Big hope for a big city

The Last Empire evangelism initiative kicks off tonight in Sydney. This really is a monumental event, with seminars taking place in 27 locations across the city and more than 4000 people registered. If you're not able to attend, we ask that you pray for the speakers and attendees, as well as everybody involved behind the scenes. For more information, including venues and session times, visit <www.lastempire.com.au>.

Sonoma's quiet revival

Sonoma Adventist College has undergone a number of exciting changes. RECORD assistant editor Kent Kingston recently took a trip to Papua New Guinea to find out more
about Sonoma's quiet revival.

More News

Real me

It's a story of hurt and pain. It's a story about a search for identity and the healing power of God. It's a story that's powerful and confronting, and one you're definitely going to want to read.

More Features

Grace is only grace when it's gracious

While listening to a presentation, something that was said struck a profound chord with Dr Barry Oliver: do not talk about grace if you do not intend to be gracious.

More Insight

We get you amped up and ready for Mother's Day (next Sunday, May 12) in this week's issue of RECORD.

Watch/download InFocus

Is there anything the "straight edge" punk subculture can teach us about living a drug and alcohol-free lifestyle?!? Check out the interview with Untoxicated founder Matt Urmenyhazi on this week's episode of InFocus.

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Sonoma's quiet revival
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The first rays of sunrise are tinting the rising jungle mists with gold. I’ve joined a group of 14 college students as they trot along a muddy track. We pass elephant ears of wild taro, brush under the delicate aerial roots of a fig tree and navigate through a forest of tall, pale trunks. After about 20 minutes we sight the first huts of a village—kunai grass thatching and rusty sheets of tin; hard-packed earth underfoot. A family sits on logs and upturned tins near a contentedly snuffling black and white pig and a small smoky fire—an old man, some women and assorted children. They’re not surprised to see us as they gravely shake hands—the visitors have come to conduct the regular branch Sabbath School, one of four such outreach programs in villages within walking distance of Sonoma Adventist College in East New Britain.

“It’s the culture of Sonoma,” explains Jerry Ibia, a final year business student who leads the group. New students are mentored by their senior peers as they participate in various church and mission activities and take on more responsible roles. By the time they reach their final year, they’re in leadership positions and are actively passing their knowledge on to their successors.

This emphasis on active engagement and student empowerment is no accident, I discover. I sit in Pastor Julius Divu’s cluttered chaplain’s office while he recalls his concern at the dropping chapel attendance in 2011.

“One of the major factors was that we had very few youth completing Master Guide level in Pathfinders,” he says. “Because of that they didn’t feel confident in taking leadership roles.”
Pastor Divu recounts how he put together a strategic plan and began rejuvenating the Master Guide program and laying out a structure of student groups.

In a land of tribal tension, Pastor Divu has taken the risk of establishing some of the groups along ethnic lines, representing PNG’s different provinces. But both he and the students I spoke to deny that this has caused any difficulty; rather, they say it promotes identity and confidence.

Pastor Divu also ensures that students with particular needs are nurtured. An enrolling student who confesses they’ve been struggling with alcohol or drug addictions is placed in a support group. Similarly, the 30 per cent of students who come from non-Adventist backgrounds participate in a special Sabbath School class. “We come from a position of respect—to learn more about the students’ spiritual backgrounds,” Pastor Divu says. “But we also ask students to compare their church’s teachings with clear Bible teaching. So far this year, we haven’t got to discussing Adventist teaching yet, but 10 students have already been baptised as Adventists.

“We give opportunity for young people to become elders, deacons and deaconesses,” says Pastor Divu, becoming more animated. “Last year we increased the numbers of people in these roles. First and second years as deacons; final year students as elders.”

During my Sabbath at Sonoma I witnessed Pastor Divu’s plan in action. The students were clearly and confidently in charge of the Friday night vespers program, Sabbath School, the church service and the afternoon AY program. Sometimes staff members were involved in preaching and teaching. There was an emphasis on broad participation, with numerous students speaking from the platform and performing music.

I ask Pastor Divu if he’s had any criticism for his change of direction; a fairly radical move for Melanesia’s hierarchical culture. “The principal, Dr Samson Kuku, has a pastor’s heart,” he says. “He has supported me all the way. The one per cent of people who originally questioned these changes are no longer critical—they’ve seen the results.

