Changes

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is the land of the unexpected. Today, it is also a nation in dramatic transition.

The PNG government has recently passed a bill aimed at reducing the high rates of violence against women in the country. And, just yesterday, James Standish reported on some big changes taking place in PNG’s church-state relations, with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency right in the thick of it.

Visit our website for more news and views from PNG. For other hard-hitting issues (or articles)—such as backsliding and book addiction—keep reading this week’s edition or Record eNews.
Letter from Annual Council

The Annual Council meetings of the General Conference wrapped up this past weekend in Silver Spring, Maryland (US). Barry Oliver reports on some of the outcomes, as well as important things coming up for the South Pacific Division.

Fiction addiction

Being addicted to reading books—specifically novels—does not carry the same stigma associated with being addicted to alcohol or drugs. Yet in its own way, “fiction addiction” is just as insidious.

Record poll

Church administration is:

- Too top heavy
- Just right
- Not widespread enough
- I don’t know

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The latest Christian news with Dannielle Synot. Nutritionist Sue Radd proves fruit is fun for both kids and adults. And a Sydney mathematics teacher tells of his life-changing work in Ethiopian prisons.
Why you really left the church

Today, Christian literature is littered with articles about Millennials abandoning church, with various hobbyhorses being flogged to explain the exodus. So let's look at a few of them.

More Editorials
Domestic violence law changes in PNG

The Papua New Guinea (PNG) Government has passed a bill aimed at reducing the high rates of violence against women in the country.

The Family Protection Bill 2013 was passed unanimously when it came before Parliament on September 18 and is seen as a crucial first step to reducing violence against women. It criminalises domestic violence and gives legislative backing for interim protection orders. It also allows neighbours, relatives and children to report domestic violence, and gives police the power to remove perpetrators from their homes to protect the victim. Penalties include fines of up to K5000 ($A2500) and up to two years in prison.

Aid and development consultant Michelle Abel said the passing of the Bill is an important step in the right direction, however, much more needs to be done to end the high rates of violence against women in PNG.

"The legislation needs to be effectively implemented and government must adopt institutional and policy reforms to support the legislative framework, especially regarding the capacity of the PNG police force," Ms Abel said. "ChildFund Australia conducted a study that found that many women try to get help from the PNG police force but that there was disinterest, and in some instances police were the perpetrators of violence. Police lack basic resources, such as petrol to drive to villages to investigate crimes, limited numbers of female police officers and inadequate training to deal with violence against women."

Andrew Opis, communication director for the Papua New Guinea Union Mission (PNGUM), said it was a major step forward.

"The sanctity and value of human life, which the Church has been teaching for many years, has now received government support," he said.

Rugged terrain, poverty and a shortage of village courts are just some of the issues preventing the law from protecting vulnerable women and children. Many women unable to report domestic violence incidents to police try to resolve the issue through their village magistrates. Currently in rural areas village magistrates hear civil cases for a fee, and have no formal training or background in law, mediation or counselling.

Medecins Sans Frontieres estimates that 70 per cent of women in PNG will be raped or physically assaulted in their lifetime. PNG ranks 134 out of 148 countries in the 2012 UNDP Gender Inequality Index, and 156 out of 186 in the Human Development Index—the lowest in the Pacific.

"The PNG Government are to be applauded for their recent stand against domestic violence," said Pastor Trafford Fischer, director of the South Pacific Division’s Family Ministries department. "The clear and unanimous message will now hopefully make its way into the towns and villages and provide police and social workers a stronger hand to help bring an end to so much physical and emotional pain to women,
children and families in Papua New Guinea. It may also aid in changing attitudes to violence and sexual abuse, bringing PNG towards being a more caring society.”

Sources: Amnesty International-Australia/ChildFund Australia
Big changes for PNG church-state relations

From the Church Partnership Program biannual meeting, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a nation in dramatic transition. Its economy is one of the fastest growing in the world. Investment is pouring in from Australia, Asia and the United States. It is developing complex relationships with nations as diverse as Israel and Chile.

This is not your father’s PNG.

