Who are you?

Tomorrow (September 7), Australia will have a new prime minister. Or not. Tony Abbott, Kevin Rudd—who’s your pick to win? Is either really a “winner”?

In an interview with Lyle Shelton from the Australian Christian Lobby a couple of weeks ago, Kent Kingston suggested that most people would probably vote for the party they disliked the least, rather than somebody they actually admired. Why is that? What is about Mr Abbott and Mr Rudd that people just don’t like? Perhaps it’s because, despite all the campaigns and media coverage, we really don’t know either of the prime ministerial candidates as people.

There is power in the combination of testimony and transparency, as you will see in this week’s issue of Record eNews.

By the way, for those who have yet to hit the polling booths, you’re going to want to check out what Ellen White has to say on the subject of voting.
Messy messages

Raw, heart-wrenching honesty—we love hearing it, but are scared to practise it. "Our mess is our message", writes Jarrod Stackelroth. "Why then, do we so often hide our brokenness?"

Convicted

If you saw him on the train, he might be the type you’d avoid. But if you took that chance, if you sat in that empty seat next to him, you would hear an amazing story.

Only by love

Columban father Kevin Mullins is an Australian who has devoted his life to the people of Juarez, Mexico, a city that has been described as “the murder capital of the world”. And research shows the presence of women—sisters, daughters, spouses, colleagues—turns men into sensitive new age guys.
"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken," said C S Lewis. With the risk of being hurt, is love really worth it?

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from Linden Chuang, RECORD editorial assistant

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Spam
Not spam
Forget previous vote
To vote or not to vote?

Apparently there isn’t a political party for me. I say that after taking the ABC’s Vote Compass and finding myself pegged somewhere between political no man’s land and electoral outer Siberia. So what to do? Hold my nose and vote for the party closest to my views on everything from abortion to asylum seekers, the economy to education? Or, because there is no perfect party, should I just not vote at all?

It’s not a new question in Christianity in general, and Adventism in particular. Early Adventists first completely abstained from involvement in political campaigns, believing Christ’s soon coming made voting irrelevant at best, and a distraction at worst. But as the Church became involved in the temperance issue, attitudes changed. Still, it can be hard to make sense of Ellen White’s advice on voting if taken in isolation.

Talking about politicians who were agitating for Sunday laws, she stated:

“We cannot safely vote for political parties; for we do not know whom we are voting for. We cannot safely take part in any political schemes. We cannot labour to please men who will use their influence to repress religious liberty, and to set in operation oppressive measures to lead or compel their fellow men to keep Sunday as the Sabbath... The people of God are not to vote to place such men in office; for when they do this, they are partakers with them of the sins which they commit while in office” (Fundamentals of Christian Education, page 475, emphasis added).

Unsurprisingly, some have read this quote, and others like it, and concluded that voting is a dangerous proposition. After all, most of us have enough of our own sins to be concerned about, without “partaking” in the sins of the politicians we vote for. But, it turns out, refusing to vote isn’t a safe course of action either. Ellen White states we are responsible if we fail to use our vote to address the wrongs in our society:

“Many deplore the wrongs which they know exist, but consider themselves free from all responsibility in the matter. This cannot be. Every individual exerts an influence in society. In our favoured land, every voter has some voice in determining what laws shall control the nation. Should not that influence and that vote be cast on the side of temperance and virtue?” (Review and Herald, Oct 15, 1914, emphasis added).

But Ellen White went even further. She prayed Adventists would vote:

“Men of intemperance have been in the office today in a flattering manner expressing their approbation of the course of the Sabbath-keepers not voting and expressed hopes that they will stick to their course and like the Quakers, not cast their vote. Satan and his evil angels are busy at this time, and he has workers upon the earth. May Satan be disappointed, is my prayer” (Temperance, pp. 255, 256).

And were that not enough, she even approved, in some circumstances, of voting on Sabbath:

“[P]erhaps I shall shock some of you if I say, if necessary, vote on the Sabbath day for prohibition if you cannot at any other time...” Ellen
So what can we take from all of this? It turns out that voting is not altogether different from anything else we face in life. There is culpability for actions that are bad, but no less culpability for inaction that fails to do good or stop evil. And, sometimes knowing what is right, what is wrong, when to act and when not to, is not simple.

