens.
So, you think you know what’s on Dr Barry Oliver’s mind? You may be surprised as you read this interview with the president of the South Pacific Division.

RECORD: The official “mission” of the Adventist Church in the South Pacific is to “make disciples”—what does that mean?

OLIVER: Being a disciple is all about following in the footsteps of Jesus. We can’t make disciples if we aren’t disciples ourselves because we can’t give others what we don’t have. So, discipleship starts with me, and it starts with you. It is about humbling ourselves at the foot of the cross, giving up our self-centred hopes and dreams, our prejudices and our preferences, and letting Christ fill us with His will, His power, His peace and His joy.

When we have Christ’s heart in ours, it’s natural to follow Him and attract others to follow Him as well. I don’t mean by this that we twist people’s arms against their will. I mean a genuine, authentic process that follows Christ’s model—first mix with the people and get to know them, meet their needs, give without necessarily expecting anything in return. Then, and only then, invite them to follow Jesus. And that is persuasive!

RECORD: What about public evangelism?

OLIVER: I believe with all my heart in public evangelism. But, and it’s a very big but, with very few exceptions public evangelistic events must be reaping campaigns, not sowing
campaigns. What do I mean? They are the places to bring our friends who already know about Christ because they have seen Him in our lives. Christ mixed with people first, met their needs and then called them to follow Him. If we miss the first two steps, we aren’t following His example. Public evangelists can only do their work if we have invited people to the program. We should not criticise the evangelist if we have not done our part.

RECORD: As you look back over the past five years as president of the Church, what milestones have we reached toward achieving our mission?

OLIVER: This is a trick question. If I provide you with numbers, you’ll say “wait a minute, there’s a difference between disciples and baptisms”. If I provide you with illustrations, then you’ll say “but they are just generalisations!”

RECORD: (laughter) You know me well! But you must have some way of measuring success?

OLIVER: When I look at how we are travelling as a church family, I look at a matrix of information. Sure, I do look at the numbers and I don’t apologise for that. Specifically, I look at not only church growth, but also our retention rates. I look not only at the number of people attending our churches, but, for example, the percentage who are tithe payers.

RECORD: Tithe paying as a measure of success? You’re joking, right?

OLIVER: Hold on—I know you are thinking “Barry, stop counting the shekels!” Let me tell you, God does not need our tithe, and as anyone will tell you, the last thing I want from our members is money. Why I care about the tithe number is because Christ said “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”. I care about tithe numbers because I care about the condition of our hearts, plain and simple. Tithe is also the most reliable number—you can pad your baptism numbers and you can fail to “clean up” your church books, but I haven’t seen a case yet where someone came up with a large chunk of cash in order to pad
the tithe numbers!

RECORD: So you have membership data and tithe data, do you use any other measurement?

OLIVER: The hard numbers are where I start, not where I end. As you know, I travel around our region every year. I don’t get to every location, meet every member or attend every church, but in a year I get a pretty good sample.

RECORD: So, how are we doing?

OLIVER: All our hard numbers indicate that, overall, we’re moving forward at a faster pace than we have in many years. And that is in a number of places. The Australian census found our growth has been very encouraging in Australia in recent years. Similarly, our growth in PNG, the Solomons and many other Pacific nations continues strongly, albeit we have been doing work in some parts of the Pacific to ensure our records are accurate. Before, during and after the global financial crisis, the total tithe returned by our members across the division continues to grow at a rate faster than inflation.

What strikes me most strongly, though, is the vitality of faith in this generation of young people. It’s no secret that in some places the Church experienced tough times during the latter years of the last century. The theological controversies, and our community’s delay in reacting to profound changes in society, distracted us. Today, things feel very different. There is a positive direction, a real thirst for an authentic Christian experience—that is so refreshing. Often when I visit churches, I find our young people have more to give me than I have to give them. They remind me of what it is like to be in love with Jesus for the very first time. Something profound and very, very good is happening.

I see it too at the special events that the Church conducts such as camp meetings, congresses and retreats. And then there is the amazing spirit of volunteering that is revitalising the spiritual lives of so many. I am grateful to God for what I see and experience.
RECORD: On a personal level, you’ve faced huge family challenges over the last handful of years. How has that affected your spiritual life?