But as much as life is changing, some things remain the same. The nation’s education and health infrastructure still has a long way to go to reach standards achieved long ago in many developing nations. There are widespread and egregious violations of the most basic women’s rights. And the nation is struggling with a large under-skilled, under-employed workforce.

So, who do you turn to to address some of these complex problems? The answer, at least in part, is the nation’s churches. Churches ranging from the Roman Catholic to the Anglican, the United Methodist to the Seventh-day Adventist have a long and rich history of providing health, education and social services across this complex nation of more than 800 languages, and vast cultural differences. AusAID, the aid and development arm of the Australian Government, instigated a new program in 2004 in order to harness the energy, organisation, grass roots networks and expertise of the churches to deliver development aid. The Papua New Guinea Government recently announced it will follow suit.

AusAID’s “Church Partnership Program” (CPP) includes seven Christian denominations that have a national organisation in PNG, a corollary organisation in Australia, and proven experience delivering key social services.* AusAID contracted ADRA to manage the CPP, in partnership with the Adventist Church in PNG. Within that capacity, ADRA runs the CPP coordination office that serves all seven churches. The AusAID budget for the CPP is about $A7 million a year. Grants are provided to improve the services provided by churches to communities, to build the ability of churches to provide services, and for church contribution to the functioning of the local public sector.

It may sound like jargon but the projects are very practical. They include job skills training for under-skilled young people, ranging from how to run a market garden to classes in making pavement bricks, literacy, and life skills. They also fund churches to implement programs to reduce violence against women and provide assistance to the poorest mothers and young children.

In explaining the rational behind the funding, Stuart Schaefer, head of AusAID in PNG, notes that: “[Churches] see the problems people face—you are integrated in all communities and you reach the poorest and the most remote . . . Australia strongly supports your work.” Robert Brink, AusAID counselor for governance in PNG, echoes the sentiment noting “churches are the best partners for development aid in PNG.” AusAID is pleased with the results of the CPP so far. “The program has many achievements which have been confirmed by an independent review,” says Mr Schaeffer.

From left to right: Jasmin Simyunn, ADRA PNG country director; Charles Abel, PNG minister for National Planning and Monitoring; and
The success of the CPP has, in part, inspired the PNG Government to seek to similarly harness the expertise and infrastructure of churches to provide basic services across the nation. Charles Abel, MP, minister for National Planning and Monitoring, states: “The churches are important partners in nation building.” He points out that churches are currently more successful delivering health and education than the government. “If the churches are delivering health and education. And if the government is struggling then it makes sense to support the churches. It’s a pragmatic approach,” he concludes.

Minister Abel recently announced the creation of a “Church Development Council” to distribute 50 million kina a year in funding for health and education. The funding is contingent on cabinet approval. If the funding materialises, Minister Abel announced it will be divided based on the level of services churches already provide in the area of education and health. Minister Abel points out that this is a neutral approach that avoids the level of discretion that rested with the Ministry in the past and resulted in money being distributed based on criteria unrelated to the ability of the recipient to provide services.

Schaefer notes that 50 million kina, although a lot of money, is a small fraction of the 1.5 billion kina overall budget allocated by the PNG Government for development in provinces, districts and local level governments. Not all provinces are currently spending the money wisely. “Churches are the only organisations in the country outside of the government which are able to monitor how the money is spent,” Mr Schaefer says, “they should use their moral authority to encourage greater transparency.”

Minister Abel, whose great grandfather was a missionary from the London Missionary Society, also threw out a challenge to the churches. “We want [our people] to live lives around serving others rather than themselves. Christianity must be based on translating the example of Jesus Christ into daily actions or it is meaningless. Despite words and zeal, it is not always translating into action.”

Minister Abel called for input as the Church Development Counsel develops. “It is not fixed in stone—we will change and improve it as it develops. My ears are open and I’ll do all I can to support you.” The first meeting of the Church Development Counsel is planned for early 2014.

Pastor Leigh Rice, president of the Adventist Church in PNG, is encouraged by developments. “We’re pleased the PNG Government funding process is planned to progress in an open and transparent manner, employing neutral criteria. We are strongly committed to the religious freedom of all faith groups, and that includes equal treatment of all peaceful people of faith, or no faith, by the government.” In his prayer closing the morning session, Pastor Rice also recognised the importance of donors. “We thank you, Lord, for the generosity of the Australian people expressed through AusAID, and the work it is accomplishing to give people in PNG access to healthcare, education and economic opportunity.”

