Presentations and pastors' kids

The Manifest Creative Arts Festival begins next Thursday (March 21) at Avondale College of Higher Education's Lake Macquarie campus. Visit www.artsmanifest.info for more information about the event. Also check out record.net.au to hear what last year's winners have to say about the relationship between their art and their faith.

And while we have your attention, you're going to want to check out the new issue of RECORD, as we tackle the sensitive topic of pastors' kids (see below).

Confessions of a pastor's daughter

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Do I even know you?

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My story—Natacha Lehartel

"God."

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Pastor Gilbert Cangy is the director of Adventist Youth ministries for the world church. What's his view on whether youth are leaving the church or renewing it?

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We all wear masks, and the time comes when we cannot remove them without removing some of our own skin,” says Canadian novelist André Berthiaume. As a pastor’s kid I appreciate this statement, maybe more than most. I’ve always heard that pastors' kids “have issues” and tend to wash out of the Church. What I haven’t heard is intelligent discussion on why this might be true. This is my story of why I left the Church, why I came back and the skin I lost in the process.

Growing up a pastor’s kid was somewhat of a beautiful contradiction. At an early age I learned that Sabbath is supposed to be a day of rest. But my experience was that Sabbath was the day Dad was never at home and we as a family worked hardest. I experienced being a part of some amazing churches, where people were genuine and God really did work. But I also watched as a group of church members attempted to destroy the people I loved most because of church politics and power. I was told I was valuable, but, as the pastor’s daughter, I felt crushing judgement everywhere I turned in our community.

As a teen, I struggled with the feeling that I was not as important as everyone else because I was the pastor's kid, the given, the good kid who should know all the faith stuff already. We had to bend over backwards for "the lost", but I was the “found of the found”, and the expectations were impossibly high. I tried desperately to be the perfect pastor's daughter but no matter what I did, I always fell short.

By the time I was 15, I had come to the conclusion that if I wasn't good enough for church I wasn't good enough for God. By the time I started university I could recite the textbook...
Adventist answers with the best of them, but under the smile and the “Happy Sabbaths” I was angry and desperate—silently struggling with addiction and an eating disorder.

When I graduated from university, all I wanted was out. Not from my family, who I admired and loved, but from all the pressures of church life that surrounded them. So I ran as far as I could—all the way to Denmark as, ironically, a student missionary. I enjoyed being where no-one knew me, my family or that I was a pastor’s kid. For the first time in my life I was anonymous and felt safe from judgement. I was free.

What I didn’t know is that while Denmark is one of the richest countries in the world, it has among the highest teenage abortion, suicide and alcohol consumptions rates. And the normal family? There was no such thing! Working at Vejlefjordskolen, an Adventist boarding academy, those statistics became real as I interacted with kids dealing with trauma. But unlike Papua New Guinea where I had spent the first four and–a–half years of my life, no-one needed any material stuff in Denmark. Many of these kids had more brand name items than I could ever imagine owning and my shallow textbook Adventist answers were useless. What they needed was what I didn’t have myself: real love, real acceptance, real forgiveness and real grace.

What do you say to a kid who describes their weekend with: “It was terrible—my dad just went to prison after I testified against him in court.” What do you say to the 14–year–old threatening suicide after having an abortion the weekend before? My religion had equipped me to explain the 2300 days, not to provide genuine love when someone had experienced a profoundly traumatic day.

After a particularly distressing night I asked one of the other student missionaries: “Why do you believe in God?” Her answer wreaked havoc with my brain for months: “Because God is love and without Him, without His love, I’ve got nothing to give anyone.” I desperately wanted something to give these kids, but at the same time I wanted nothing to do personally with a God who I saw as harsh, judgemental and condescending; or a Church that I saw as ruthless, unforgiving and two–faced. But after months of fighting with myself and the calling of the Spirit, I decided to give God another try.

It's been a little over a year since that day. I won't lie and tell you that everything is perfect now, because it's not. I still struggle with the consequences of past decisions, there is pain I still have to work through and there are churches I’m not sure I'll ever be able to walk back into again. As they say, “pastors' kids have issues and many of them leave the Church”. It may be because of what we’ve seen, because we don't feel supported, because we don't believe that we are good enough or because we're sick of the two–facedness of it all. But
often—maybe most often—we leave simply because we've been incredibly hurt.

Some of us come back, some of us don't. The reason I came back is because I met God. I met a God who is bigger than our Church. A God whose love is big enough to take our hurt, our anger and resentment and say “I love you. I accept you. You are enough”. I saw what His love did in the lives of students. I know personally that He took an angry pastor's kid from New Zealand and showed her that she is loved, her story is important and His grace really is enough.

To paraphrase the apostle Paul: “God's grace; it's all you and I need. His strength truly comes into its own in my weakness." And once I realised that; once I let go and trusted that He knows me far better than I know myself, I could quit focusing on my imperfection and begin appreciating the gift. It became a case of Christ’s strength moving in on my weakness. That’s why I can be so sure that every detail in my life can and will be worked into something good. Because these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks—I can just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become in Him.

