Honestly . . . just ask

Homosexuality. In Christian circles, it’s probably one of the toughest topics to talk about. Why? Are we afraid of open, honest discussion? Or is it more to the fact that talking about homosexuality often leads to more questions than answers?

Whatever the case, homosexuality is a topic worth discussing, particularly since same sex marriage is now legal nationwide in thirteen countries, with legislation in Uruguay and New Zealand to come into effect later this year.

If you’re keen to join in on the discussion of homosexuality—particularly from a Christian standpoint—we encourage you to tune in to Wahroonga Live tomorrow to hear the story of Wayne Blakely and his transformation from gay escort to man of God. The program may lead to more questions then answers, but—honestly—maybe that’s a good thing.

While we’re talking about questions, we have some more for you to consider in this week’s edition of RECORD eNews. Care to have a read?
Lest we forget . . .

Rosalie McFarlane is concerned “that we are forgetting the rationale behind the sacrifice to build—and the enormous value of—our Adventist education system”. Is she right?

Train up a child . . .

To send your child to a Christian school or a non-Christian school—that is the question. And, as Tom Pennington explains, it’s not a simple one.

Going old school
Adventist families sending their children to Adventist schools—that's nothing out of the ordinary. But why are so many non-Adventists choosing Adventist schools?

*This week's offering (July 13, 2013): World Mission Budget Offering*
Lest we forget...

Have you ever held a real life treasure trove in your hands? Have you ever been presented with a mystery that changed your life? Has something you’ve unexpectedly discovered altered the way you view yourself and your world? I have.

Years ago, my aunty left an unexplained mystery behind when she moved into a nursing home. I had the melancholy task of cleaning out all of her earthly possessions out of her home. It wasn’t easy—all those memories, all those dreams, all those hopes. As I methodically cleaned out closet after closet, drawer after drawer, memories of my aunty as a young, vibrant woman and everything she meant to me over the years came flooding back. It was a lifetime’s worth of mundane objects—clothes, cutlery, knick-knacks—each with a memory attached and each to be packed up and shipped out. I had been cleaning and packing for awhile, when I came to a chest of drawers in the spare room. It didn’t look like much, and I didn’t expect to find anything extraordinary. But I was wrong—profoundly wrong.

At the very back of one of the drawers I found a battered old chocolate box. The box was a mystery the moment I found it. Why was it tucked in the back of the drawer? Was it too heavy? And why did it make a metallic clink when I moved it? Did the box contain gold? Precious coins? What was it hiding? Should I open it? Or should I let a mystery remain a mystery?

Curiosity got the best of me and I slowly opened the lid. Inside I discovered three medals and a large bronze plaque. On the plaque I read the words, “He died for honour and freedom”. The name on the plaque was David Stewart McFarlane. As I read it, another memory came flooding back. I first heard of McFarlane D S when I was five years old and my dad pointed to his name, etched in stone on an Anzac memorial. It had all seemed very remote to me then—a faceless man, long since dead, lying lifeless in a place I’d never been, killed in a war I didn’t understand.

But holding his medals and reading the inscription on the plaque, which I later learned is called a “dead man’s penny”, made it all so real. It was at that moment I realised, McFarlane D S was my own Anzac. And it was up to me to ensure his service and his sacrifice were never forgotten.

On April 24, I joined thousands of New Zealanders and Australians in a journey of remembrance at Gallipoli. During the freezing cold that night, beneath the peaks my great uncle scaled and died on, I thought of what he and thousands of others did for honour and freedom. As I contemplated their immense sacrifice, my mind wandered to a very different hill where the King of the universe, our awesome Jesus, gave His life for honour and our freedom. As dawn broke on April 25 in Gallipoli, I stood with the thousands there and uttered the words “Lest We Forget”. But unlike many there, I was thinking not only of McFarlane D S and thousands like him, but I was thinking also of the One who made an even greater sacrifice.

On that cold morning I realised that the tragedy is, we do forget. But for a chance discovery in my aunty’s home, after all, I would likely have forgotten McFarlane D S. It was a sobering thought. And it isn’t just our Anzacs who we forget, it’s also our spiritual ancestors and their sacrifices we ignore.