*The Anglican, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, United Methodist, Salvation Army and Seventh-day Adventist denominations.
As I begin to write this newsletter I am sitting in the auditorium of the General Conference (GC) office. It is the last morning of the Annual Council of the General Conference Executive Committee. There are probably 300-400 people in the auditorium. Almost 300 are members of the committee. The rest are spouses, invitees and some observers. Attending with me are our GC Committee members: Lawrence Tanabose, Rod Brady, Leigh (and Barbara) Rice, Glenn (and Pam) Townend, Chester (and Robyn) Stanley, Brad Kemp, Aho Baliki (a layperson from Papua New Guinea Union Mission) and his wife Veronika, Owen Ryan (a layperson from Trans Pacific Union Mission) and his wife Anna, Alban Matohiti (a pastor from the Australian Union Conference), and Evelyn Will (layperson from New Zealand Pacific Union Conference). These annual meetings are important, setting the agenda in many ways for the world Church in the coming months and years. I will share a number of relevant items from the agenda with you in this newsletter.

Mission to the Cities

Just before the Annual Council started an Urban Mission Conference was conducted. This year has seen the start of a global strategic initiative to reach the urban areas. We actually started the ball rolling with “The Last Empire” in Sydney. This was followed by Christchurch, Lae and right now Apia. In every division a large city has been selected and considerable resources deployed. Cities like New York, Tokyo, Mumbai, Moscow, Lagos and Mexico City are being targeted. There are cities here of over 20 million citizens, with hardly a Seventh-day Adventist. In 2014 every conference and every mission in the world will choose a large city in their territory and intentionally target it with a comprehensive evangelistic strategy.

Mission to the Cities in Apia, Samoa

As I write, the special evangelistic program which is part of Mission to the Cities, has just commenced in Apia, Samoa. I have received an initial report which I summarise here for you. The program is being transmitted live to 23 outlying centres in Samoa and American Samoa as planned. The theme of the campaign is “The Last Empire” and the opening followed a weeklong church spiritual revival conducted by Pastor Jean Noel Adeline. This was also transmitted live via internet.

Attendance: Attendance by non-Adventist guests for all the sites combined during the first three nights were 500-plus for the first night, 600-plus for the second night, and for the third night 700-plus. Among the guests on opening night were the country’s Acting Head of State, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of Parliament, the President of the Lands and Titles Court and other lesser government lights. The Head of State (and spouse) and the President of the Court (and spouse) have continued to attend and have indicated a desire to come to as
many evenings as possible.

Program: The 30-minute long health talk by Dr Chester Kuma has been well received and addresses important health issues to the government and people of Samoa including the Church in the two Samoas. The music by Vincent Clairmont is a blessing as is the preaching of the message by Pastor Jean Noel Adeline. The main message is being translated into Samoan.

Venue: The main venue is the new government Conference Centre in the heart of Apia, the nation’s capital. With expected growth in numbers, plans have been made to have a screen in the spacious and airy veranda to accommodate any outflow from the main hall. The facility has full connectivity which makes it ideal for transmission via internet to the outlying centres. There is room in the facility for a children’s programme which is running at the same time as the main event. People have been trained specially to conduct that programme.

Outlying Centres: There are 23 outlying centres for receiving transmission via internet. Five centres are on the island of Savaii, 15 on Upolu and five in American Samoa.

Joanne Davies promotes the Beyond: The Search DVD project at Annual Council on Sunday, October 11, 2013. [Photo courtesy: Ansel Oliver]

125th Anniversary of 1888

I am sure you will be aware that this year is the 150th anniversary of the founding of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. It happened in 1863 in Battle Creek, Michigan. Elsewhere in the country the civil war was occupying the lives of Americans.

What I had not realised was that 2013 is the 125th anniversary of the historic 1888 General Conference session. This gives us an excellent opportunity, not only to acquaint our people with some important events in the history of our Church, but also to focus on righteousness by faith and God’s amazing grace.

