1844: Embracing disappointment

170 years ago this past Wednesday (October 22), a group of Christians were left greatly disappointed.

If you're an Adventist, you've no doubt heard of “1844”. But for some of us, the story has become more legend than history. We know little about it, or struggle to make sense of it. We've lost sight of its significance and its relevance.

And that's a shame. For while the notion of remembering an epic failure seems odd, there is still “greatness” in the story of the Great Disappointment. Click HERE to find out.

For more great stories that won't leave you disappointed, keep reading this week's edition of Record eNews.
Prime minister opens San redevelopment

Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Federal Health Minister Peter Dutton and NSW Health Minister Jillian Skinner officially opened the Sydney Adventist Hospital (San) redevelopment on Friday, October 17.

Healed from shame

Nepali doctor Angela Basnet outlines the impact of uterine prolapse and says it's fairly simple to treat, but only if women are prepared to ask for help. Visit <AsianAid.org.au> to learn more about Asian Aid’s uterine prolapse project.

InFocus

Making headlines:
- Churches say no to gambling and fossil fuels
- Pacific warriors blockade Newcastle’s coal port
- Asia Bibi’s death sentence upheld by Pakistan’s High Court

What will the appointment of America’s first Jewish ambassador for international religious freedom mean for the world? Record InFocus commentator James Standish explains.

Maybe grandma does know best! Nutritionist Sue Radd reveals the secrets of getting the best out of your food.

Stop staying that

“Good morning.” “Now as we begin.” “Wherever two or three are gathered.” “Can I get an ‘amen’?” These are the things that Pastor Roger Hernandez, ministerial director for the Southern Union Conference (US), wishes we would stop saying in church.

The argument for creation

As Christians, we believe in creation. We see the evidence for it everywhere. We savour it and soak it in. But are we willing to stand up to defend it?
Wake-up call

Jesus is coming soon. It's time to wake up.
Every year on October 22 a good friend of mine sends me a tongue-in-cheek “Happy Great Disappointment Day” message. He wonders aloud about the continued delay of Christ’s return. It’s a light-hearted way of raising a good question “What happened on October 22, 1844?” And “why is there such a delay?” October 22, 1844, is of course the day thousands of Millerites awaited the return of Jesus only to be sorely devastated.

Before looking at what happened in 1844 we need to acknowledge that the more time elapses between then and now, the more obscure the date and event become. Some church members know little of it or struggle to make sense of it. It seems a world away now and not very relevant. It’s hard to explain and easy to ridicule. It’s about a mistake after all! And yet it’s a defining part of our history. Briefly I want to explore 1844 as an event in which God is at work but in ways that are counter-intuitive yet edifying. I want to reclaim the greatness of the Great Disappointment. Not as the heart of our faith, for it certainly isn’t—Jesus is—but as a foundational part and catalytic moment for Seventh-day Adventism which has ongoing relevance for us precisely because of its unusual and even awkward qualities.

The earthly event

A surface understanding of October 22, 1844, goes something like this. American Millerite Christians caught up in revivalistic millennial excitement wrongly predicted the return of Jesus as so many other groups have done in history. That’s the truncated version. In reality, what led up to the 1844 movement, the event itself, and what followed it, marks 1844 as of unique and unrivalled significance.

The lead up

Historically 1844 brought to a head deep elements of Christian faith which had been building for centuries. In particular, the broadly accepted and long work of countless biblical expositors who sought to understand the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. This whole history of historicist interpretation finally reached its zenith in the pulsating cauldron of revivalistic America among the Millerites. No other failed date for the return of Jesus had such a broadly attested backstory.

The event

No other movement focused on the second coming compares to the 1844 movement in terms of sheer size and global
reach. Estimates range from 100,000 to 500,000 people as connected to the movement in 19th century America (population 17 million), not to mention the widespread interest in South America, Europe, the British Empire, and the Middle East. This took place in a 10-year period. In today's terms that is equivalent to a movement in the USA growing from zero to between 2 to 9 million people in ten years.