Today, I have a particularly grave concern that we are forgetting the rationale behind the sacrifice to build—and the enormous value of—our Adventist education system. As I meet with Adventists from across the spectrum in my role as education director for the New Zealand Pacific Union Conference, I get a sense we are forgetting why as a Church we run the world’s largest Protestant school system, despite being only the seventh biggest Church. I can’t give you a battered old chocolate box full of mysteries to spark your memory, but what I can give you is something better—living, breathing students and teachers who are, every day, being profoundly touched by the wonder of Adventist education.

Adventist schools are operated to achieve three aims: to share who God is; to teach His plans and purposes for us; and to prompt a response to Him.

These three components of Adventist education have been part of God’s wonderful eternal plan for educating humanity from our inception. The garden of Eden was a school. It was here that God as the great Teacher shared with Adam and Eve who He was, His plans and purposes for them and how they could respond to Him. No matter how well God had created human beings, to develop a relationship with them He still had to share with them who He was. This is the first work of Adventist schools: to introduce our wonderful Jesus to our children, and to share with them a loving, caring, almighty and powerful God.

God also revealed his plans and purposes to Adam and Eve, giving them dominion over the earth and all that was in it. Our schools continue to open to students God's wonderful eternal plan for their lives and how they can respond.

Yes, Adventist education involves academic success, great sporting events, music and arts programs, and more. Yes, the results we are achieving are widely recognised in the community. Yes, our schools have a superb reputation. But the core purpose of Adventist schools is to gently lead children to the foot of the cross where they meet Jesus. The work of Adventist education is to open to them the “joy of service in this world and the higher joy of wider service in the world to come”.¹ This is the most important
way Adventist schools differ from schools just down the road. For more than 100 years members of local Seventh-day Adventist churches worked hard, giving time, effort and finances to building a school for their church. They built these schools in tough times, when many of them were poor and when an extra shilling meant a lot. But like King David, who had a phenomenal vision for a magnificent temple for God, these church members had a vision of Adventist education that would provide eternally focused education for our children. We have inherited the wealth of that vision and provision, and like Solomon who built a magnificent temple with the provision his father had made, our generation has continued to improve our high quality Adventist schools, which today achieve great results that are widely recognised in our community.

But we can’t rest on the efforts of our ancestors. When the Temple in Jerusalem passed to Rehoboam, the original vision was lost and, in the end, so was the temple itself. Is it possible that we too could lose our vision for Adventist education and as a result lose a precious and highly effective means of evangelism and ministry? We have seen some schools close and the rate of creation of new schools has slowed. Unless we remember and value what we have and continue to invest and support that original vision, we could squander our educational inheritance.

As I stood on Chunuk Bair on Anzac Day and looked at the name McFarlane D S etched in stone so far away from the wall in New Zealand that my dad had first pointed out, I experienced a deeper understanding and appreciation. While I felt a deep gratitude for what my great uncle had done, I had tears in my eyes as I looked out across the spectacular vista his name sits above every day and I quietly prayed: “Lord may we never forget.” Today, that is my prayer for our entire church family.


Rosalie McFarlane is director of Adventist Education for the New Zealand Pacific Union Conference.
Train up a child . . .

As Adventist parents we face some difficult educational choices. In many ways it's a dilemma born from privilege. The options are numerous—public, selective public, private, selective private, single-sex versus coeducational, and even home-schooling. Our Church has a long and justifiably proud history of providing quality primary, secondary and tertiary education to young Adventists and, increasingly, to children and youth from diverse faith backgrounds. For Christian parents of young children contemplating the various educational paths, the choice is by no means clear.

This article is not written to recommend one particular schooling method over another. Indeed parents often worry about the role school plays not only in children’s learning, but in shaping their characters, and ultimately influencing them to accept or reject God. While it’s true that school influences are powerful moulders of impressionable minds, I believe God was talking specifically to parents when He said: “Train up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). It is in the home environment that a child learns to love God. Nevertheless, the choice of schooling can augment the parents’ home teaching in varying and important ways. I can speak from my experience of my own schooling and outline pointers that may prove helpful for parents contemplating this important decision. This is a subject especially close to my heart now that I am a father contemplating the best educational path for my young daughter, Isabel, and son, Lachlan.