At elections we aren’t faced with a clear choice between a party of all things good and pure, and another that is evil. And there isn’t just one moral question per election—there are many profound issues at stake and a party that may be good on one issue, may be equally awful on another. Balancing or prioritising the issues is complicated.

So should we quiver in a corner paralysed by indecision? Better to treat voting like every other complex moral decision we face on a daily basis. Put our lives in God’s hands, asking for His guidance as we prayerfully consider how to vote, and trust in His grace should we fail to comprehend His guidance. After all, nearly every nation in the South Pacific is what Ellen White termed a “favoured land” in which every voter has a voice. Let’s prayerfully and humbly cast our votes to advance the common good.

James Standish is director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the South Pacific Division.
Ever had a moment your life changed? It might be an event, a day, a loss, a year, an adventure, a relationship; but somewhere along the way, you flew the cocoon and started a new direction. A clarity hits you; something exciting, fresh and also nostalgic. Life-changing events are not always positive—sometimes they haunt us, dogging our steps, clouding our horizons or maiming us permanently. Yet they are important. Without change, we do not grow. Without growth, we die.

It took one weekend for my life to change. A friend of my wife and I (girlfriend at the time) had invited us to a “supernatural encounter”. We thought it was hype, just another church camp. They said it was hard to explain; we had to come and experience it for ourselves. So we did.

It wasn’t the camp that changed our lives. There was no professional evangelist, no deep theological truths that we’d never heard before, although the messages were solid. It certainly wasn’t the music. In fact, Lina took a while to adjust. She was used to very conservative worship styles.

It was the raw, heart-wrenching honesty; the realisation that all of us were sinners and struggled with the same fallen humanity; the discovery that no matter what we’d done, God’s presence was with us and He wanted to be part of our lives. It was stuff I knew rationally but had never felt physically. We heard testimonies like Albert’s. These were people who loved Jesus and wanted to live for Him but weren’t perfect and were willing to admit it.

When God changes a life He does so with power. He doesn’t expect us to cover up that mess. Look at the Bible. It’s a collection of messy people with questionable characters, motives and actions, and yet God still works through them and with them to bring about His purposes. Why then, do we so often hide our brokenness? We have become deceived into thinking that everyone else is more perfect than we are, so we’d better just keep quiet. Actually, our struggles and triumphs with God’s help, can be liberating for others.

Baptism isn’t the end of a journey either. Life doesn’t suddenly become rosy—it’s still hard, it hurts and even if we are fairly “righteous”, we still face struggles and hurts. That’s what makes us human.

God often chooses the least likely: younger brothers, sheep herders, fishermen, criminals, cowards. They more perfectly demonstrate His power. The truth of who we are keeps us humble, shines light in darkness and helps us relate.

We cannot wallpaper over our trials. That does not bring about true restoration. The cracks are still there underneath. True restoration is found in sharing.

Paul shares his testimony with the crowd in Jerusalem and again before King Agrippa. His letters are filled with accounts of his trials. He does not gloss over them. Instead, he uses them to glorify God.
The message of Jesus is often called the good news. It’s news about an event that has already happened—the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But the reporting of it, when received, should change lives. That is how the church explodes in Acts; they are witnesses to the resurrection. When the good news changes your life (and it should on a daily basis), you become an extension of the Gospel. Your story becomes your good news and sharing it, along with the story of Jesus, is a powerful way to enter into the lives of the broken. After all, Jesus Himself has a story of brokenness and suffering to share.

I used to think I didn’t have a testimony to share; no road to Damascus experience. I was raised in the Church, never felt the need to rebel. Yet we all have pet sins, comfortable crimes, that we entertain, justify and ignore. The first step into the kingdom, preached by John and Jesus, is to repent and confess. We can share how God has helped and is helping us with these things. In doing so it can help others. Christian rapper Lecrae said recently: “In these streets, if you are inclined to listen there are a million stories. I always try to make time to listen and share my own [story]. You never know how one person’s story may change another’s life.”

