Politics and prayers

In the "Flashpoint" section of next week's issue of RECORD (July 6), you'll see a short news piece about Prime Minister Julia Gillard's visit to Nunawading Christian College in Victoria. We "signed off" on this issue of RECORD on Monday, June 24. Who would've guessed two days later Australia would have a new prime minister?

Australia, and much of the world, is still reeling from this past week's political upheaval. In this time of change and uncertainty, it's time for us Christians to do what we do best—pray.

For those who think what happens in parliament doesn't directly affect them, consider this: Kevin Rudd earlier this year declared his support for same sex marriage. Thus, let us pray. Not for Mr Rudd's political demise, but for God to carry out his "good and acceptable and perfect will" (Romans 12:2) here in Australia.

Speaking of politics, James Standish recently found himself in the midst of a political protest in France (see third item below). Also, check out this week's episode of Record InFocus for Christian commentary on Australian politics.
The Jerry Matthews story

Pastor Jerry Matthews, who recently announced his retirement as president of the New Zealand Pacific Union Conference, looks back on his call to ministry, and the 25 years of "unexpected surprises" that followed.

Should the Church ordain women?

While people are currently asking, “Should the Adventist Church ordain women?”, the Church itself is addressing a broader question, namely, “Should the Church ordain anyone at all and if so, should it ordain women?”

Read RECORD

Lazing around on the couch wrapped up in a blanket, with your feet by the heater and a new issue of RECORD in hand. See, winter’s not so bad after all.

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This week, as an Australian election looms, are refugees a political priority? The challenge of unemployment to a marriage. And from gay activist, to active Adventist.

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Storming the Bastille

“Equal rights for children; now there is a novel idea.” James Standish considers what a society that accorded children equal rights would look like.
The Jerry Matthews story

My Dad grew up in a drovers' camp in outback Queensland. Both his parents died before he reached the age of 10. He was as tough and as honest as the land he made his living from. Considering everything, he was a good dad to me. But we didn’t have any time for religion in our home. My mum had a bit of Lutheran faith in her background, but out in the bush it didn’t seem relevant. Maybe there was a Man upstairs, but we weren’t bothered with Him.

By the time I was 15 years old, I was making a living working at the local bacon and pork sausage factory. Eventually I got married, had three children and settled down on a share farm in Queensland. The hours were brutal, the rewards meagre. As the years went by, my drinking got out of control. I was having a couple of bottles of beer before breakfast. I knew that was excessive, but it was a way to handle the pressures. I loved a good smoke, too. I could roll my own cigarette while I was riding along in the bush on my horse. It took years for me to get that little trick down pat.

And my idea of a good meal? Steak. If the steak didn’t fill the plate, then we hadn’t eaten, full stop.

My wife, Cheryl, was watching TV one evening and saw an ad for some spiritual lessons. At the time, our lives seemed so hard and so pointless, and I think she was also getting pretty fed up with my drinking. So she responded to the ad. Pretty soon, the local Adventist pastor showed up and started Bible studies with her. When he moved on to a new district, Pastor Murray and Bev Chapman took his place. Murray and Bev used to study with Cheryl and then Murray would come down and help me milk. I thought the bloke was crazy for coming down and working for nothing. I wasn’t interested in his faith. But I sure could use his help!

When my wife got baptised I didn’t attend. Our farmhand went and so I docked her a day’s pay. I still feel a bit guilty about that—I was firmly opposed to this religious stuff.

Even though Cheryl tried to share with me what she learned about God, I didn’t want anything to do with it. I completely shut her out. I believe it was her prayers that made the difference in God getting through to me. Two years after Cheryl was baptised, I was out ploughing one Sabbath morning when I was overwhelmed by a deep conviction that what I was doing was totally wrong. I got off the tractor, knelted down on the freshly ploughed earth and opened my heart to Him. I promised that my days of working on the Sabbath were over and I committed my life to God.

Now I had to tell the owner of the property I was managing that I was going to keep the Sabbath. This was a problem because when I was hired, I committed to working a seven-day week. I was so nervous when I asked if I could talk with him. We met in the old machinery shed. I felt I had to lean against the metal work table, just so my legs didn’t buckle. He came in and said, “What is it, mate?” I replied, “You
know how Cheryl goes off to church on Saturdays, well, I’ve decided to go too.” I’ll never forget his response: “Is that all? I reckon if we can’t make a go of this place working six days a week, we won’t working seven.” I walked out of that shed like I was walking on air.

Later, after I was baptised, I was called to be a literature evangelist (LE) in Gympie, Queensland. There was a three-week transition between moving from the farm and starting to knock on doors. We were down to nothing in the bank and so, for that three weeks, my family survived on pineapples that were too ripe to go to market and some watermelons from a kindly nearby farmer. My kids' mouths were raw and their tongues bleeding from eating so much acidic pineapple. It was really rough. The first day I went out with Graham White knocking on doors, I was amazed by God’s graciousness as I came home after making a number of cash sales. We went out that night to the grocery store and bought food. Bread never tasted so good!

