Big questions

By now you’ve probably heard about last weekend’s tragic car accident that claimed the life of actor Paul Walker. Much has been said about the Hollywood star over this past week, especially in regards to his movie credentials and charity work. But here’s one quote from the actor you may have missed: “I’m a Christian now . . . The people I don’t understand are atheists. I go surfing and snowboarding and I’m always around nature. I look at everything and think, 'Who couldn't believe there's a God? Is all this a mistake?' It just blows me away.”

The weeks leading up to Christmas and New Years may be among the busiest of the year. In the midst of duties and deadlines, however, it’s important for us to stop and think about bigger things—why do you do what you do? Why do you believe what you believe?

For more thought-provoking topics, keep reading this week’s edition of Record eNews.
Half a million for Philippines relief

Adventists have provided $A495,000 to support the survivors of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines through the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) disaster response program.

Great Controversy Project a great success

More than 140 million books have been distributed around the world as part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Great Controversy Project.

Read RECORD

After a three-week gap, it’s back—a new issue of RECORD. Dive on in!

Watch/download InFocus

Nutritionist Sue Radd says calcium supplements can raise the risk of a heart attack by up to 30 per cent. And Sydney Adventist Hospital CEO Leon Clark is in the hot seat to talk about the San’s latest developments.

Church’s paradise
“I will be candid: church is a challenge when you have an active child,” writes James Standish. “Yes, it’s critically important to take them because research shows that children who attend church regularly are significantly more likely to continue attending as adults. But boy oh boy, most churches don’t make it easy!”

With power comes . . .

What if a Seventh-day Adventist became a prime minister or a president? What if an Adventist-dominated political party won an election? It’s more than a hypothetical question.

*This week's offering (December 7, 2013): Mission Extension Offering
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Half a million for Philippines relief

Adventists have provided $A495,000 to support the survivors of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines through the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) disaster response program.

Churches across the country took up a special offering on November 23. Many churches ran special fundraising events; the Sydney Adventist Hospital ran a matched payroll-giving campaign and even ADRA’s op shops donated a week’s takings to the relief effort.

Although final figures haven’t yet been tallied, to date ADRA Australia has processed $A238,000 in direct donations and church conferences have reported $A257,000 in donations through the church offerings system, bringing the estimated total to $A495,000.

“The generosity of supporters will enable ADRA to implement critical emergency response and recovery programs to save thousands of lives and help thousands to rebuild and move forward,” said ADRA Australia’s director of public and supporter relations, Janelle Muller.

A young boy flexes his muscles carrying an ADRA hygiene kit.

The global ADRA network has been working closely with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and other aid agencies to ensure a coordinated and efficient response. ADRA was among the first to respond after the November 8 super-storm, delivering emergency food and water in the hardest hit regions of the Philippines. The second wave of aid saw ADRA distribute water and hygiene kits, shelter provisions and additional emergency food for the worst effected families on the hard-hit coastal fringe of Panay Island. ADRA has now provided assistance to 34,000 people.

The hygiene kits will help protect vulnerable families against disease and illness. The kits include a jerry can, bucket, water treatment solution, soap, toothbrush and tooth paste, laundry detergent and other hygiene supplies. The food packs will provide enough rice, salt, sugar, oil, canned fish, peanut butter and other items to feed a family of five for a month, while the shelter kits will provide tarpaulins and other building supplies to ensure temporary shelters can be established as families plan for their future.

A lady opens up her hygiene kit.

ADRA Australia’s Braden Blyde has been in the Philippines for the past two weeks gathering information to support the relief effort. While there he met Nida, a widow, grandmother and carer to her eight grandchildren. “The storm has made it very difficult. I am afraid of more storms—I see clouds and I fear,” said Nida. “The children too are afraid. They won’t go near the sea and wake up at night in a panic.”