Theology of Ordination Study Committee update

Dr Artur Stele, head of the Biblical Research Institute and chair of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee gave an update on the proceedings of the group. As you may well know, a consensus statement on the theology of ordination has been released. That was voted at the June meeting with a sizeable majority. The committee is now specifically considering ordination without reference to gender. Papers have been presented from both sides of the issue. Those papers and all others that have been presented in the course of the work of the committee are available on the webpage of the General Conference Archives and Statistics. At its January meeting the committee will receive reports from each of the Division Biblical Research committees on the issue. There will be papers presented critiquing the papers presented thus far. And then there will be two important papers presented which map the way forward for the Church. One paper will be presented from the perspective of those who do not favour ordination without reference to gender. One will be presented from the perspective of those who do favour ordination without reference to gender. I have been asked to write and present the latter paper. I need your prayers for this assignment. It will be time-consuming and I dare say it will be written late at night. If you have any thoughts on how
the Church may proceed into the future in the context of some differing opinions on the issue, I would ask you please to respond to me as soon as possible after you read this newsletter. I am consulting widely as I put this together and it will need to be complete within the next few weeks.

**The Creation: A media evangelism project**

A new DVD depicting the events of creation was released at the Annual Council. This DVD has been produced in Germany under the auspices of the Communication Department of the General Conference. It will be available for distribution and use by our churches shortly. You will be informed once we have stock available for distribution.

The Creation: The Earth is a Witness is a movie that will soon be available for worldwide distribution and use in outreach initiatives.

[Photo courtesy: Ansel Oliver]

**Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists**

Some editing work on the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs was introduced on the floor of the executive committee. No vote was taken as the plan is to circulate the proposed changes over the next year and to collect responses. The responses will be taken into account and a document returned to the Annual Council in 2014 for consideration and recommendation or otherwise to the General Conference Session of 2015. Many of the changes are editorial. Gender inclusive language is one proposed change for example. But other changes are substantive and I would encourage you to consider the proposed changes and respond as you wish when the document is circulated. We will certainly be considering it and responding from the South Pacific Division (SPD) Biblical Research Committee. You may either respond through our Biblical Research Committee or direct to Dr Artur Stele.

**Impending retirement: Pastor Lawrence Tanabose**

I am sure most of you have heard that Pastor Lawrence Tanabose is planning to retire at the end of 2013 and return to his home island of Choisel, Solomon Islands. We rejoice and thank God for Lawrence and Rosina Tanabose but we are going to miss them terribly. As the first Pacific Islander to be elected to the senior leadership of the SPD, Lawrence has demonstrated a level of commitment, wisdom and discernment that has ensured that he has contributed immeasurably to this Division. His knowledge of particularly the work of the Church in the island nations of the Pacific has been invaluable. He is a wise counsellor, friend and brother in Christ and we wish him and his family good health and happiness as they return to live and work with the people of Choisel and the Solomon Islands. God bless you Lawrence and Rosina and family.

Well, I need to send this to you. As often happens I have written in fits and starts as I have travelled home over the last few days. I am now safely back home again and looking forward to getting back into the office ready to gear up for our year-end round of meetings. 2013 is almost history. I wish you the blessing of the Lord as we close out this year and look forward to 2014. I want you to know just how much I value each of you and thank God for the committed, talented, focused team we have in the various entities in this Division. I am always proud to represent the SPD at global events where we continue to “punch way above our weight”. My prayers are with you and your families as we serve our God together.

*Dr Barry Oliver is president of the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.*
Imagine coming into possession of a device that unlocks the door to an alternate universe. You are given fair warning that if you choose to enter this universe, you will witness graphic and horrific scenes. Children will be forced to engage in a brutal fight to the death, merely for the entertainment of an evil metropolis. Their only hope for survival is the advice of a perpetually drunk mentor and their own wits. This universe abounds with fear, gruesome violence, starvation, hatred, defiance and death. Would you still use your device to unlock the door?

If you’ve read the bestselling *Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins, you already have.