“We’ve seen an increase in the spirituality of staff and students. This is an historic year for Sonoma College—we have almost 500 students this year and we’re seeing 100 per cent worship attendance.”
It’s a strange thing. When God has washed you and made you a new person, all you want to do is tell the world about the difference He’s made in you. That’s me! I feel so totally new that, like the apostle Paul, I want to tell the world all about it. I grant you that my story is complex and maybe even confronting. But it’s true. And I hope it may help our community and maybe some readers as we struggle with an issue that is itself controversial and painful.

I was once your typical Adventist mum. I had two beautiful daughters, a great husband and an excellent career as a nurse. I helped out in Sabbath School and did all the right things at home. I suppose we were the dream family and I was, more or less, the dream wife.

But like so many things in life, it wasn’t exactly as it appeared. You see, some very terrible things happened to me when I was a teenager. They were so traumatic, I pushed them deep, deep, deep down. No-one ever talked about the things I’d gone through, so I assumed I was all alone. I felt ashamed. I felt isolated. I felt I had no-one to talk to. So I hid it all. And determined to get on with life like nothing ever happened.

And it worked—more or less. I repressed any thought of it. And everyone I knew thought I was just a regular suburban woman—reading Women’s Weekly with my greatest worry being which brand of dishwashing liquid to purchase.

But then all hell broke loose. I was doing some further study and I enrolled in a class entitled: “Society and culture and the underlying cause of domestic violence and sexual assault on drug and alcohol clients”. I was stunned as I learned about other people who had
gone through the trauma I had. And it brought everything I’d tried to push down for all those years, bubbling right back up to the surface. I began to have nightmares and lost my trust in men—all men. I was terrified and traumatised all over again. I was hurt and I was very, very angry.

Even though I had a good husband, I stopped looking at him as my best friend and partner, and started seeing him as just another man. And like all men, I couldn’t trust him anymore. Naturally our relationship disintegrated.

During this time of intense pain, I came to the conclusion that if men couldn’t be trusted then maybe women were safer and, within a very short time, I left my family for a relationship with a woman. I felt like running a million miles to get away from everything that had happened to me, and everything I was. Not long after moving in with a girl I cut myself off from my old life, my church, my family and my friends. I wanted nothing to do with anything and anyone who I associated with my intense pain.

I joined the thriving gay scene and made new friends. The girl I was living with was heavily into drugs and before long I was drinking and regularly taking drugs with her. Between the alcohol and drugs, I was trying to block out everything around me—especially my memories, my pain and my guilt.

Not surprisingly my work began to suffer, as we drank and took drugs until the early morning. I would struggle to get up and go to work. My dependency problem became another lie I was trying to hide. But like everything else, I couldn’t keep it up. I had to stop work and ended up in rehab several times.

The trauma resurfacing did something to my mind and body. I developed gender dysphoria or transgenderism. This can happen for a variety of reasons, including when someone feels intensely vulnerable in their gender. As a result they take on the appearance of the opposite sex for protection. I’ve subsequently learned from a psychiatrist that this is not unusual after someone experiences the kind of trauma I did.

The feelings were very strong. I literally felt like a man trapped in a woman’s body. I would have showers very quickly and wouldn’t look in the mirror so that I didn’t have to see my body. I visualised myself as having a man’s body. I cut my hair off, started wearing men’s clothes and strapped my chest to make it flat. I tried to look tough by adding body piercing. I used men’s bathrooms and no-one knew the difference. In my heart and mind I was a man and only my body got in the way of it.

When the feelings didn’t go away I was referred to a gender centre to see a psychiatrist. He
offered to give me counselling for two years prior to a sex change. During this time I had to live as a man and then I would be assessed for a sex change. I changed my name, and through Eastern meditation I endeavoured to change my voice, my expression and deal with the stress it was causing in my life.

At the end of the two years, I had my first operation: a total hysterectomy. At the hospital they referred to me as “he” and “him” and I felt comfortable with that. I set up an appointment for my first testosterone treatment, and I was still having counselling while preparing for breast removal in the near future.