My first five years

of primary schooling were delivered in a metropolitan Adventist primary school. I was then accepted into a selective private boys’ school (Sydney Grammar), where I completed primary and secondary schooling.

Both schools offered a wholistic curriculum in academic and other pursuits. Both schools encouraged the cream to rise to the top, and both struggled to nurture and motivate students who were not academically focused. Both schools offered guidance in religious studies, though the former was more integrated and all-encompassing where the latter was very optional and unashamedly pluralistic. For example, readings at assembly each Friday morning at Sydney Grammar School rotated between the major world religions’ texts—the Bible, the Qur’an, the Upanishads and the Torah. This seemed appropriate for a non-Christian, multicultural school, and it neither bothered nor challenged me spiritually because Adventist philosophy had already been so ingrained in me. For a child with a weak Adventist upbringing, however, this may have been confusing and a potential stumbling block.

The transition from a small Adventist primary school to a large selective private school in grade five was not an easy one for me. I went from top of the class to middle of the pack; from friends with everyone to knowing no-one. And it’s where my young faith was challenged for the first time. I met children from all walks of life. I was now faced with the scenario where the majority of extra-curricular activities were on Friday night or Sabbaths. I had to opt out of many of the activities that I had previously excelled in and enjoyed—athletics, swimming and team sports (although this didn’t stop me from winning the age champion in Years 5 and 6 at the school athletics carnival, held mid-week). I was unable to participate in inter-school sporting competitions as these occurred on Sabbaths. The same could be said for musical endeavours, with the vast majority of concerts/performances held on Friday nights.

This, you could say, greatly limited my education through late primary school and throughout high school. I certainly look back and have some regrets in this area. My older brother, who attended a selective boys’ public school, was able to participate in most activities he chose, as these were scheduled on weeknights and weekdays. The flipside of missing out on school sporting and arts events is that it made me learn to stand up for my beliefs, and I was able to talk to many of my friends about the Sabbath. Would it have been harder to stand up for my beliefs in an environment where my peers were supposed to be Adventist Christians? It's perhaps easier to swim against the tide when one knows which way the tide is going.

The challenges through high school did not stop with the Sabbath issue. By Year 9 I was faced with the reality of teenage binge drinking and substance abuse. It's only through the strong upbringing at home, and by the grace of God, that I was able to resist these vices. The temptation to join “the crowd” was strong and sustained throughout senior high school and well into my university years. I cannot comment on whether this temptation would have been any less (or greater) in a Christian environment, but I would urge parents, youth leaders, pastors and teachers not to ignore this issue. Particularly, with regards to the consumption of alcohol, we as a Church need a united front. I can positively say that my parents were by far the most influential of my educators on the issue of alcohol and other harmful substances.

On the academic front, high school was very good for me and it nurtured a competitive environment that enabled me to do well enough to study science and medicine, and
to pursue a career in surgery (though I have peers who went to Adventist schools who also were accepted into medical school and other demanding university courses).

Being academically “middle of the road” at this highly selective private school may have pushed me to achieve more than I would have in a less pressured academic environment, though of course I say that with a large amount of uncertainty. I was still able to achieve my grade 8 piano certificate in the 10th grade of school (this without any help or tuition from the school), and I played many sports to my heart’s content, just not competitively.

The inevitable cost of not taking part in Saturday sports, teenage partying, alcohol and drug-taking was a loss of popularity. Friends came and went. The friends who stood by me were the ones who respected me for my beliefs, but for the most part I was considered pretty “uncool”. Adventist parents who send their children to non-Christian schools need to pay close attention to their child, as the signs of social isolation can be subtle. Make your home an oasis and an open forum for discussion and encouragement. Children who are experiencing peer pressure, loneliness, or having their faith shaken to the core, especially need a home environment filled with love, assurance, encouragement, compassion and recreation.

Despite these hardships, I would rate my experience at a non-Christian selective private school as, overall, a positive one. It’s indeed possible to come out the other end a strong Seventh-day Adventist Christian and I am testimony to that. But I also have friends who went to Adventist schools who are strong Adventist Christians.