The follow up

Afterward, this event gave birth to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, one of the fastest growing, organisationally unified, and most global and ethnically diverse bodies of faith in the world.

The heavenly event

The early Adventists knew the 1844 date was not acquired impulsively but built on a long trail of historical and biblical evidence. They could testify to the extraordinary spiritual power of the advent awakening in transforming lives. This encouraged them to search for its enduring meaning. The early Adventists recovered from the trauma of the Great Disappointment by means of a new insight into heavenly realities. This new insight was the realisation that the date was correct but their interpretation of the expected event was wrong. The “cleansing of the sanctuary” (Daniel 8:14), the defining text for the 1844 movement, was not the cleansing of the earth by Christ's fiery second coming but the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary by means of a final judgment.

This wasn't a face-saving devise as critics asserted. After all, the people who eventually became the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church could have done what the vast bulk of Millerites did; assimilate back into the Christian denominations they most closely identified with. They chose the path of further study because they believed they were onto something important, but they just didn't know what it was. It was the beginning of an unanticipated doctrinal and missional revolution. What this brought to mind (and in a sense restored from neglect) was the importance of Jesus' cosmic priestly ministry for our ongoing salvation and final deliverance. Sinful mortals are only presented complete before the Father by the unfailing mediation of a priest who cares about our every moment, trial, and struggle. It's not “once saved, always saved” (either by an outward profession of faith I can date or by God's eternal predestined degree regardless of my choice) but “once saved, continually saved by Jesus—his life, death, resurrection, intercession”. This work of Jesus climax's in a new additional closing work to end sin. In 1844, after holding off for centuries and centuries, God began the final judgment.

This final judgment involves pre-advent, advent, and post-advent (millennium) stages. What is significant is that this judgment ends all others. Throughout history God has been engaging in temporary and partial judgments. He has always sought to give humanity more opportunities. But in order to bring on the second coming, to end all sin and evil, and to inaugurate a perfected universe and an eternity without opposition to his reign, God begins the final judgment. Jesus will not return until he has vindicated God and all his people (called the “saints” in Daniel 8) in judgment, as well as cosmically expose so-called followers who are really betrayers and deniers who brought shame and blame upon God's name (chief representative is the “little horn” in Daniel 8) and finally, and fully, expose the instigator of all evil himself.

The effect of this new insight about 1844 on the shattered former Millerites was phenomenal. They started to think in new ways. Instead of seeing the end of time as simply a geographic and sociological expansion of the gospel, to this they now started to see a cosmic dimension. The early Adventist group started to realise that the 2300 days of Daniel 8:14 and 1844 did not mark the abrupt “end of time” but demarcated an eventful “time of the end”. During this period major prophecies would be fulfilled and Christ’s final saving work would take place. A final message and finalising mission would take place (Rev 14:6-20). The last earthly leg of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, involving conflict over God's character and law, would be completed (Rev 12-14). The early Adventists thus rediscovered their mission within the newly recognised and wider cosmic mission of Christ. They were transported from a simple “end of history” mind-set to an “end of cosmic conflict” mind-set.

Why a disappointment?
But we must ask the question "why did God allow it to happen this way?" After all, it’s hard promoting the Great Disappointment as a wonderful triumph! It doesn’t make good press. There is a reason it is called the Great Disappointment even by Adventists. Why couldn’t the events which triggered the formation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church been more dramatically heroic? Like Martin Luther the solitary monk standing against the whole world! Submerging his fear in fiery passion, Luther shook the world, split the church, and gave birth to the Protestant Reformation. The Lutheran Church has quite a story! Instead our origins trace back to a great revival which ended in apparent failure. Why?

I think behind this is a providential combination of God’s mercy and wisdom. I am certain God did not ordain or predestine the Great Disappointment. But he did foresee it. Having foreseen this event in which human faithfulness to Scripture was entangled with human fallibility what is God to do? Simply allow failure without redeeming it? Or does God, foreknowing the sincerity of their mistake, skilfully incorporate it into his wider work? Yes! God often redeems our sincere failures by making them part of his work. Thankfully this is so because our spiritual lives are full of countless mistakes. If God fails to utilise our mistakes then a large portion of our lives are beyond divine involvement!

