Time for tribute

"Church service in much of the world isn't for cowards. And yet, as a community, we can be rather nonchalant about the incredible courage shown by our brothers and sisters. Every year we celebrate the bravery and sacrifice of those who serve in the armed forces. But where is the respect, the deference, the memory and the honour for those who have laid down their lives in Christ's cause? Where is their memorial? When is their remembrance day?"

Read James Standish's complete editorial to find out what RECORD is doing to remember those who have died in Christ's service. Also, keep reading this edition of RECORD eNews and join Jean Gersbach as she looks back on the tragedy of the murder of her husband, Lance, 10 years ago.

Ten years on . . .

May 18 marked the 10th anniversary of the beheading murder of missionary Lance Gersbach in Atoifi, Solomon Islands. Jean Gersbach reflects on the loss of a beloved husband, father, brother and friend.

The not-so-secret society of Conspiracy

Keen to catch up on the latest and tastiest Adventist news and views? Go no further than this weekend's issue of RECORD.
Adventism

Pastor Anthony MacPherson highlights the "vast world of difference between being a great controversy Adventist and a grand conspiracy Adventist".

More Features

Tragedy at Atoifi: 10 years on

Dr Barry Oliver shares his thoughts on Jean Gersbach’s testimony, and announces an exciting new initiative the South Pacific Division is developing in memory of Lance.

More Insight

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This week, the challenge of blended families; an author tackles growing pains; and words of wisdom on Adventism’s 150th anniversary.

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My family left Australia when I was two years old to serve our first term of mission service. We were stationed on the beautiful island of Penang, on the west coast of Malaysia. It was an intensely charming place. When it came to mission postings, it was as sweet as it comes.

That said, it presented challenges. Within a short time of our arrival, race riots broke out. A total curfew was declared and a shoot on sight order for curfew breakers was instituted. Unfortunately, it was right at that time I decided to experiment with my dad’s razor blades. The experiment ended badly. And my family was faced with a dilemma: let me bleed profusely at home or risk being shot to death if we ventured out to the hospital.

My family chose the latter.

We survived, but one of our family friends, a young Chinese lab technician from the Adventist hospital, was not so fortunate. He was dragged off his motorcycle, beaten to death and then his body was burned. We passed the spot where he died whenever we went to the swimming pool. It was one of the oddest sensations—driving out for a happy swim, but passing by the big black oily mark on the road that memorialised the mindless murder.

It was to be my first of a number of brushes with violence as a missionary kid. When I was 14, a bomb exploded across the street from our home in Bangkok. Six people died from wounds incurred in the explosion and scores were injured. I’ll never forget the sight of the carnage and suffering that horrible night. Then there was all the incidental violence: our home was broken into by armed robbers; my dad was briefly held with an AK47 to his head by communist guerillas; one of our Adventist physicians was murdered by a young guy we knew; our ice-cream man was gunned down (apparently he was dealing drugs on the side—a precarious second job); and there were three murders and one police killing in my vicinity over the years.

Nowhere is perfectly safe, I suppose, but no-one is going to make a hip-hop album about growing up on the mean streets of Wahroonga where I currently live. In truth, I’m currently doing church service for sissies and I know it. But there are many serving our Church in the South Pacific who are very literally putting their lives on the line for God. In some nations they face periodic political instability, widespread violent crime, coups and ethnic violence. Added to this, they brave exposure to severe illnesses like malaria. Church service in much of the world isn’t for cowards.

And yet, as a community, we can be rather nonchalant about the incredible courage shown by our brothers and sisters. Every year we celebrate the bravery and sacrifice of those who serve in the armed forces. But where is the respect, the deference, the
memory and the honour for those who have laid down their lives in Christ’s cause? Where is their memorial? When is their remembrance day?

The sad truth is we have no cenotaph, no parade and no day of remembrance.

This is a double tragedy, as not only are we failing to recognise the immense sacrifice of the heroes of our faith and their families, but we are also missing an opportunity to remind ourselves that sacrifice is central to the cause of Christ. Jesus tells us that unless we are willing to give up everything—everything—we aren’t worthy of Him. It’s time to remember the champions of our faith who haven’t just been willing, but actually have, given everything.