Here I was, a bloke who only knew how to talk to cows and machines, but during the four years I worked as an LE, we never went hungry. God took care of us, and through our LE ministry a number of people found Jesus. I’ll never forget the people we met. Like the lady in the old Queenslander home who, when I arrived on the front step, was out in the back praying, “Lord, if You’re really there, send me someone.” Can you imagine what it’s like to be used by God to answer someone’s prayer?

After a stint in secular employment I felt a call to the ministry. But that seemed impossible as I hadn’t finished high school. Nevertheless, the calling was so strong I filled out my application assuming I’d be turned down. I wasn’t.

So we put our home on the market, but it was in a downturn and the real estate agent said, “Not much chance you’ll move your place anytime soon.” We went ahead in faith. We were packed up ready to roll out of the driveway at quarter to five on a Friday afternoon, when the real estate agent came rushing in with a contract on our place. “Someone’s looking out for you,” he said. He was right.

My life in ministry has been full of unexpected surprises. For example, when I was general secretary of the Eastern Highlands Simbu Mission, in Papua New Guinea, there were problems at one of the schools. It got completely out of hand, with a group so enraged against the school treasurer and two other teachers that their lives were threatened.

I was able to get them out of the area and took them to a Lutheran facility in town, where we arranged to have them airlifted to Lae. When the time came to evacuate them, we drove out to the airstrip, they jumped out into the plane with its engines running and they were in the air within seconds. It was a challenging experience and I was so thankful to God for protecting us.

It was a long journey from outback Queensland to the highlands of Papua New Guinea, and now to the beautiful surrounds of Auckland, New Zealand. I feel like I’m the most unlikely guy to be president of anything, let alone a union of God’s special Church. From a very tentative step in a machine shed through to my current role, God has been right there beside me. He used me in a way I never could have dreamed of. I have nothing special to offer God, but God has everything special to give to me. And I know he’ll use you, too, if you put
everything on the line for Him.

Pastor Jerry Matthews is president of the New Zealand Pacific Union Conference, and recently announced his plan to retire.
Pastor Jerry Matthews has announced his retirement from his position as president of the New Zealand Pacific Union Conference (NZPUC).

“It was with a twinge of sadness that I announced to our staff in the [Union] office this morning that I will be retiring next month,” said Pastor Matthews in an email statement. The NZPUC oversees the Adventist Church’s operations in New Zealand, New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Pitcairn Island.

*Pastor Jerry Matthews.*

Pastor Matthews has been serving in the role as NZPUC president since 2005. During his 25 years of full-time ministry, Pastor Matthews has worked in a number of church administrative roles, including general secretary of Eastern Highlands Simbu Mission in Papua New Guinea and president of the North New Zealand Conference.

Prior to entering the ministry, Pastor Matthews also worked as a literature evangelist in his home state of Queensland.

Pastor Matthews acknowledged that retirement would take some time getting used to. “It is uncharted territory for me,” he said. “[But] I am looking forward to spending lots more time with [my wife] Cheryl, doing the things together that we haven’t had time to do up to now.”

Pastor Matthews and Cheryl have three adult children.
This piece is part of a series providing varying perspectives on the parameters of ordination.

While people are currently asking, “Should the Adventist Church ordain women?”, the Church itself is addressing a broader question, namely, “Should the Church ordain anyone at all and if so, should it ordain women?” Assuming the results of this study mean the present practice of ordination is continued, consistency would compel me to say that since the Adventist Church is ordaining men it should ordain women too and for all the same reasons. However, the question really deserves a more considered response than this with a look at some of the evidence available to us.

To begin with, the church is a New Testament phenomenon that came into being through the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and continues to find its raison d’etre in the presence and activity of that same Spirit. The Spirit produces fruit (Galatians 5:22) in the lives of all believers without distinction and gives spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1-11 cf. Romans 12:6-8) to many to exercise for the edification and growth of the church. Though these two actions of the Spirit provide the means whereby the church is able to exist and function, gender is not mentioned as a factor in either of them (for a more accurate rendering of these references in the Greek text see the NNIV).

Paul’s body parts illustration (1 Corinthians 12:12-31 cf. Romans 12:4, 5) is another case in point. He uses a human body model that is gender neutral to describe the various facets of the church and to declare their usefulness to the whole. This is in harmony with his teaching that universal salvation means, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

The Bible avoids the limitation of belonging only to a specific time or location in what it teaches. Rather, it majors on principles that are always applicable anywhere. It is its tendency to deal with motives and attitudes that makes Scripture timeless and universally relevant.

So what does this mean for male and female roles? Are they also subject to biblical prescription?