Once I came to terms with my brokenness (God’s terms) I was more effective for His kingdom. (Warning: I had to be broken first and it hurts.)

Our mess is our message but only God can redeem our mess—clean it up and refine it.

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*Jarrod Stackelroth is associate editor of RECORD.*
If you saw him on the train, he might be the type you’d avoid. Shaved head, tattooed knuckles, intense gaze. The seat next to him—empty. But if you took that chance, if you sat in that empty seat, you would hear an amazing story—a challenging, gritty, redemptive story from a man unashamedly in love with his Saviour.

You’d be surprised to hear how he helps little old ladies and picks them up for church and how he goes around the neighbourhood servicing people’s cars to show them that love. He sets and packs up all the equipment at his church and loves to “labour for the Lord”. And he's ready to share his story with anyone who’s willing to listen.

“It’s really the Holy Spirit who convicted me to get out of my hiding spot,” he says. “Satan had me in a hole for years, but I praise God, I’m opened up and able to be real to people and also be real about my feelings.”

But before the Holy Spirit convicted him, Albert Fa’a’logo spent years being convicted by the law.

Born in New Zealand in 1974, Albert’s parents split up soon after he was born. His mother suffered a breakdown so Albert and his brother, Ray, were cared for by their grandmother until, at about 5 years old, they were shipped off to Australia, to an acquaintance of the family to get a better education and a better life. Instead, they ended up in a three-bedroom house with up to 30 islanders brought over to work for the woman who took them in.

“I stopped going to school at 15, started hanging out with the crowd. I was stealing cars and breaking into shops.

“I’d just do anything to fill the void that was missing, as a young man.” Here Albert pauses.

The void. Dark, deep and insatiable, it was consuming Albert from the inside. It started with a child, lonely and longing for a family, longing to belong. It was compounded by the beatings and sexual abuse from his guardian.

“Any little thing and she would beat us with extension cords.”

Little wonder he ended up in the juvenile justice system. “My father and stepmother came looking for us. They got us out and we moved back to Samoa.” But it was too little too late for Albert.

“I didn’t feel the love for them because it had been so long. I didn’t really know them so they sent me to America to my stepmother’s brother. I planned to join the military.”

Another fresh start on another continent—only the void came with him. At about 17, Albert began to work.

“I made a couple of friends through work and they asked me if I wanted to be blessed.” Not knowing the street lingo in America, Albert
wasn’t sure what they meant so he asked them. “They said ‘You want to be in the family’. To me this was cool. Growing up with no family, I felt like this was family, we became tight.”

Turns out Albert’s new family was a gang and Albert became an enforcer, a foot soldier, selling drugs and taking orders. He began to use—heavily.

But the gang was like family; he would take a bullet for them and he knew they would take a bullet for him.

“Life was rough but I was trying to get the American dream of having money, looking good, driving nice cars and also having power, as in, no-one messes with you or they’ll get it back. I wanted all that.”

But it was never enough. He kept chasing more and eventually the law caught up with him. His house was raided at 4am one day and he was thrown into the federal penitentiary for immigration fraud.

“In there it was kinda rough, time stood still. Prison sucks.” With a wry smile, Albert shakes his head. “I thought I was a tough guy going in there, but inside it was a totally different story. You’ve gotta live by the rules.” Albert had to join a gang inside the prison. For his protection, he joined the Mexicans (his wife is Mexican). But it wasn’t the kind of life he wanted.

“I started reading the Bible but wasn’t solid. The only time I needed Jesus was when I was in trouble.” Albert was in and out of prison, breaking his probation with drug use. Before his last court case, in 2005, he prayed: “God if I get out, I promise I’ll change.” He won his case but didn’t change.

He was still struggling with drugs, violent towards his wife, Lisa, and his marriage was breaking down. He had had enough of life and was ready to leave the woman who had stuck by him during his dark times.

“I’m fed up with this,” he thought. “I need changes in my marriage, I need changes in my life.”