We are in the process of building an online memorial to all those from the South Pacific who have died in Christ’s service (that is, those killed in accidents, violent acts or by disease related to the location or conditions in which they served). We want the memorial to honour their sacrifice, remember their service and to inspire all of us to live a courageous life for Jesus. If you know of someone who has died in Christ’s service—whether they were a lay person or church worker—please send a biography of the length of your choosing or a factual summary, and, if you have them, photos, to: <lindenchuang@adventistmedia.org.au>.

Together we can remember the sacrifice of the very best of our community.

*James Standish is editor of RECORD.*
May 18 marked the 10th anniversary of the beheading murder of my missionary husband, Lance Gersbach, in Atoifi, Solomon Islands. We mourned the loss of a husband, father, brother and friend.

Great tragedy and grief is gruelling. It crushes your spirit. It suffocates. It overwhelsms. At the time it leaves you feeling bereft of hope, purpose and a future. Yet amidst the anguish that pervades every fibre of your being, God is never far away. Seriously? Do you believe, beyond doubt, that God is there? Does the God of the universe really pay close attention to our loss, our despair and our apparently insignificant lives here on planet earth? Perhaps this type of cliché is a good example of “Christian spin”. What is the evidence?

As a nurse educator, I often ask my students for evidence to substantiate rationales for their actions/practice. Evidence is vital for without it our words are just that—unsubstantiated words.

Facing the future as a “new widow” with two young daughters to feed, clothe and provide schooling for, I was afraid. In the first few months, grief was crippling. I could not hold down a job. I struggled to cope with my own emotions, let alone those of my daughters. Questions flooded my mind. How could I provide for my family into the future? Yet Scripture promises that God will supply our needs in Christ Jesus. Did that mean spiritual needs only or physical needs too?

A few weeks after Lance’s death I journalled a prayer to God: “... I want to share our needs only with You God, so You can demonstrate and fulfil Your promise to provide for us.” I committed at that time not to discuss our financial needs with anyone. Not family. Not friends. Not strangers. I would talk only to God.

The first credit card statement arrived and I panicked. Turning to God I told Him it was up to Him to do His thing! Over the ensuing weeks we were overwhelmed with the love and generosity of people, known and unknown. Monetary gifts came in unmarked envelopes from church members and strangers I had never met. Gifts, that to this day bring tears to my eyes, reminding me of God’s faithfulness. I have often been reminded of the promise in Isaiah 65:24: “Before they call I will answer.” In my experience it is irrefutable that God heard our prayers and honoured His promise to provide for our needs. He has continued to provide for us in so many tangible ways for 10 years.

The first 24 hours after the murder are hard to put into words. I couldn’t sleep and every time I closed my eyes I had a vivid picture of Lance’s mutilated body. I felt fear, horror and despair. In desperation I cried out to God, “Take this image from me, I can’t cope another minute!” Immediately the image was gone, but not only did it go, it was replaced with a favourite memory.
picture of Lance. To this day I have never again been haunted by those initial images. God has kept me in His perfect peace. I have certainty in knowing within my spirit that God is with us, even in the darkest of life’s experiences.

Ten years on I have learnt that being single in a Christian church environment is not always easy. Irrespective of the intent, churches tend to focus on family, the nuclear family of dad, mum and the kids. Sometimes it seemed easier to stay away, to avoid having to face the reality of being alone, being single. Yet time has also shown me that there were those who looked beyond singleness and included me openly into their hearts and homes.

There is enormous value being in a community and we have been blessed by those who reached out and included us into their lives. I will always be incredibly grateful to the men in our church Pathfinder club, who mentored the girls through their teen years. The skills they taught, the exciting challenges, the fun and encouragement that these male role models provided made a huge impact on our family, providing yet more evidence of God being so very close.

Has it all been easy? Let me assure you that is far from the truth—we have had, and continue to have, challenges and difficulties. However, learning to trust God more completely and seeing evidence of His working in our hearts and lives has brought comfort and hope for the future.

