150 and counting

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is 150 years old. It's a little weird celebrating a 150th birthday. In the normal birthday sense, it sounds as if our Church is quite old. On the other hand, when you compare our age to that of other Christian denominations, we are extremely young.

In our short history, the Adventist Church has endured a number of slip-ups and setbacks. However, we can agree that God has done—and is doing—some amazing things through the Adventist Church. Need proof? Just keep reading this email.
City-wide evangelism largest for 30 years

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New Adventist hospital coming to PNG

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500,000 books distributed across Pacific

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So far, some good

James Standish looks back at some of the astonishingly good things God has done through the Seventh-day Adventist Church over the past 150 years.
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Epping, New South Wales, Australia

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On the first weekend in May, The Last Empire opened in 29 venues throughout the Greater Sydney Conference (GSC). Some 45 churches throughout the conference worked together to prepare for the program. The opening night saw more than 1500 community members attend. While numbers fell during subsequent programs, there were still almost 1000 non-Adventists attending by the third program.

“We are excited by the number of contacts that have been coming along to the meetings,” said Pastor Michael Worker, GSC president and coordinator of The Last Empire. “We continue to uphold the presenters and contacts before the Lord as the series continues to develop and unfold.”

Pastor Johnny Murison speaks on the opening night of The Last Empire at Mountain View Adventist College in Doonside.

The English programs, hosted by Sydney–based presenters, used the same slides and scripting. Some of the venues, reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of Sydney, offered the program in other languages such as Portuguese, Tongan, Samoan, Fijian, Mandarin or Arabic. The use of the Daniel 2 image, the key image used in the marketing, saw a lot of
interest from Syrians and others from the Middle East.

“The pastors who have been trained and equipped to present this Last Empire program now have a greater confidence in their ministry and feel more equipped to go out and engage with their community,” said Pastor Worker. “Pastors have told me how much they appreciate the opportunity to be involved in this program, as they are growing and developing their own pastoral skills in the process. This will be our first campaign, not our last.”

The concept of running numerous local programs, simultaneously across the city, was developed by Pastor Worker in partnership with the South Pacific Division’s Institute of Public Evangelism director, Pastor Gary Webster. “This program is about proclaiming the good news of Jesus in a prophetic context, relating to people’s lives and what is happening in society, using updated, contemporary materials,” said Pastor Webster.

Pastor Webster had trialed a similar approach on a smaller scale in Adelaide in 2011 and developed the scripts for The Last Empire with Pastors Lyle Southwell, Garth Bainbridge and Graeme Christian.

“It was an opt-in arrangement with pastors and churches,” said Pastor Worker. The invitation was extended and any pastor or church that desired to be involved were encouraged. “We wanted those who were enthusiastic and keen and we gave them permission to try ‘something different’, alongside the traditional approach.”

Pastor Worker explains that the Conference began with the “desire to present something that our members can be excited about and proud of and that would also reach a secular, consumer driver society such as Sydney.”

Kel Naughton of M24Media created the brand/theme—The Last Empire.

The program will run throughout the month of May with each venue developing a program that represents their congregation and the audience they are targeting. Churches will follow up with programs such as Beyond, Prophetic Code, Secrets of Prophecy and a range of other initiatives.
Charissa Fong speaks at the Last Empire series at Brookvale.

In the 18 months leading up to the program, church members were encouraged to prepare themselves and their congregations for a program of this nature. “We have been encouraging members to pray for five people for the year leading up to the program. They were also encouraged to invite family, friends and colleagues to the event,” said Pastor Worker. One Sabbath was designated as a Conference-wide day of prayer and fasting to seek the leading and involvement of the Holy Spirit in this program.

Unlike evangelistic series of the past, The Last Empire had a large online presence and impact. Close to 80 per cent of people booked through the website, which had about 14,000 unique visitors over the two weeks leading up to the program. In the same period, almost 5000 people directly viewed the Last Empire Facebook page.

One church had a unique way to get attention to their program. Talkback radio and social media were abuzz with news of a 30-meter image, standing in the Hoxton Park churchyard. The air-filled image was of the image spoken of in Daniel 2 as seen in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream—the same image depicted in all of the Last Empire advertising.

According to Pastor Lyle Southwell, evangelist and director of the South Pacific Division’s Discovery Centre, the image is the world’s largest freestanding, air-filled image.

Pastor Worker has already seen changes in the church in Sydney and says the most important outcome of this program will be changed lives. “As a conference, we would love to see the people who have been touched by this program become part of our churches.”

“We hope to see this stronger partnership continue between local Adventist churches as we work together to spread the gospel. We had a much bigger ‘buy in’ from churches than we expected. It has highlighted the latent desire in our members to be equipped and resourced to share the gospel with those who need it most,” adds Pastor Worker.

“This program has increased the mission focus in our conference and the level of enthusiasm our members have to share their faith.”
New Adventist hospital coming to PNG

The Papua New Guinea Union Mission (PNGUM) has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Hela provincial government to administer a new K9.4 million hospital.

It has been more than 10 years since the Adventist Church operated a hospital in PNG. For some time the PNGUM administration and the Adventist Health Department (SPD) have been looking at ways of reactivating the Church’s clinical/hospital ministry.

PNGUM CFO Bob Butler, signs the MOU.