OLIVER: I’ve had to cling to Christ even more tenaciously than ever. It’s relatively easy to have faith when all is well. But even Christ Himself called out in despair on the cross. I’ve had my moments when I’ve been down on my knees calling to God in desperation. Looking back I have to say that through the enormous stress of intense personal family challenges, God’s assurance and love have kept us going. It’s no picnic. We had some very dark days that are known only to God and us. But like David, I can say “the Lord is my strength”. And there are many who can identify with just what I am saying.

RECORD: If you could change anything about the Adventist Church what would it be?

OLIVER: It would be spiritual superficiality. It is so easy to have a veneer of faith, but be unchanged underneath. But true godliness requires a total change inside us. It’s what is deep down that matters most! If our entire church family could experience the new heart and new spirit God has promised us on a daily basis, there would be no force on earth that could hold God’s Church back.

RECORD: Who is the Bible character you most identify with?

OLIVER: It may seem simplistic, but my answer is Jesus. Not because I can ever be exactly as He was but I aspire to be as He was in His humanity. To be like Jesus is my greatest desire and prayer.

Part 2 of this interview, in which Dr Oliver candidly addresses some of the toughest questions facing our church, will be published in an upcoming issue.
There are so many uncertainties when you enrol at university. Have you chosen the right course? Will you enjoy what you have chosen to study? Will you be able to pass all of the subjects or units that you need to be able to graduate? Will you meet arrogant professors and classmates who challenge your belief in the Bible and six-day Creation? Will you meet someone whom you will ultimately fall in love with and marry? Will you be pressured into drinking alcohol at a party, or to sleep with someone before you are married? Will your Adventist faith still be intact by the time you graduate?

There is one thing that is certain, though, and that is that Jesus has promised to be with you throughout your time at university. You are never alone because He has said that He will never leave you or forsake you, and that’s true when you are attending lectures and tutorials and when you are sitting in an examination trying to remember everything that you have studied.

In fact, Jesus has not only promised to be with you. He has a purpose for you being at university, a plan that will give your life meaning, fulfilment and purpose. It will bring incredible joy to your life and be really exciting as well! Jesus is calling you to become His ambassador on the university campus, demonstrating what His kingdom is really like to all the lecturers and students there. He wants you to be a missionary for Him within the university, in a situation that is very similar to what Daniel faced in Babylon. Are you willing to accept Jesus’ mission for you while you are studying at university?

There are literally hundreds of thousands of students and lecturers at university who do not
have the hope in Jesus Christ that we share as an Adventist Church. They have very little or no idea about the prophecies in the Bible that tell of His soon return. They have not experienced His transforming power in their lives. They do not know that He loves them so much that He died on the cross for them. They have not accepted His Lordship over their lives and they have not entered His kingdom by being born of His Spirit. Jesus’ plan for your time at university probably doesn’t involve complicated strategies or superhuman efforts. Jesus has promised the gift of His Holy Spirit to guide and equip you for His mission. There are also some simple, practical steps that will enable you to be effective in accomplishing Jesus’ mission while you are at university.

Spend time with Jesus every day, reading the Bible and talking with Him in prayer. Ask Jesus to give you wisdom as you relate to your classmates and lecturers and open up opportunities to share your faith with them. Have the courage to share openly and boldly that you are a follower of Jesus and that you are really looking forward to His soon return. Read some Christian books that will provide you with solid answers to questions that they may ask you. Also, pray that God will connect you with other Adventists who you can work with to reach your friends and classmates.

The Adventist Students Association (ASA) has a vision to reach the one million students who are enrolled at Australian universities. The association is connected with a growing number of Adventist campus groups across the South Pacific. If you sense Jesus calling you to become an ambassador and a missionary for Him while you are studying at university, we would be delighted to work together with you. We can connect you with other Adventist university students who are also responding to Jesus’ call, and we can provide you with practical coaching and training on how to effectively reach out on campus by building a vibrant Adventist university student group.

To connect with the Adventist university student movement, contact your local youth leader. In Australia, contact ASA president Brenton Race on 0448 995 757 or email . Check out the website www.myasa.org.au>. Also see: record.net.au/items/uni-clues>. 