Perhaps the greatest challenge I faced was dealing with the acquittal of the two murder suspects and subsequent closing of the case. It left me reeling, crying out for answers. I believed God placed enormous value on human life and I was certain that He would see to it that justice would be served. However, that was not to be. The accused were acquitted and allowed to go free. I struggled with anger and a sense of betrayal over what had occurred. The injustice and apparent lack of consequences for the perpetrators plagued me. I longed for closure, yet I felt trapped, chained to the crime and unable to break free.

Evil cannot be condoned; we cannot ignore it, pretend it has not happened or that it does not matter. Being Christian does not mean I must overlook the wrong. It does matter and it matters to God. However, there is one significant flaw in the law of revenge. Unforgiveness never settles the score.

Midway through 2006 I reached a point where intellectually I knew there was little hope of finding any human resolution. I had made a choice to forgive the perpetrators and asked God to forgive them, but my heart and emotions lagged behind. I found myself moving through a range of emotions, but always I came back to that inner desire and need for closure.

In August 2006, I made contact with an anthropologist who informed me of an impending visit to Sydney of the chairman of the Kwaio Council of Chiefs. This man was the most powerful man in Bush Kwaio and one who had an inside knowledge of the happenings within the community where we had lived. On September 1, with just two hours' notice, I jumped into my car and travelled to Sydney for a one hour visit. This would be my first opportunity to speak openly with a Kwaio leader about the murder.

I arrived at the appointed meeting place feeling intense emotion—my head full of questions—not knowing what to expect. After brief introductions, the chief spoke of the events of that dreadful day and we shed tears together. I then informed him of my deep desire to find closure to enable me to move forward. I was in no way prepared for his response. After pausing for a few moments, he lifted his gaze and looked me in the eye.

“Jean,” he said, “you have two options, but only one offers a way forward. They are not easy options, but very difficult options.” I listened breathlessly.

“You must come back to Malaita, meet with the accused, pray with them and offer your total forgiveness.”

To say that I was stunned is an understatement in the extreme. I was speechless. I felt angry and betrayed. After all, I was the victim here. How dare he ask me to offer total forgiveness for such a heinous crime, while the perpetrators go free! His request was unreasonable, even irrational. The visit concluded and I said my goodbyes, still reeling from his outrageous suggestion.

As I drove home, I recounted his words over and over: “Pray with them and offer your total forgiveness.” I recalled a quote from a book on forgiveness by RT Kendall: “You must totally forgive them, unless you forgive them you will be in chains,
release them and you will be released.”

Slowly it started to make sense. He was asking no more of me than what Jesus had already done on my behalf. When I considered what God had forgiven me, I realised I could do no less. Jesus died the cruelest of deaths so that I could have hope and a future. He accepted and forgave me totally—no conditions other than I accept. I didn’t deserve it, I didn’t earn it. He gave me Life. The love of God meant Calvary. Nothing less.

The more I thought about it, the better it sounded. I felt a sense of peace begin to wash over me and the tears flowed like a river! As I contemplated the total forgiveness option—both intellectually and emotionally—I sensed a feeling of freedom.

I was not in a position to return to Atoifi, so in January 2007 I wrote a letter, expressing that I wanted to offer my total forgiveness—that my forgiveness was based on what Jesus had done in forgiving me. The letter was sent and received. A huge weight was lifted and God has brought closure for me. The inner peace I experienced was tangible. God alone enabled me to take that step forward. There is no way I would or could ever have done this in my own strength. God gently brought me to this decision and I thank and praise Him for His patience with me. It took time—four years—to come to that point. Yet God never pushed me or made me feel guilty. Gently He carried me through until I was ready to leave it totally to Him.

I don’t know the reason God allowed Lance to be murdered, but one day I will. Jesus’ death on the cross is proof to me that God always has a purpose in the circumstance, and that His purpose and His plan will prevail and triumph through any circumstance. In the meantime, I know He sees, I know He cares and I know He loves. The evidence is there.

Has God been close these past 10 years? Absolutely. Nothing will dissuade me from knowing that God is with us and continues to be involved in the lives of His children.