The Hela provincial government, with the support of the natural gas sector, has built the new regional hospital at Komo (south of Tari in the Southern Highlands region). The memory of Sopas lives on as the provincial government has asked the Church to operate its new medical facility as an Adventist hospital. It will also be providing the funding for the hospital’s operations.
Dr Chester Kuma, associate director for Adventist Health Ministries (SPD), who formerly worked at Sopas Hospital and at Atoifi Hospital in the Solomon Islands, said: “This is a very exciting time for our health work. PNG has one of the highest infant mortality and maternal mortality rates in the world and it’s only getting worse.

“We know that it is through our comprehensive approach to health and wellness that Adventist clinics and hospitals can make a major contribution to addressing community health needs. I believe that when our doctors and nurses work in an Adventist health institution they are able to deliver the quality of care that we are famous for.”

The PNGUM team, with support from Adventist Health (SPD), will now work towards equipping, staffing and administering the new facility. Adventist Health has received donations of 100 hospital beds and mattresses, but will be looking for the other medical and surgical equipment that is needed. The provincial government has also committed to build staff housing.
Sydney, New South Wales

The South Pacific Division’s Project Hope evangelism initiative is in full motion, with distribution of more than 500,000 books in regions across the Division.

Copies of Great Hope (a condensed version of Great Controversy), Step Beyond (Steps to Christ), and the full versions of Great Controversy and Desire of Ages were dispatched to church unions earlier this year.

“Prayer is needed for people who will be distributing them,” said Dr Danijela Schubert, Project Hope coordinator and assistant to the SPD president, “and for people who will receive them, that they will be brought to Christ.”

The distribution project was recently launched in Fiji where church members from one local church gathered to pray over the books.

The book being launched at Suva Central church, Fiji. [Photo courtesy: Branimir Schubert]

While most books have been dispatched, extra copies of Great Hope and other titles are still available for order. Visit <www.ProjectHope.net.au> for more information.

Project Hope is part of the Great Controversy project, an initiative of the General Conference to place a copy of the Great Controversy in every home within reach of our members, churches and institutions.
Several years ago when I approached the White House about making a video for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, I mentioned in the background material that we were approximately 150 years old. The approximately got lost in translation. When the video arrived from then president George Bush, he congratulated us, in part, on our 150th anniversary! Strangely enough, despite hundreds of thousands of people viewing the video, I've never had anyone note that the president's congratulations were a little premature.

At any rate, good things come to those who wait I suppose, and here we are at our 150th anniversary. If you feel like reliving the moment, we've added links to the former president's video (see below) and we've added a link to another video, featuring Hillary Clinton, as well, just for good measure. As we look back, we may be tempted to think of every mistake, missed opportunity, every deficiency and tally up our faults with ruthless efficiency. But it wouldn't hurt to pause and also consider the astonishingly good things God has done through the Seventh-day Adventist Church over the past 150 years.

I was recently in the offices of another denomination that started at roughly the same time as we did, in roughly the same region and who are, today, roughly the same size. As I sat in the conference room, I looked at the photos of their world leaders. What was interesting to me was that every one of them was an American white male. What a contrast to our senior General Conference leadership team! Among our most senior leaders you'll find Africans, Asians, North Americans, Central Americans and Europeans. You will even find a woman! Only one, it's true, but she is easily among the most capable leaders in our world Church headquarters.
Do you know how hard it is to achieve a truly global, culturally integrated organisation like we have? Every culture has its own way of doing things. Every region has its operational norms. It isn’t that cultures like New Zealand and Australia don’t have multicultural workforces, but they generally operate within the constructs of the dominant culture of the nation. Not so with the Adventist Church.

I got a taste of this when I went to work at the General Conference and had my first meeting with our religious liberty leaders from the 13 world divisions. Frankly, it was a pretty confusing experience. Why? Although everyone was talking in English, everyone was communicating within the constructs of their culture. So simple answers like “yes” or “no” could have completely different meanings. Multiply that by the highly complex networks of institutions and initiatives we operate in virtually every nation on earth, and you start to get a taste of what a truly amazing miracle the world Adventist Church is. Yes, it may be inefficient and ineffective at times, but after doing some work at the United Nations I can attest that the Adventist Church is a model of functionality and transparency for a global body!

And it’s not just that God has raised up a Church that truly is from virtually every nation, kindred, tongue and people who work remarkably well together, but it’s a Church that does more practical good for humanity, pound for pound, than any other entity I’ve ever witnessed.

Anyone feeling cynical about the Adventist Church at our 150th, needs to pack their bags and spend some time helping out at one of the Adventist clinics on Vanuatu’s volcanic island of Tanna, or at the Khurda Adventist school in India’s Odisha State, or maybe Mae La refugee camp just across the border from Burma, or Queen Elizabeth Adventist Orphanage in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, where precious children are cared for. Rolling up our sleeves and pitching in to assist with this great global Adventist endeavour for God is the best remedy available for armchair cynicism!

So, here we are at 150. Not perfect, and not home. We can all name 101 things we should do differently or better, faster or higher. But God has done something truly miraculous to take a tiny group of under-educated young outsiders from the sticks, and turn us into a global family, blessing our world with health, education, acts of practical love and the good news that, yes, though the Master delays, He will soon return. And after 150 years, one thing we can still all agree on is that day can’t come soon enough!

James Standish is editor of RECORD.