Being addicted to reading books—specifically novels—does not carry the same stigma associated with being addicted to alcohol or drugs. Yet in its own way, “fiction addiction” is just as insidious.

Author Lucy Maud Montgomery is quoted as having said, “I am simply a ‘book drunkard’. Books have the same irresistible temptation for me that liquor has for its devotee. I cannot withstand them.”

I can relate. Hi, I’m Vani, and I’m a bookaholic.

For as long as I can remember, reading has been a part of my life. With two parents who worked in libraries, maybe my condition was inevitable. As soon as I was able to say complete sentences, I was also able to read. I quickly developed a passion for books which would play a major role in the story (pun intended) of my life.

“But witches do exist,” I protested. “They look exactly like normal women except that they’re bald and they have to wear wigs. Oh, and they have claws on their hands, which they cover up with gloves, and funny square feet which they hide with pointy shoes.”

I was seven years old, in the third grade, and trying to convince my best friend Wendy that witches really existed.

“But how do you know?” she challenged me. “And how do I know that you’re not just making this up?”

“I know it’s true,” I said with great authority, “because I read it in a book.”

If only winning every debate could be so easy. This convincing argument persuaded Wendy that the witches of childhood fantasy books were indeed real. We spent the next few weeks suspiciously eyeing every glove-clad woman that walked past our school playground. Of course it probably didn’t help that it was winter at the time.

I eventually did learn that there was a difference between fiction and non-fiction, that *The Witches* by Roald Dahl definitely fell into the first category, and that I shouldn’t be so influenced by what I was reading.

But not before I tried to make sneezing powder (*Third Year at Malory Towers*), suggested to my parents that if I couldn’t have a puppy, I
would accept a pet horse (*Black Beauty*), wondered why I never had exciting adventures involving shipwrecks and islands (*Swiss Family Robinson*), and contemplated potential future careers—perhaps starting my own child-minding business (*The Baby-Sitters Club*) or becoming a girl detective (*Nancy Drew*).

A few weeks ago I walked into a bookstore. Out of curiosity I decided to check out the young adult section. I’d expected *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* to be on its bookshelves, but I hadn’t realised just how many authors had jumped on the same bandwagon. Almost every book revolved around wizardry, sorcery and violent fantasy.

Philippians 4:8 encourages us to think on things which are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous and praiseworthy. Parents often worry about what their children are watching on TV. Do we pay as much attention to what they read?

Ellen White had a lot to say about the dangers of reading fiction: “There are many of our youth whom God has endowed with superior capabilities. He has given them the very best of talents; but their powers have been enervated, their minds confused and enfeebled, and for years they have made no growth in grace and in a knowledge of the reasons of our faith, because they have gratified a taste for story reading. They have as much difficulty to control the appetite for such superficial reading as the drunkard has to control his appetite for intoxicating drink.”

Huh. There’s that comparison between fiction addiction and alcohol addiction again. I can already hear the counter arguments now. “But not all fiction books are bad! Some have really good morals and values.”

Absolutely. There certainly are fiction books which express sentiments that are lovely and praiseworthy. For example, *Paula the Waldensian* tells the story of a Waldensian orphan whose kindness and love convince her relatives and neighbours to give their hearts to God. John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is a beautiful allegory of the Christian’s life journey. And it isn’t just religiously themed novels that have uplifting themes.

But if we are honest with ourselves, if our primary goal in reading these books is to learn from the morals and values they espouse, why are we not more interested in reading the Bible—our ultimate moral compass?

When was the last time we stayed up late so we could find out what happens in the last chapter of Genesis? Or vegged out with a bubble bath and the book of Psalms? Or called a friend to say, “Hey! You’ll never believe what I just read in 1 Kings. It’s amazing!”

Type the words "Bible" and "boring" into Google and you’ll end up with a myriad of hits. There are a few atheists among them, but the majority of complaints come from Christians.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise. Trying to read the Bible after reading a thriller novel is like trying to drink a glass of water after you’ve downed a Sprite. You know that the water is better for you—it just tastes bland after the sugar rush of lemonade.

But imagine that you’ve just finished running a marathon. You’re dripping with sweat, you’re incredibly thirsty and someone hands you a glass of water. It tastes like the best drink you’ve ever had.