At the same time, my new life was turning out to be no panacea. My girlfriend's drug abuse was spiralling out of control. She was particularly fond of various forms of amphetamines that made her very aggressive. When she was high, she became enraged and violent at the slightest thing. One day when I returned home and put some food in the microwave, something about the sound of the microwave door closing set her off. She attacked me with her full force and broke a number of my bones. Exactly the kind of brutality I was trying to avoid by leaving men, I was now experiencing at the hands of the woman I had hoped would love and nurture me. I was devastated and dying inside all over again.

About that time a friend from church called to see how I was doing. She had heard I had moved to Sydney and asked if I'd like to get together for coffee the next week. I think it was a bit of a shock for her at first to see me, but she was really accepting. The way she treated me was very comforting. I felt safe, loved and completely accepted while I was with her. She talked to me for a while and suggested a group she had found that I might call up and have a talk to. They were from the Baptist church and had a ministry focused on meeting the spiritual needs of gay and transsexual people.

I was at a crossroads and I felt God calling me. So I made the call and I started meeting up with their minister. He read a text to me from Genesis 1:27—such a simple text, just a couple of sentences, but it had an impact: “God created man in His own image, male and female He created them”.

I sat up and thought about it: who was I to change something that had originally been created perfectly in God's image? I went home and cancelled my testosterone treatment, sat on the lounge and cried all day. I felt physically sick that I had believed I was physically, emotionally and spiritually male. It felt like I was dying. I was as confused as I'd ever been. I had to believe God would give me a new life.

I began going back to my Adventist church. It was on and off at first. I also tried giving up the drugs. It was a huge battle. Finally I got baptised and it was a wonderful experience.
With the support of a couple of Bible workers God helped me cross my comfort zone and begin to trust Him for protection. I realised my thoughts and outer appearance did have to reflect God.

As Jesus has become the source of my protection and Someone I trust, I have a peace inside that I haven’t felt for a very long time. I have a deep sense of happiness that I’ve been given a second chance. I choose to be the complete woman that God created me to be. I feel a wholeness I never felt living in the shambles of my lesbian/transgender years.

I’m not going to lie or pretend—I did that enough in life and paid the price for it. The truth is that I continue to struggle with drugs from time to time. And my walk with Christ has highs and lows. The terrible things I experienced are in the past, but the traces linger on. And the damage to my family and many around me is still there and I can’t undo it. That’s the reality of living in a sinful world in which we are all victims of victims. It’s not a pretty picture—that’s why I can’t wait for the new world where all tears are wiped away forever.

None of us know the future, least of all me, but I’ve been in love with Jesus for five years now and I hope and pray I never slip back into the horror and the darkness I came out of. Every day I reach up my fragile hand to His, and ask Him to carry me through the day. That’s all I can do. And every day for five years now, I’ve found His arms wrapped around me before I even asked.

One of the passages of the Bible that’s very precious to me now is:

“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor [active]¹ homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9–11, emphasis added).

Thank God for all the “buts”. I have been washed, sanctified and justified by God. I’m not running away any longer. I don’t need to pretend. There’s just the real me, trusting in our real God.

1. While the NKJV does not include this qualifier, the NIV translates this phrase as describing sexual acts.

Linda Marshall is a pseudonym. Linda attends church in Sydney, NSW.
I was listening to a very good presentation on the practical aspects of Christian living. Unexpectedly something that was said seemed to leap out and give me a good shake. It went something like this: do not talk about grace if you do not intend to be gracious.

Grace may be a gift, but graciousness definitely has to be worked at. Grace may be free but it usually costs some of our own self-righteousness to be gracious.

Am I being too hard on us? Not at all. Of all people we should be gracious. We should be gracious to one another: not jumping to conclusions or making assumptions based on our own experiences, or worse, our own prejudices. We should be especially gracious to those who do not see things as we do. We should respect and speak well of those who are not of our faith. I do not have to agree with a person’s beliefs or ideas to respect them. God forbid that we should ever give the impression that any other person is our enemy or that we disparage people because they do not see things as we do.

Christ called upon us to love God and love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Well, there it is. Don’t even think of talking about grace unless you intend, with God’s grace, to be gracious.

Dr Barry Oliver is president of the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.