So, here I am, a pastor’s kid cliché; only I came back—missing skin and all. And now, next time you hear talk about the trouble with pastors' kids, you’ll have an insight into maybe why some of us are troubled. One of the most poignant expressions of my prayer to Jesus today, is put this way:

“I have not much
To offer You
Not near what You deserve
But still I come
Because Your cross
Has placed in me my worth.”

—Unashamed by Starfield

Rebekah Rankin is working while studying for her Masters in International and Community Development at Deakin University, Melbourne.
I grew up on a variety of islands in French Polynesia. My dad is Pastor Ambroise Colombani, and you know how they like to move pastors around. I also spent a few years in Fiji with my parents.

In honesty, when I was young it was tough. My dad was gone all the time doing church work. I missed him very much at home. A lot of pastors' kids of my generation in French Polynesia have left the Church. I think it is, in part, because we were often very harshly judged by church members. And they also criticised our pastor dads to us. I suppose our pastor dads are treated like public figures—and considered fair game for criticism. But it isn’t easy on the families, I can tell you that. It can be very hurtful. As I grew older, my dad included me in his work. I loved working beside him. And you know what, I still do!

I eventually moved to Moorea (an island roughly 15km from Tahiti) to join my husband. He works in a plant that produces noni juice. Have you heard of it? It's made from a fruit, has a very strong taste and is quite pungent. It is full of vitamins and is very good for you. It tastes a little like spicy vinegar. I can imagine that, as you read this, you are asking yourself “where can I get some of this appetising stuff!” Well, you are not alone. Because of its health properties it is actually very popular, particularly in China and France where we export to. If you knew how good it is, you would want some too!

I stay home with our daughter and son. I have a little business selling sandwiches to high school kids at lunchtime. It brings in a nice side income.

Church is central to our lives. I am the Adventurers director and I also direct our 40 voice
strong choir. It's a great group! I volunteer to clean our church every Wednesday and Friday in preparation for our midweek and Sabbath services.

Since I moved to Moorea, guess who has come to live here? Yes, my parents. When my dad arrived two years ago, there were only two churches on the island. But we began a constant cycle of evangelism and now there are three churches and a new company. We plan to travel to an island four hours away by boat and do evangelism work there as well. I help my dad with the logistics and our choir performs at the evangelistic events.
“Your uncle is a fool!”, or so wrote one of my “super fans” last month—in rather poor handwriting I must say. In fairness to my uncle, my super fan's point was not about him, but rather that I am a fool just like my uncle. At this stage of life I get a sort of sardonic kick out of letters like this. But when I was more tender in years, it was rather confronting.

My dad was, as some of you may recall, a rather polarising figure in the Church. So much so that when I was a lad, someone went to great trouble to produce a cartoon book about him. In the book, he was shown as a grotesquely obese witch doctor. Ironically, the primary goal of the vicious cartoons was to prove grace is all important. Grace, yes, and wouldn’t it be nice if we had some?

I was around 10 years old and living in Melbourne when that little masterpiece came out. I remember looking at it and feeling like someone had stabbed me in the heart. You see, some loved my dad, some hated him, and naturally enough, I was then and remain today, firmly planted in the love camp.

You would think the negative feelings one had toward someone’s dad would be kept to oneself in the presence of their child. Not so! In fact, I found myself loved or hated by some church members based entirely on their feelings toward my father. Even as a child, I found this bizarre. I felt like saying something smart back when someone made a hurtful comment about my family to me, like a sarcastic: “Do I even know you?” But never managed to. Instead, I just took it and felt lousy inside.

A few years ago, another child of a high profile Australian church leader of the 1970s–’80s...
was contacted by yet another of our number to get together and commiserate. Their
Adventist demi–star dads were on opposite sides of the theological spectrum, and yet, he
pondered, maybe they had similar experiences? I suspect they did. They also had similar
trajectories—shooting right out of the Church at their first possible opportunity.

Which leads to two very different pieces in this week’s RECORD, both by the daughters of
pastors ruminating on their experiences growing up. Just in case you think I am trolling the
backwaters of the South Pacific searching for people who share my emotional baggage, I
want you to know the first, rather beautiful, article was unsolicited, and the My Story was a
complete coincidence. That they both came to me at roughly the same time sparked me to
write this piece, not vice versa.

As you read this week’s RECORD, I hope you will give just a little thought to the children of
pastors, evangelists, theologians, elders and so forth. Yes, everyone takes their fair share of
hits in life, but there's something rather damaging when the hits you take are so closely
associated with the faith you hold. It can be hard not to equate the pain you feel with the
faith you love. Put another way, when we turn pastors’ kids into surrogates for what we feel
about their parents, we are doing something profoundly harmful. And not just the usual
kind of harm; we may well be marring the image of God in that child’s mind.

Pastors’ kids have enough to deal with. All the moving is very unsettling. The unusual hours
disrupt family life. Plus, they have to listen to their parent giving sermons every Sabbath
knowing in a unique way the problems their parent struggles with. They don’t need us
piling on more.

So what’s my point? It’s pretty straightforward: our community asks a lot of pastors’
families; we need to give a lot back in return. Specifically, at the very least, we need to give
them a little common decency, basic courtesy and rudimentary humanity. And, in the
off–hand chance we happen to be deft with the old cartoon drafting, maybe we would best
expound on grace by showing a little . . .

James Standish is editor of RECORD.