You see, the Bible is not only a moral compass. It’s an amazing story in its own right—a narrative of cosmic drama, the battle between good and evil, the love of a Saviour and a victorious redemption. But as long as we’re caught up with the "lemonade" books, we won’t be as interested in the Living Water.

Books in and of themselves are not the issue. Like TV, they are a medium which can be used for good or evil purposes.

But if you find yourself struggling to read your Bible or keep alert during the church sermon, I highly recommend that you take a look at what else you’re reading. Like other addicts, it might be time to acknowledge that we have a problem.

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Vania Chew recently began working for the communication department of the South Pacific Division as PR/editorial assistant.
Most of my best friends from boarding school in Singapore left the Adventist Church. As have most of my friends from primary school in Australia, my friends in Michigan and a bunch of my friends from college in England. And it isn’t just my friends. My generation–Generation X–left the Church in droves. We were, it turns out, a little foretaste of what was to come.

Today, Christian literature is littered with articles about Millennials abandoning church, with various hobbyhorses being flogged to explain the exodus. So let’s look at a few of them.

There’s the old chestnut—“someone said something wrong”. Now let’s get real here. No-one could hold down a job, stay in school or have a relationship if they were so sensitive they left as soon as they bumped into a grump. Yes, of course people at church should be kind, pure and true. And, in my experience, Adventists generally are—though not always and not everyone. But, outside of extreme circumstances, people don’t walk out on things they value simply because they come in contact with real human beings—warts and all. They walk out because they don’t value the underlying substance.

A second explanation—popularised by American author and columnist Rachel Held Evans—is that Millennials are abandoning church because it focuses on sexual morality, rather than social justice. But this doesn’t work on two counts. First, the denominations that are biggest on talking social justice and the smallest on biblical sexual morality, are the ones shrinking the fastest. Second, it turns out all those traditional evangelicals are hardly indifferent to poverty. World Vision, one of the largest aid and development outfits in the world, is an evangelical initiative. The Salvation Army? They’re evangelicals too. And you would be hard pressed to find a community that does more, pound for pound, to provide health and education to the poor around the globe than the Adventist Church.

So if it isn’t grumpy people, unfashionable views on sex or cold indifference to the poor, it must be stodgy worship services! Apparently not. There’s no community that has embraced contemporary worship more enthusiastically than American evangelicals, and yet they are losing Millennials left, right and centre. Pastors in black t-shirts, churches with espresso machines and Daft Punk style praise bands just aren’t packing ‘em in like they used to.

Which leaves the superficially profound answer: organised church is antithetical to the authentic Christ. The problem? It was Jesus who set up the church, and He began it with 12 very imperfect people. So if the real Jesus set up a church full of real people, how could disassociating from a real church be consistent with loving the real Christ?

But there’s an even more fundamental problem: all these explanations rest on age-old phenomena. There is, for example, nothing new about Christian teachings on sex or flaws in organised churches. If the rate of defections has increased, the underlying reason for the drift away must also be increasing. New events require new explanations.
So what’s new? One of the most profound changes in our culture is the explosion of media consumption. Back in the early ‘90s, the average Australian, for example, watched about 17 hours of TV per week. According to McCrindle Research, Australians today spend close to four hours online every day, and about three hours a day watching TV, for a staggering 49 hours of media consumption per week.

As mass media has become more heavily entwined with our lives, the content has simultaneously become increasingly incompatible with, and even hostile to, Christianity. Our media consumption profoundly impacts the way we see the world. Ellen White comments on a popular truism this way: “It is a law both of the intellectual and the spiritual nature that by beholding we become changed. The mind gradually adapts itself to the subjects upon which it is allowed to dwell. It becomes assimilated to that which it is accustomed to love and reverence.”

Could the answer to the spiritual malaise infecting society have little to do with the inadequacies of everyone and everything else, and all to do with how we choose to invest our consciousness? Is the exodus from church the inevitable, natural result of our media consumption patterns? Could the solution be as simple as spending less time watching Game of Thrones and more time focused on the Throne of Grace?

James Standish is editor of RECORD.