More than that God prepares us through disappointment. A great mission is preceded by great trial and refinement. Before the Exodus, Moses endured the desert. Prison and exile prepared Joseph and Daniel. David was a fugitive before a King. Elijah faltered before he was ready for translation. Peter painfully learnt the cost of denying Christ before bravely heralding him. What then of the group who would receive the final message to usher in Christ's return? What test might help prepare them? What might help them break with fossilised tradition and receive dramatic new truth? The Great Disappointment! I perceive a divinely measured symmetry here. The movement to announce the second coming would die and be reborn in the hope of the second coming itself. Those who gave all, would lose all, and only then receive all. A message destined to end in total triumph started in the humbling furnace of disappointment. Before giving his final message to the world, God wanted a movement focused solely on Christ and his return. His foreknowledge allowed God to transform human miscalculation into just such an occasion. If God can embrace our failure we need fear no disappointment.
Prime minister opens San redevelopment

Photo Source: SAH | "Dr Leon Clark leads Tony Abbott on a tour of the San's new facilities."

Wahroonga, New South Wales

Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Federal Health Minister Peter Dutton and NSW Health Minister Jillian Skinner officially opened the Sydney Adventist Hospital (San) redevelopment on Friday, October 17.

Speaking to a gathering of more than 500 guests, the prime minister said it was a “deep honour” and a “privilege” to take part in the opening ceremony.

“This is a happy day for the people of northern Sydney and a proud day for everyone associated with the San,” said Mr Abbott. “I’m just so delighted to be here to bask in the glory of the doctors and nurses and all the other professional and other staff who make this hospital such a splendid success and make it such an important institution in the healthcare system of NSW and of Australia.”

Prime Minister of Australia, Tony Abbott, and Adventist HealthCare CEO, Dr Leon Clark, unveil a plaque to commemorate the official opening of the San redevelopment. [Photo courtesy: Linden Chuang]

The importance of the San to the community was echoed by Mrs Skinner, who credited the hospital for providing “outstanding care to people across Sydney’s north shore, north west, Northern Beaches and Central Coast” for the past 111 years.

“Today it is the largest private, not-for-profit hospital in NSW,” added Mrs Skinner, “working closely with public
hospitals including Hornsby, Westmead, Gosford and Royal North Shore.”

Dr Barry Oliver, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific, speaks during the official opening of the San redevelopment on Friday, October 17. Dr Oliver also offered the dedicatory prayer. [Photo courtesy: SAH]

As part of the opening ceremony, the prime minister and other dignitaries were given a tour of the recently opened LW Clark Tower, named after Adventist HealthCare CEO Dr Leon Clark.

The 12-storey building, which serves as the centrepiece of the San redevelopment project, brings the hospital's total bed-capacity up to 550. The new facility also features NSW's most modern maternity unit, state-of-the-art birthing suites, and space for up to 24 operating theatres.

The tour concluded with a walk through the San's new purpose-built healing garden. The outdoor courtyard area is designed to help patients of the hospital's Integrated Cancer Centre, which is awaiting completion subject to further public donations.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott meets a new mother in maternity ward of the LW Clark Tower. [Photo courtesy: Linden Chuang]

The $A200 million San redevelopment has been built to cater to the estimated 50 per cent increase in demand for its healthcare services. By 2024, the hospital is expected to cater for over 300,000 patients a year.

“This hospital is about providing the love of Christ in a practical way to people who need help,” said Mr Abbott. “I salute your work, and I know you will do it even better in the months and years ahead as a result of these new facilities we open today.”

Prime Minister of Australia, Tony Abbott, and NSW Health Minister, Jillian Skinner, share a laugh with the Sydney Adventist Hospital surgical team. [Photo courtesy: Linden Chuang]

See below for the full transcript of Mr Abbott’s speech.
“Thanks very much for making me and my parliamentary colleagues so welcome—Federal Health Minister Peter Dutton, Jillian Skinner the State Health Minister, Paul Fletcher the local Federal Member, and Barry O’Farrell the former Premier and our local State member.