Jean Gersbach writes from Newcastle, NSW, where she is a nurse educator at the University of Newcastle.
Most Adventists, myself included, greeted with joy the news that Angus T Jones, the actor from the hit sitcom *Two and a Half Men*, had recently become an Adventist. It was moving listening to the testimony he shared with *Voice of Prophecy*. The upshot of this initial winsome witness was a focus on meeting Jesus with the potential to attract people to the Gospel. Then everything got disastrously derailed. Angus T Jones released a media clip in which he agonised over the immorality in the show *Two and a Half Men*. The problem was not his comments about the moral content of the sitcom—after all, the show does indeed glorify sin and immorality. The real problem was that he did so in conjunction with conspiratorial Adventism. Almost instantly everything changed from a story about a young actor discovering Jesus, to a story about a young man sucked in by crazy claims about the Freemasons (apparently Jay-Z is one), the Illuminati, bizarre rants likening President Obama to Hitler, and more. In the eyes of many people, Adventists went from a group with a message about Jesus capable of grabbing the heart of a young Hollywood star, to a weird, paranoid cult indulging in the most ludicrous claims and manipulating a young man. The Church wisely and sensitively distanced itself from the conspiracy connection but the damage was done. A credible witness was greatly diminished.

A wake-up call!

The high profile incident provides an ideal time for Adventists to think long and hard about our mission and methodology. Maybe God allowed this to happen to wake us up to the dangers of conspiracy theories and the disastrous effect it has on our witness. Satan would love nothing better than to shift the focus from Christ to baseless conspiracies. Unfortunately, he appears to have many sincere but unwitting accomplices.

Adventists are to help people embrace the glorious victory of Jesus in the great controversy, not join in paranoid conjectures about an imaginary grand conspiracy. There is a vast world of difference between being a great controversy Adventist and a grand conspiracy Adventist. The way each narrates history, handles Scripture, shapes discipleship, impacts church community, and forms the mind and heart are often very different. One is our inspired calling from God, the other is a twisted product of man. In the introduction to her book *The Great Controversy*, Ellen White explains her methodology and aim. She says: “The great events which have marked the progress of reform in past ages are matters of history, well known and universally acknowledged by the Protestant world; they are facts which none can gainsay.” What a contrast to conspiratorial Adventism! This should be our approach. Tragically, conspiracy Adventism turns all of this on its head. Crazy, dubious claims are made the essence of the message.
**A message: open, public and verifiable**

Ellen White's approach is what healthy Adventism has always used. The foundational bedrock prophecy for Adventism is Daniel 2. Here God nestled prophecy within well attested facts of history. Does anyone doubt the exploits of Alexander the Great? Who isn’t fascinated by the amazing archaeological discoveries about ancient Babylon, Greece, Persia and Rome? This is our message. Not fervid conjectures about handshakes and pentagrams. Not spinning a yarn about symbols on the American dollar bill and fantatising that somehow a secret global conspiracy has been established. There is no mistaking the world of difference between the two approaches. One is exciting and the other is embarrassing.

The reality is that history is out of anyone’s control, except God's. The rise and fall of empires is something that God oversees (see Daniel 2:20-22). No empire can resist this and no human organisation is secretly controlling it. Not even Satan can control history, let alone a rabble of Freemasons or Illuminati!

**Have we forgotten Murphy’s Law?**

There is of course the more obvious fact, one known to all people by constant, unyielding and often painful experience: human beings are simply too flawed, fallible, stupid, disorganised, selfish, competitive and gossip prone to secretly control the world. And yet conspiracy theorists credit conspirators with god-like powers. Somehow conspirators can see the future, manage countries and superpowers, keep irreconcilable political enemies submissively on side, and effortlessly orchestrate wars, elections and financial crashes. Are these gods or humans? I would suggest that Murphy’s Law helps us see this for what it really is—an embarrassing flight of fancy that keeps crashing up against the stone cold wall of reality.

Conspiracy Adventism approaches history in a way reminiscent of Dan Brown and his book *The Da Vinci Code*. Did you ever wonder how Dan Brown was able to "prove" that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and became the Progenitor of the Merovingian kings of France? Symbology! This is the very same methodology that conspiracy theorists heavily rely upon. Forget facts, documents and the critical analysis of sources. Symbology can prove anything. And it’s much easier than having to deal with real history.

