Leading the way

There's an old adage in sports that goes something like this: "When the team wins, it's the players. When the team loses, it's the coach." Why is it that leaders are so often criticised but rarely celebrated? Think about it—how often do we speak negatively of our politicians, when the vast majority of us would never be willing to step into their leadership role?

Have you ever prayed for your country's politicians? What about the leaders and pastors of our churches right here in the South Pacific? If you answered yes, awesome—keep it up. If you answered no, why not take a moment this Sabbath to do so?
Church in PNG mourns loss of Adventist pastor

Dr Aaron Lopa—one of Papua New Guinea’s (PNG) foremost Christian leaders and ministerial trainers—passed away in the early hours of Sabbath morning at Port Moresby General Hospital on April 20. He was 67 years old.

Australia’s oldest evangelist?

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The Oliver interview—part 2

Dr Barry Oliver, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific, is back in the hot seat to address some of the toughest questions facing our church.
Church in PNG mourns loss of Adventist pastor

Dr Aaron Lopa—one of Papua New Guinea’s (PNG) foremost Christian leaders and ministerial trainers—passed away in the early hours of Sabbath morning at Port Moresby General Hospital on April 20. He was 67 years old.

A funeral service was held at Pacific Adventist University (PAU) on Sunday, April 28.

The son of an animist “devil priest”, Dr Lopa made a significant impact on Adventism in the Pacific during his 40 years of active ministry. He spent a number of years serving at both Sonoma Adventist College and Pacific Adventist University (PAU) and was an integral part of the improvement of training for teachers and ministers.

“For many ministers in PNG, Aaron has been both a model and a mentor,” said Dr David Thiele, acting deputy vice chancellor of PAU. “His influence in the Pacific will endure because Aaron profoundly influenced a whole generation of ministers, shaping their understanding of ministry, spirituality, and the Church’s mission.”

“Aaron Lopa was truly sent by God to minister to me to enter God’s service,” said Pastor Thomas Davai, director of Student Services at PAU. “He began the fire burning in my heart and I wanted to be like him preaching [from a] very early age.”

Dr Aaron Lopa.

More than a teacher and a preacher, Dr Lopa was also a pioneer. He was the first Papua New
Guinean to be sponsored by the Church for advanced study in the Philippines. He was also the first Adventist from PNG to receive a Doctor of Ministry, which he completed at Andrews University in the United States in 1997.

Dr Lopa received a number of significant awards during his lifetime, including the Order of Logohu, which was bestowed by PNG’s Governor General in 2008. After his retirement from PAU in 2009, he was given the title “Professor Emeritus” in recognition of his contribution to university life. Earlier this year Dr Lopa was also presented the General Conference “honourable retired” service medal.

“Dr Lopa was a man of great gifts who could have risen to the highest echelons of politics or business in Papua New Guinea,” said Avondale College senior lecturer Dr Ross Cole, “but instead chose to devote his talents to training young men and women for ministry. “

Dr Cole, who worked with Dr Lopa at Sonoma College and studied alongside him at Andrews University, also described Dr Lopa as a natural leader and a gentle, respectful and forthright individual. “He will be sadly missed but his legacy will long outlive him.”

Dr Lopa was buried on his home island of Wuvulu in the East Sepik Province of PNG. He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth, and children Jamie, Jennifer, Nathan, Alice and their families.
Aputula (Finke), Northern Territory

Pastor Ray Stanley, 92, preached a nine–night series of meetings in the remote community of Aputula, Northern Territory, in April.

The “Living Abundantly” program focused on the Bible’s prescription for a balanced lifestyle, including diet, relationships, tithing and Sabbath rest. Pastor Stanley’s brisk daily walks around the small desert community bore witness to the fact that anyone, as he said during one night’s program, can learn how to “keep well, look younger and live longer”.

The message was received positively by the mostly Aboriginal audience. “When I made appeals, they were quick to respond and spontaneous,” he said.