Parents who wish to send their children to non-Christian schools should not expect to abdicate their vital role in creating a Christian home, as it’s in the home that children learn to love and obey God. Our instruction is vital to our children coming out of school on “the other side” balanced and grounded Christians regardless of their schooling environment. If you are contemplating sending your child to a non-Christian school, don’t do so without much thought and prayer. At the same time, don’t shy away from non-Christian schools for fear of their bad influence on your child—you are your child’s most important instructor. Your child will mingle with children of different faiths and cultures, and will daily have opportunities to share their faith. To those parents whose children have left the faith, who may be feeling remorseful for their decisions regarding their children’s education—pray for them. The journey is far from over, and God is not slack concerning His promise (2 Peter 3:9).

Tom Pennington is a physician engaged in surgical training. He is currently based in Lismore, NSW.
If traffic is flowing on the freeway, it only takes a little over an hour to drive south from Los Angeles airport to San Clemente. It’s worth the drive. San Clemente feels very much like a ’60s surf town ripped straight out of a Beach Boys song. It isn’t so much that time has passed it by, but that it has come into modernity maintaining its modest scale and original charm. On a sunny day, the Pacific Ocean sparkles a beautiful azure blue and “those bushy bushy blonde hairdos” are, indeed, “surfin’ USA”.

Recently an old friend and I sat framed by a large Spanish arch in a restaurant on San Clemente’s Avenida Del Mar. We spent a very lazy and enjoyable couple of hours catching up on where life has taken us so far. We talked about our professional lives, stories of what our mutual friends were up to, our hopes, dreams, fears, tragedies, triumphs and, of course, our children.

I wonder what our younger selves would have made of us sitting there so enthralled by a child-centric conversation. After all, prior to children, I fondly quoted the lyric, “Been around the world and found that only stupid people are breeding”, with a chuckle to anyone asking about my plans for kids. Life has a way of making fools of all of us, and when it comes to children, there’s no bigger fool than me.

“You know,” my friend said thoughtfully, “I don’t think we appreciate what we had when we were kids.” “What do you mean?” I replied. “You know, the church school thing.” “What about it?” “Well, there’s no church school around where we live now. I didn’t think much of it when I moved there. But now my son is enrolled in a ritzy private school and, frankly, it’s not as good as the school my parents sent me to.” And so we talked for a while.

The truth is that Adventists today aren’t like our parents: we don’t just automatically enrol our children in an Adventist school and assume that it’s the best. We know too many of our peers who went to Adventist schools and didn’t stick with the faith. We also know that Adventist schools aren’t perfect. And many of us are pretty impressed by public and private alternatives. I know this well, because it’s a subject men and women of a certain age spend an awful lot of time talking about from San Clemente to Sydney, from Tauranga to Tahiti (those are among the places I’ve had conversations about children’s education in just the last few months . . .).

But sometimes it’s by seeing Adventist education through the eyes of non-Adventists that we gain a full appreciation for what we have. When I talk about the school my children attend with fellow church members, most of them are complimentary, in a suitably muted sort of way. No-one wants to be unsophisticated, after all. But when I talk about the school with non-Adventist parents, they are rhapsodic. We live in an area with some of the best public and private schools in Australia, and yet there’s a steady stream of parents choosing to transfer their children into our Adventist school. And our local Adventist school is hardly unique—I’ve seen this pattern at other Adventist schools I’ve visited in both Australia and New Zealand.

Why are so many non-Adventists choosing Adventist schools?

I’ve wanted to know myself, so I’ve asked. The reasons given are just so heartening. The academics are superb, my non-Adventist friends say. And, they observe, there’s a very special supportive spirit among the children. But most of all, they point to the exceptional Christian dedication of the teachers. As one non-Adventist parent commented, “The teachers here aren’t just doing a job, they are following a vocation.” Children are, I’m told, cherished and nurtured as individuals, and each one matters.

I’m not sure why non-Adventists can see what some of us can’t. Maybe familiarity breeds contempt? Or maybe we are simply spoiled and we just don’t realise it. As I left the restaurant in San Clemente considering what my friend had told me, the lyric “don’t it always seem to go, that you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone,” was ringing in my mind.

1. Depending on your generation, you’ll know “Big Yellow Taxi” as a Joni Mitchell masterpiece, or a Counting Crows hit.