On the other side of the world, in Sydney, Australia, Albert’s brother, Ray, was being encouraged by the Xcell church plant he had recently joined, to pray for his family and friends. Albert and Lisa were on the bottom of Ray’s list of 10. After all, they were so far away and so far from God, deep in a world of anger, gangs and drugs. But God “flipped the script”. In God’s Kingdom, the last shall be first.

Albert found himself in Australia for his grandmother’s birthday. His brother invited him to a men’s group at Xcell church. At first he thought it was silly. But slowly things changed. He moved back to Australia and Lisa came too. They attended a “Conquering Conference” and they were baptised, their lives changed.

Neat story right? Only that’s not the end of Albert’s journey.

After 13 years of trying, Lisa fell pregnant. Albert told everyone how it was a testament to God’s glory. Then she lost the baby. That was a dark time. The doctors told them they couldn’t have another baby. They almost walked away from God at that time but they somehow pulled through and in the same month the next year, Lisa fell pregnant again, this time giving birth to a healthy baby girl. Albert told the doctors and everyone else about God’s miracle. “That’s why I believe man can go so far but God’s power can go beyond.”

He wants his daughter to grow up to know God. “My prayer every morning is ‘Lord, please help my daughter not to be like me but to love you’. I still struggle with teaching her the ways of the Lord and how life is because as a young man I wasn’t taught. I praise God what he had planned for our marriage and our life because we weren’t ready to have kids back then but now I think He said we’re ready.”

For Albert, his journey requires daily recommitment and the Holy Spirit’s infilling. He still struggles with losing his temper and was suspended from the church leadership team for a short time as he battled with it. But he’s not bitter. “I got pruned.” Albert says with a chuckle. “So I could have some good fruits. Cause if you’ve got rotten fruits man, ain’t nobody gonna pick that . . .” His laugh is full and loud this time, and it dances in his eyes. “The leadership saw my fruits weren’t growing and the roots weren’t solid so the brothers told me to step down for awhile, start growing again and ask the Lord to prune you. We can’t have rotten fruits so the world sees rotten fruits on us. They’re already eating rotten fruits.”

As he looks back, Albert can see God’s hand in his life. He should have died many times. He’s been shot at, blown a hole in his stomach through a drug overdose and been electrocuted during a robbery, but through it all his life was sustained. Now he gets excited to share his new life with people, even going back to the juvenile facility he was once locked up in to share his testimony with the inmates.

“You need to wake up with the Lord and go to sleep with the Lord,” he says. “Sometimes I want to give up. I just want to walk away and go back into the world but my heart will never do that. Even though I fall I will always come back. I will never give up on the Lord, after what
He has done in my life. He gave me a new name."

Albert’s surname, Fa’alogo means listen or obey in Samoan. He who has ears, let him hear.

_Jarrod Stackelroth is associate editor of RECORD._
I scurry along in the international terminal, my suitcase in tow, clipping the back of my legs, the random bursts of sting prodding me along. The handle is shorter than it should be—stuck half way. It’s broken—damaged and tired, having been thrown around on my many ministry adventures. I race toward the check-in desk, trying not to trip over, and chiding myself for being so silly as to wear heels to the airport, when I usually end up running to catch a flight!

We all have “baggage” of some sort. Tired from being thrown around—we are broken. Sometimes in our brokenness we sting others; at times in our stupidity, we trip ourselves.

I travel a lot, speaking openly on life issues, sharing my own story and journey with God. I also spend a lot of time with people who share their stories with me. As much as we would like to pretend that we have it all together, behind the masks of a cheerful “Happy Sabbath” greeting each week, the truth remains that many of us are struggling.

People are struggling with marriages breaking down, depression and same-sex attraction. Some pastors are workaholics or need help setting boundaries in their ministry. People from all walks of life are struggling with addictions—not just drugs, but pornography, cutting and perfectionism just to name a few. I talk with people who have been abused, lost a baby or had an abortion and never told a soul because they feel so ashamed. I talk with parents who are watching helplessly as the world grabs their children and spins them out of control. These are not outsiders; these are our brothers and sisters in the pews every week. You may even be one of them. I know I have been.