OCHA has described the humanitarian situation in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan as catastrophic. The estimated number of people affected has been revised upward to almost 15 million, with around 4 million people displaced from their homes. Food, shelter, recovery of livelihoods and restoration of basic services are top priorities for the humanitarian community. Immediate life-saving and early recovery
programs alone are estimated to require more than $US1 billion.

“The most difficult thing about being a widow is finding enough money and food for the kids,” said Nida. “Before Typhoon Haiyan I worked each day processing the fish brought in by the boats. Now, with most of the communities boats destroyed, and no fish to catch, my income has dried up.”

Nida and her children.

ADRA has finalised a recovery plan needs assessment which will inform the next phase of the response. Additional funds raised will go towards the restoration of livelihoods and the rebuilding of shelter.

For updates and further information, call ADRA Australia on 1800 242 372, or visit <adra.org.au> or <adra.org.nz>.
Great Controversy Project a great success

Wahroonga, New South Wales

More than 140 million books have been distributed around the world as part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Great Controversy Project.

The project, which began in 2012 with a vision of placing a copy of Ellen White’s The Great Controversy in every home within reach of members, churches and institutions, has more than doubled the initial distribution goal of 50 million.

“My heart rejoices with praise and gratitude to God for the great evangelistic outreach . . . the world church has undertaken during 2012 and 2013,” said Adventist world Church president Pastor Ted Wilson. “I sincerely thank our church members and leaders worldwide for their faithful commitment to mission through the circulation of the written Word of God.”

Copies of the The Great Controversy and an abridged version of the book (The Great Hope) were distributed throughout the Adventist Church’s 14 world divisions. The books were translated into 88 languages.

560,000 copies of the books were distributed in the South Pacific, as well as thousands of copies of Step Beyond (Steps to Christ) and The Desire of Ages.

“The results of such literature distribution will only truly be seen once we meet in heaven,” said Danijela Schubert, Project Hope coordinator for the South Pacific Division.

A closing ceremony for the Great Controversy Project was held at Adventist world Church headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, in October. Books will continue to be distributed in church divisions until the end of the year.
This is the law of the universe: when you take one child on an adventure to see the world, you must reward the other similarly. And true, the Gold Coast isn’t Paris, but it seemed the perfect getaway for my youngest daughter and I to spend some time together luxuriating in all of the finer things in life. I never expected, however, that going to church would be among them.

I will be candid: church is a challenge when you have an active child. Yes, it’s critically important to take them because research shows that children who attend church regularly are significantly more likely to continue attending as adults. But boy oh boy, most churches don’t make it easy!

At my regular church, children’s Sabbath Schools finish at 10:45 am sharp. The sermon starts somewhere between 50 and 75 minutes later depending on the vagaries of the day. So we bring snacks and activity books, do plenty of “shushing,” bribing, threatening and all the rest of it. We generally seem to struggle through, and sometimes we even manage to get something out of the sermon along the way, but I’ve always suspected there must be a better way.

I talked with Greg Pratt, pastor of Reedy Creek Adventist Church (Gold Coast, Qld), a couple of months before the trip and he mentioned their 8:30 am family service. Not a children’s service but a service targeted to the needs of families. I was intrigued, and as we had nowhere else we had to be, we decided to check it out.

So what did we find?

I have to admit I was a little apprehensive as I didn’t have the “Sabbath bag” with me. In my experience, going to church without the bag filled with activities and distractions is like trying to fly an A380 without engines; it will not end well. When we walked into the hall it was very low key. Everyone was friendly. The service began with three lovely songs. Then Pastor Greg got up, said a prayer and the sermon began. We were about 10 minutes into the service and the sermon was already underway. Unheard of!

And it was an unusual sermon. I say unusual, not because of the content. Nor because of the tone. There was nothing “dumbed down” or simplified about it. What made it unusual was Pastor Greg stopping periodically and asking questions of the congregation. Specific questions. Expecting specific answers. My daughter sat spellbound. And occasionally she called out an answer. Apparently Greg decided that using one of the most effective methods of teaching ever invented—the Socratic method—may work just as well in church as it does at the most prestigious universities in the world.