While attitudes and motives are directed by Scripture, gender roles are normally defined by the customs and culture of a given society. As such they are subject to variation and modification as the values, knowledge and opportunities of people change over time and from group to group. So based on custom and culture we have different ways of living and relating. These may or may not conflict with Bible principle or the teachings of the Gospel. When they do conflict the New Testament has more than one way of dealing with them. Sometimes the answer is to compromise for the sake of the Gospel as Paul did in face of the practice of slavery, while the abolitionists of the 19th century fought against it as Paul did in the case of certain unacceptable behaviours during worship on the part of some women (1 Timothy 2:11-15), while he endorsed the worship practices of other women who preached and prayed appropriately in the congregation (1 Corinthians 11:5).

For the rest we can say that where culturally conditioned practices cause no impediment to the progress of the Gospel they can be practised at will by believers. This includes the way people eat, dress, work, relax, relate, manage their homes and run their churches.
Why should the Church ordain women? It would seem to me that this question cannot be answered by a one-size-fits-all policy. On the basis of New Testament teaching and practice and on the expectations of custom and culture in some parts of the world, the Church should begin to ordain women immediately. This would go a long way towards stopping the damage being done to the progress of the Gospel by failing to do so. In other parts of the world it may be a folly to ordain women because it might harm the progress of the Gospel to do so. Based on its intimate knowledge and understanding of its own part of the world it would be wise for each union to make its own decision as to whether or not to ordain women and leave the rest of the unions making up the worldwide Church to do the same.

Carole Ferch-Johnson served, until recently, as the Australian Union Conference's associate ministerial secretary for the support of female pastors.
My eldest daughter and I recently strolled down the Champs-Élysées hand in hand, taking in all the sights, sounds, smells and a few of the tastes of Paris in spring. We visited little boutiques, grand repositories of the world’s greatest art, we sat in cafés wearing our matching berets; we went up towers, over walls, across gardens and through so many doors we lost count.

Was it good? No. It was glorious!

As far as dad-daughter outings go, I admit this one was a bit on the extravagant side. But as they say, we have to seize the moment. And for me, it seems just a few months ago our tiny little girl was born—two and-a-half months premature, weighing just a little over a kilogram, and struggling moment by moment to cling to life. I never imagined while we sat by her tiny body in the neonatal intensive care unit, that one day she would grow into a girl who makes the whole world sparkle anew.

On our final day in Paris, we visited the Musée d’Orsay. What an experience—it seems almost obscene that one gallery holds so much magnificent art! As we exited the gallery, however, the mood on the street was rather less rhapsodic. We were greeted by a long line of armoured police cars, with police in full riot gear, and in the distance the rumbles of a massive protest could be heard. My daughter, ever curious, wanted us to get close to have a look. “Your mum would kill me if I took you into the middle of a French protest,” I told her. After all, as anyone who’s seen Les Miserables knows, if there is one thing the French know how to do right, it’s put on a protest.

But this protest wasn’t by farmers dumping their tomatoes in the street or unemployed youths ransacking their neighbourhood; this protest was by hundreds of thousands of people—from what I could see most of them young and very vibrant—rallying in favour of the family. As their leader, Ludovine de la Rochère, pointed out, millions of people in France have now joined in protests nationwide to save the family without a single car being burned or shop ransacked. Such restraint seems almost unpatriotic. And what exactly are they protesting for? She put it this way:

“Our belief, held by most of the country, rests first on the equality of children . . .” (click here for the full speech).
Equal rights for children; now there is a novel idea. As we watched the protest from a safe distance on the Pont de la Concorde, I had to wonder what a society that accorded children equal rights would look like. What would abortion law look like, for example? Considering the devastating impact of divorce on children, would we retain permissive divorce laws? Would we permit the creation of children from anonymous parents, whom the children never have a right to meet or even know the identity of? And would we adopt policies that encourage adults to create and raise children in families where children never have the joy of a mum and a dad (click here)?

If those questions were not enough, I wondered how we would organise our broader society if children had equal rights? Would one generation of adults pass on enormous national debts for their children to service? Would Western societies tolerate youth unemployment rates at twice to three times the rates enjoyed by older adults? How would we treat our environment? Would we permit huge multinational fast food companies to lure our children into obesity with omnipresent advertising and promotions?

What, in total, would we have to change in order to achieve equal rights for children?

Looking at objective indicators (see for example, growth in male youth suicide rates in Australia and rates of depression among young Americans) of the mental health of children in Western nations, there appears to be compelling reasons to change direction. Could it be that Ludovine de la Rochère is right; that it’s time to storm the Bastille of leftover bad ideas from the sexual revolution and overturn its archaic policies of social re-engineering that are currently being championed as the future? Has it come time to shift our collective focus away from self-actualisation of adults and onto the core needs of our children? Has the time really come for childhood equality?

James Standish is editor of RECORD.