Something happens and there’s disconnect. Perhaps it’s a sense of shame, a fear they will be judged or rejected; perhaps they have been hurt and withdraw. Sometimes people don’t know how to connect, or nobody makes an effort to seek them out. Whatever the case, many people are feeling disconnected and excruciatingly lonely—inside their hearts and inside the church building.

When I read about the birth of the early church in the first five chapters of Acts, I see God’s people giving and sharing with one another so that no-one was in need of anything. I read of them not only worshipping and studying but eating together, and caring and healing. In fact their reputation of love for one another was such that even the Gentiles would bring their sick to God’s people to be healed, and thousands were added to their number each day. I read those early chapters of Acts and have to ask the question, what’s happened to us?

Is this pain just something I see because it’s my own hobbyhorse? Part of me wishes that were the case, but sadly even our Natural Church Development (NCD) statistics confirm my observations.

According to NCD, generally our lowest rating is in the area of loving relationships, defined by the question: “Are relationships in the church Christ-like?” How can this be when the Bible clearly tells us: “By this they will know that you are my disciples, because of your love for one another”?

Daniel R Sanchez, author of Church Planting Movements in North America, reports that 80 per cent of local congregations have reached a
plateau or are declining in attendance.

A June 2005 NCD survey among Seventh-day Adventist congregations reveals that the Church lacks an overall sense of community, “where people can share their feelings and trust each other”. More recent surveys, even here in Australia, are indicating the same thing—we are lacking in loving relationships.

Do we need another evangelism fad? Another “friendship evangelism” training manual? A program? When we try to connect artificially, people see straight through it. People crave authenticity, trust and acceptance—for church to be a safe place where they can love and be loved.

We talk about a need for community within our churches, and while I agree, I think a core issue with the term "community" is our definition of it. The sad reality is that we can have community without any real depth of connection, like a nice convenience or a social club. But for real, lasting and meaningful relationships, what we really need is a deeper level of connection. By this I mean safe, authentic and vulnerable relationships within our communities, including our churches, families and friendships. We need something deeper than a church community. We need a family of God.

A church family goes deeper than attending church, Pathfinder clubs, employment, camp meetings and small groups in themselves, it’s about connecting in these and other situations out of choice not tradition or obligation. It's about getting to know each other authentically, and caring for one another personally. It's scary and messy. To transition from community to family we have to step into intimacy and vulnerability.

The challenge is that you can't have loving relationships without risking rejection, and so many of us are too afraid to get hurt again or gossiped about. You have to be brave enough to allow yourself to take a risk.

C S Lewis said: “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.”

I once questioned this: loving with my whole heart, despite being loved back or not. Was I setting myself up by over-investing? Right then the Holy Spirit chimed in and said, "Did I over-invest in you when I gave My life for you on the cross?"

Don't give up

Our tendency when we feel hurt, lonely and rejected is to run, turn bitter and disconnect. Sad to say, I have done that myself. Having no Adventist family, my church meant the world to me and when I was let down it was excruciatingly painful. I left for a time, became very bitter and sunk into a deep depression until God was able to speak to my heart. When I think of the lives God has touched through the ministries He has called me to, I shudder to think about the consequences for some of them, if I had given up. God has people for you to bless and reach. When the embers of warmth grow dim in your church, be the igniting fire; choose to be the change you want to see.

We are grieving the greatest loss in the history of the universe—it's every heart’s cry—uninterrupted connection with God and one another. That's why it hurts like hell when disconnect happens, because it's not meant to be this way. But if we choose not to love, we add to the problem, instead of being part of the healing. It's not easy but it's worth it! Living with Jesus and each other in heaven, in total loving connection forever—yep, I will fight for that, even when it hurts, even though I feel like running. True love is selfless and sacrificial.

The answer is clear in the counsel we have been given; basically it comes down to this principle:

“Only by love is love awakened” (Desire of Ages, p 22).

“Love to man is the earthward manifestation of the love of God . . . And when His parting words are fulfilled, "Love one another, as I have loved you" (John 15:12); when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven; for we have heaven in our hearts” (God's Amazing Grace, E G White, p 54).

Will you choose to love?