This is a happy day for the people of northern Sydney and a proud day for everyone associated with the San or the Sydney Adventist Hospital as we are now asked to call it.

You know, everyone loves to see a doctor or a nurse when they’re sick because doctors and nurses solve your problems.

People are not normally as happy to see politicians because politicians are thought to cause your problems.

I’m just so delighted to be here today to bask in the glory, to bask in the glory of the doctors and nurses and all the other professionals and other staff who make this hospital such a splendid success and make it such an important institution in the healthcare system of NSW and of Australia.

Some of you might remember that for four years towards the end of the life of the Howard Government, I was the Health Minister myself and they were great years to savour.

The great thing about working with people in our health system, the treating staff, the researchers, everyone involved in our health system—is there for the right reason.

No one is in the health system to become a millionaire. No one is in the health system for the applause, they’re there because they want to do the right thing by their fellow human beings when times are tough—and that’s when you go to Hospital when times are at their toughest.

So I found it extraordinarily exhilarating and uplifting to be the Health Minister for four years: it was a time which helped reacquaint me with Australians at their best and to be here today amongst the very best of us to celebrate the great work that you do is a deep, deep, honour and I thank you so much for the privilege.

I should also salute the private part of our health system because the private health system helps to make everything work. If we didn’t have a private health system that was strong and effective we wouldn’t have the strong and effective public health system that we do.

Our private hospitals such as this help to make our public hospitals better.

There’s the cross polination that comes from many of the senior staff working in both systems, there’s the fact that if the public system is under pressure, the private system can take some of that pressure off. So I see the private
system such as this not antagonistic to the public system that we know and love but as complementing and supporting the public system, the public hospitals, that we all so rely on.

Something like two thirds of all elective procedures are done in the private system—if we didn’t have the private system just think how much more difficult it would be, to get your procedures done in our public hospitals.

Finally, I want to say thank you to the Adventist Church and to all the other great charities upon which our private system depend.

As you said Leon in your lovely presentation on screen, this hospital (Sydney Adventist Hospital) is about providing the love of Christ in a practical way to people who need help.

That is the spirit which motivates so much of our private health system—doing the right thing for others. Not because of reward, not because of recognition, but because it is the right thing to do.

And you will be so much better able after today thanks to this fine new facility to spread that love and provide those services.

This is already, as you say, the largest private hospital, the largest charitable hospital in this great state.

More than 2500 staff, you treat almost a quarter of a million patients every year, you’ve got about 800 doctors—it is an extraordinary institution and to think that it has been so marvellously enhanced by the Leon Clark Tower and the other facilities that we officially opened today, you must feel very proud Leon of the work that you’ve done over the last couple of decades at this hospital.

And can I say as I was looking at the briefing notes for today’s event, looking at all the things you were able to achieve, 12 new operating theatres, 200 new beds, additional car parking for something like 1200 cars, all for $200 million? Extraordinary, extraordinary . . . $200 million of outstanding value. I hope our public health planners are taking note because we need to get the best possible value from our health dollar and that is certainly what you do here.

So thank you to you, Leon, thank you everyone associated with this great hospital.

I salute your work, and I know you will do it even better in the months and years ahead as a result of these new facilities we open today.”—The Hon Tony Abbott, prime minister of Australia
Some time ago the Education Department of the General Conference conducted a global conference on faith and science. Because Seventh-day Adventists accept their commission from Jesus to make disciples of all peoples and because we enact that commission in the setting of our understanding of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14, we affirm our belief and we worship “Him who made heavens and earth, the sea and the fountains of waters”.

One of the arguments that can raise questions that evolutionists cannot answer in a manner consistent with their philosophical presuppositions is the argument for intelligent design. As believers in creation we argue that complex systems cannot generate over time without an intelligent designer. This assertion seems to be a compelling argument. But atheists such as Richard Dawkins have countered that if we are to accept intelligent design we must accept that the designer must be the architect of both good and evil; the perfect and imperfect.