Pastor Stanley has ruled out further speaking appointments overseas or in remote locations but said he’s still keen to be involved in ministry. “What I present is so relevant to today’s needs,” he said. “I say to God, ‘Keep me well and use me’.”
RECORD: We are commemorating the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Seventh-day Adventist Church this Sabbath. What are your thoughts on this occasion?

OLIVER: My reaction is, like most Adventists I suspect, mixed. On one hand, seeing how God has worked through this Church over the years is truly inspiring. On the other, wouldn’t it be great to be home by now? I suppose we’re like the children of Israel in the wilderness—but one day God will take us to the Promised Land, and from what I see around the world, I believe that day is not far from now.

RECORD: In Part I of this interview, we asked you about the core mission of the Adventist Church—making disciples. In this second part, we’d like to ask you about some specific issues facing Adventists in this part of the world.

OLIVER: Sure, fire away.

RECORD: Are Adventists contributing to public life, and if so, how?

OLIVER: One of my firm convictions is that we should be finding as many ways as possible to engage with the community. And we are doing many things—it’s just that we should be doing more.

We have many Adventists in positions of civil authority across the Pacific. They're in elected positions in many cases and also in positions of permanent, high level leadership in government, business and education. To these members our Church’s call is “make your Church and your Lord proud”. Be like Daniel—incorruptible, honest and faithful. We expect
you to be examples of integrity.

We are working with government agencies on various proposed legislative changes in Australia. In Fiji, there is a new constitution under consideration and our Church is involved in submitting proposals. In Papua New Guinea, Seventh–day Adventist civic and community leaders are at the forefront of guiding the rapid economic development that’s taking place right now.

On the local church level I encourage all of us to become involved in the many service entities that exist in our communities. We should have more Seventh–day Adventists actively living their faith and serving in such entities as Rotary, Lions, emergency services, bushfire brigades, parent and citizen associations, etc. I can give you many wonderful examples of church members who are doing this, but many more can be involved in this way.

RECORD: What is the most attractive thing we have to offer our community?

OLIVER:

That's a hard question because we have so much to offer. I'm constantly meeting people who are almost incredulous at what we have. Our problem is that we still do not seem to be doing all that we could to share the wonderful positives and privileges of the Gospel and our way of life.

I know the devil is alive and well, but with God on our side we cannot use his efforts to thwart us as an excuse for our failure to do what we can to communicate our positive message of hope. We should be shoulder–to–shoulder supporting one another and encouraging one another. Yes, we want to be discerning, but we have to be careful not to let the spirit of criticism and vindictiveness colour the way we treat each other.

RECORD: What are we doing to develop leaders?

OLIVER: One of the greatest challenges for the Church is leadership. Each level of our Church is involved in providing resources, training and, maybe most importantly, mentoring of leaders.
I think the most important place for training leaders is at the local church. And there are some great programs in place. For example, last year I attended an elders' retreat organised by the elders of the Mildura church in Victoria. Regularly the elders have a weekend where they and their spouses meet together for a time of prayer, fellowship and growth. On that weekend we talked about what it meant to be an elder and we practised and honed our preaching skills. It was wonderful. I commend such an event to every church. I also thoroughly recommend Elder's Digest, which is produced by the Ministerial department of the General Conference for those in local church leadership.

Good leadership does not just happen. It does not just come to us. We who are called to leadership must go seeking it. We must be intentional about being the best servant leaders that we can be under the leading and blessing of the Holy Spirit.

There are a few more things I will mention. Lay training schools are an excellent initiative. In more recent times the New Zealand Pacific Union and the Australian Union have established training institutions. I highly commend them to you. The Papua New Guinea Union and the Trans Pacific Union have a history of very successful lay training schools. I would personally like to see both unions re-establish some of the schools that have fallen by the wayside over the years.