**From Christ to conspiracy**

I have never yet seen an Adventist conspiracy theory presentation that didn’t dramatically move the focus away from Jesus Christ and onto the wildest speculation. Jesus becomes a minor supporting act. Front and centre are always the phantom conspirators and of course the heroic conspiracy theorist himself. Conspiracy theory parasitically lives off its improper attachment to Christianity. And, inevitably, the parasite always ends up killing its host.

**From conspiracy to controversies**

Paul has strong words for those who turn the church away from the truth to speculative fables: “As I urged you . . . charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith” (1 Timothy 1:3,4; see also 1 Timothy 4:7 and 2 Timothy 4:4). In Titus, after encouraging a devotion to the Gospel and good works, Paul warns: “avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless” (Titus 3:9). As a pastor you soon learn what produces healthy discipleship and what leads to fanaticism, perpetual immaturity and a harsh, argumentative spirit. Devotion to conspiracy theory is a prime example. Obedience to Paul’s words would immediately eliminate it from Adventism.

Conspiracy theories raise questions of ethics and morality. My observation is that conspiracy theories place advocates in a position where truth telling is compromised. Unable to offer clear evidence, the temptation to overcompensate, exaggerate and resort to embellishments is almost irresistible. When does it all descend into simple dishonesty? The ease with which any event or person is implicated into the conspiracy reinforces the impression that things are being made up. A classic yet appalling example of this is the frequent accusation that a particular Adventist scholar, pastor or administrator is really an undercover Jesuit. I guess this is not merely dishonest—it is slander. This is the fruit of a paranoid mindset that disdains public verifiable evidence. The ethical quality of our community can only degenerate. There is a price to pay for giving comfort to conspiracy
theory.

**Conspiracy real and imagined**

Of course secret societies exist and are wrong. A Christian should never join one. They advance their own interests and often undermine justice. They bind people together in associations which are counter to Christ. Do small conspiracies happen? Of course! Thousands are happening right now. Governments, businesses, armies, politicians, societies (secret or otherwise), church members and probably your own kids are conspiring to various degrees. The world is a ceaseless realm of competing interest groups. Somewhere in the world some faction of a political party is conspiring to oust their leader in a coup. Australians witness this every election cycle. However, this does not in any way validate grand conspiracy theories, which are a completely different order of claim. Just because humans can now run 100 metres in under 10 seconds doesn’t make credible the claim that they will soon be running 100 metres in less than a second. Orders of magnitude mean everything when reasoning from the known to the unknown. Conspiracies do not justify grand conspiracy.

**What will you be?**

Most church members I know who are sympathetic to conspiracy theories nevertheless limit the time and focus they give to them. Thankfully, the centrality of the Gospel in their lives squeezes out any significant impact the theories might have. However, this is not always the case and sometimes conspiracy theory bears its unhelpful fruit. My prayer is that we will become great controversy Adventists not grand conspiracy Adventists. There's a world of difference between the two. What will you encourage?

*Anthony MacPherson is pastor of Plenty Valley and Croydon churches, Victoria.*
I was deeply moved reading Jean Gersbach’s reflections in the [June 15] edition of the RECORD. In fact I must confess to a few tears. Jean, your resilience, hope and love is an inspiration to us all. I do not know why Lance had to be taken from us those 10 years ago at Atoifi. But you and your daughters, Louise and Anita, have shown us so much courage and remind us every day just how to trust in God despite circumstances that seem almost impossible to bear.

In memory of Lance, we at the Division would like to initiate the setting up of a scholarship fund for the training of nurses at Atoifi Hospital School of Nursing. The Division will provide a grant to start the trust fund but I would like to invite members from around the Division to contribute. You can do so by sending your donations to our Division treasurer Rodney Brady at Locked Bag 2014, Wahroonga, NSW, 2076. We will work with Jean through the mechanics of setting up the fund to be managed by the Church.

Please be generous. We want to ensure that the legacy of Lance’s contribution to Atoifi and his service for his God continues into the future.

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