Don't be perturbed by such a response. The existence of evil is not an argument against design or a designer, it is an argument against the goodness of God. Christians have abundant evidence of the goodness of God exemplified in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Seventh-day Adventist Christians, with our understanding of the great controversy between good and evil, understand that the goodness of God has been called into question by Lucifer and that He has been working ever since to convince everyone he can of the legitimacy of his question.

We are called of God to refute Lucifer's claims. Are we up to it?

Dr Barry Oliver is president of the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
Ring! Ring!

We awoke at the same time and stared at one another with bleary eyes. Who could be calling us when it was still pitch-black outside?

My friend and I were vacationing in Vanuatu. It was the first time either of us had been there and we loved it! We soon forgot about clocks, stopped looking at our phones and fell into the rhythm of “island time”.

“It’s the world’s happiest country,” one local told me. “Yes there is poverty and unemployment . . . it is not perfect. No country is perfect. But our people are very happy.”

After a week of Bislama lessons, learning how to weave with coconut palm branches, a traditional Melanesian feast, splashing in the azure water and climbing up Mt Yasur to see an active volcano, we were pretty happy ourselves.

“I never want to leave!” my friend declared on the last night of our holiday. “Let’s just stay here forever.”

We fantasised a while about staying in Vanuatu but eventually acknowledged it was just that—a fantasy.

“Don’t forget to set your phone alarm. We need to get up early tomorrow,” I reminded her.

And that was the last thing I remember saying before the phone began to ring.

I answered it sleepily. “Hello?”

The voice on the other end of the line was urgent. “Are you catching the early flight to Sydney? You need to wake up! The ferry is waiting!”

Wait, what? Why hadn’t the alarm woken us up? I looked over at my friend, who was already drifting back into sleep mode.

“Wake up!” I exclaimed, shaking her frantically. “We need to leave. The ferry is waiting for us and we still need to check out!”
The next few minutes were a whirlwind of frenzied activity as we scrambled into our clothes, splashed water on our faces and gave our bungalow a cursory once-over.

When we boarded the plane we breathed sighs of relief. We’d made it. We were finally on our way. And it was all thanks to the wake-up call.

Needing that wake-up call reminds me of the parable of the 10 virgins in Matthew 25:1-13. It begins with the word “then”—a continuation of the previous passage, Matthew 24, about the signs of the second coming.

This parable holds a solemn message for God’s people. All of the virgins were expecting the Bridegroom. They knew He was on His way but that didn’t stop them from falling asleep. Perhaps they missed the signs sent to wake them up, just as my friend and I missed hearing her alarm. Perhaps the initial excitement wore off as time went on.

The Laodicean church in Revelation 3 is admonished for being lukewarm and blind to the seriousness of their spiritual condition. As far as they are concerned they have everything they need. In reality, they are miserable, wretched, poor and naked. And they sound a lot like believers today.

There is a growing complacency among Christians—especially those of us who have been raised in Christian homes. Many of us live in countries where we can worship freely in church, access the Bible with the swipe of a finger and share the gospel without fear of imprisonment. Yet we make comments like: “Nah, I don’t read the Bible. It’s too boring.” “I don’t have time to do devotions.” “I’m not going to Sabbath School—I’m sleeping in.” “Why should I give a Bible study? That’s what pastors get paid to do.” We shy away from talking to other people about God or standing up for what we believe in. We’d rather “fit in”.

Do we call ourselves Christians when, in reality, we are indistinguishable from the world?

My friend and I didn’t think about Australia when we were in Vanuatu. Why would we? We were surrounded by natural beauty, eating delicious food and making friends with some of the nicest people we’d ever met. But the wake-up call reminded us that that beautiful place was no substitute for our real homes.

Jesus is coming soon. He wants to take us to our real home: heaven. Are we ready for Him to return? Or do we need a wake-up call? As Romans 13:11 says, “... it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed”.

Vania Chew is acting editor of Adventist Record.