At the Division, as part of our People Services Department under the leadership of David Potter, we have a very strong leadership and professional development program. Dr Branimir Schubert is very active in providing a whole range of opportunities for leadership development and professional training, not the least of which is a very exciting suite of online training courses which can be accessed by people from the local church as well as by the paid professional. You can contact David on davidpotter@adventist.org.au or Branimir on branimirschubert@adventist.org.au.

RECORD: Last month Margaret Thatcher died. Whether people liked her or not, everyone agreed she was a very powerful leader. Do you think we are missing an opportunity by having so few women in church leadership?

OLIVER: Yes. How's that for a succinct answer? The Bible and our church history indicate the enormous contribution women can make in leadership. It's my hope that as a global community we will do a better job in years to come at utilising this enormous source of leadership talent.

RECORD: Why is our medical work in the Pacific in such great need, while our hospital in Australia is doing a multi-million dollar development? Is the SPD investing in one, and not the other?
OLIVER: Let me answer on a few levels.

First, the health work of the Church throughout the Division has never been stronger. We are currently running an amazingly successful Adopt-a-Clinic program that has seen many of our clinics renewed and rejuvenated. This has brought incredible goodwill as well as health and healing for communities across Melanesia. A very big thank you and well done to those churches and individuals who have worked to make this a reality.

In addition, we are working right now with government agencies in Papua New Guinea who want us to operate several hospitals in the country. This is a huge undertaking and one that we must move into carefully and prayerfully.

The Isolated Medical Outposts and Building Healthy Churches initiatives of the Division Health Department are both making an incredible difference in rural communities in the Pacific.

We are also diversifying our activities to become even more focused on wellbeing. An example is our acquisition, rejuvenation and dissemination of the remarkably successful Complete Health Improvement Program (CHIP). This is being rolled out right across the Pacific and, in fact, the world, as I speak. CHIP was presented in Prague at the European Health Summit last month, for example; it has been discussed on the floor of the Asian Pacific Regional World Health Organization Conference and there’s been tremendous excitement in America. This is something really big that is going to help all those who commit to it, to become a little smaller and a lot healthier. We hope to have a little reverse church growth!

At the recent launch of the renewed CHIP program at Avondale College, a high level government delegation from the Solomon Islands was in attendance, including a number of government ministers and permanent secretaries, because they desire to utilise the program right through the Solomons. This is exactly what our community—including myself—need right now!

With respect to our development at the Sydney Adventist Hospital we have explained previously that no other development is impeded or prevented because of the development that is taking place there. The enhanced services and extra capacity at the hospital are what enable the development to take place.

We have not used one cent of tithe in the project. And we have not used any other church monies committed to other projects for the hospital development. Rather the Division Executive Committee and the hospital Board have authorised financing which allows the
development to proceed and for repayments to be made from the extra capacity of the hospital. Simply put, it must pay for itself. That is the only way the Church could contemplate such a development. No other entity or program of the Church is placed in a risk situation because of the development. Any business risk (and there is always some in a venture such as this—some call it faith!) is confined to the project itself. Put another way, the San is developing the way it always has—moving ahead in faith and covering the cost of growth through revenues generated by services provided to the public.

RECORD: OK, enough about operational issues, now for a little about you. What do you do for fun?

OLIVER: I enjoy life! I enjoy time with family and friends. Being a husband, father and grandfather has immense rewards. I enjoy gardening. Year round, we are always picking something from our garden. And I get a great deal of satisfaction when Julie puts a vase of beautiful homegrown roses on our table.

I have always been an active person. I enjoy any healthy outdoor activity. Whenever I can, I take a long walk in the bush. I enjoy the health benefits but I also find that I have time to think, meditate and pray. I have always considered my time walking in the bush as the time I am closest to God.

RECORD: What are you most looking forward to in heaven?

OLIVER: Many things but given my inquisitive nature, I have a whole lot of questions for God for which I would like answers. Of course, those answers will probably generate more questions. No problem. We have eternity after all.