When the sermon was finished I almost found myself calling out: “we want more!” Now, for the record, that isn’t something that generally occurs to me. And remarkably, my particularly high energy little princess hadn’t fidgeted at all. She had listened to every word. Astonishing.

Or maybe not. After all, it’s much easier to keep attention when the sermon doesn’t come after a run of seemingly endless preliminaries.
And a little congregational involvement certainly keeps listeners engaged.

After the service I had a chance to sit down with Greg and ask him some questions.

“We started this service for two reasons,” he said. “First, our normal service was filling up. Second, a number of families wanted to reach out to other families with young kids. Today people find it hard to bring kids to formal, longer services. They get embarrassed by kids’ behaviour. But here, if a child yells out, there’s no problem. We’re all in the same boat!”

Yes, but is it working?

“On a typical Sabbath around half the families in attendance don’t come from an Adventist background,” he replied as if that was the most natural thing on earth.

“But just because families are our focus it doesn’t mean this is a kids' church—we’ve designed this to be multi-generational,” he continued. “Substance is key, and Jesus is very much the centre of our service. This isn’t about entertainment—it’s about a deep, lasting relationship with Christ.

“We started out with one family service a month. We’re now going to two . . . we plan to ramp up to every Sabbath.”

How does this fit into his vision for the church? “The first pastor of Reedy Creek expressed his vision for the church as a light on the hill. As you can see, we are very literally on a hill,” he replied. “We celebrated our 30th anniversary in September and I believe now more than ever we must be the light our founding generation envisioned. Our elders meet every Monday and we pray simply for the Holy Spirit to be among us. And that very much includes our family service.”

After talking with Greg, what we had just experienced all made sense. The church set out intentionally to meet the needs of families with young children. They dedicated themselves without reservation to God. And they designed a service to suit the cultural and demographic needs of those they were trying to reach. It all sounded so obvious. So why is it so rare?

When we got back to our holiday apartment overlooking pristine Coolangatta Beach, my daughter and I tucked into lunch. We were about to settle in for a nap when a text arrived from a friend. She wrote: “We've just had a good sermon.” I was stunned. It was only 12:02 pm. But then I read on: “But now the actual sermon is just beginning . . .”

Pray 'n' Play

After a nap, a walk and a play, we headed back to Reedy Creek. This time it was to "Pray 'n' play", a program run by the Adventist school located next to the church. And what a clever innovation that is.

The evening began with some singing and then a lovely worship about God’s plan for our lives by Pastor Anthony Kent, who was visiting in advance of running an evangelistic series in 2014. It's hard to tell but I imagine, of the roughly 200 people in attendance, well over half weren’t from an Adventist background—reflecting the diversity of religious backgrounds of the students who attend the school. Principal Guy Lawson was welcoming parents and leading out, while both the Reedy Creek and Gold Coast Central pastors participated. It was a seamless integration of church and school—all with the goal of meeting the spiritual needs of families.

After the worship—and great dinner provided by the Gold Coast Central Pathfinders—it was onto games under the lights. The kids threw themselves with gusto into playing “belly flop baseball” and other similarly delightful games supervised by Pastor Sean Berkeley and his Gold Coast Central team. My daughter loved every minute of it—and looking around, so did all the other kids.

The next morning we visited a park at Kirra Beach where my daughter started playing with a couple of children and I began talking to their mum. As we talked, I learned she was like so many 21st century parents—struggling to balance work and home, high academic aspirations for her children, concerned about too much screen time, etc. Her husband was Catholic, she was Methodist; they attended a Presbyterian Church mid-week service when they could get there.

After a while she asked me what had been the highlight of our trip. I thought about it for a minute, then told her all about the family church and “Pray 'n' play”. She listened carefully and asked, “Which church was that again?” I gave her the details. As we went our separate ways, she said, “I’m going to go and check that out . . .”
James Standish is editor of RECORD.