Season of prayer

The *Adventist Record* team would like to wish you a Happy Christmas and New Year.

As you gather with family and friends during this holiday season, please spare a thought and a prayer for those who have little to be “merry” about at this time of year—the families of the Sydney siege victims, the fathers and mothers of the 140-plus school children killed this past week in Pakistan, and all those affected by the ongoing crisis in Syria.

On December 26 it will also be the 10-year anniversary of the Boxing Day tsunami, which claimed the lives of more than 280,000 people. A decade on, it’s safe to assume the pain is still very real.

It’s been a big news week for Adventists in Australia. Check out some of the stories in this week’s edition of Record eNews—the last for 2014.
Adventist leaders reflect on Sydney siege

Adventist leaders joined the many Australians grieved by the tragic loss of hostages Tori Johnson and Katrina Dawson following Monday’s siege in Martin Place, Sydney.

Unfair go: Australian aid cuts to affect millions

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) Australia strongly condemns the Government’s deep cuts to Australia’s aid program announced by the treasurer on Monday.

New era for Avondale

Avondale College of Higher Education has become the first Australian non-university higher education provider granted
self-accrediting authority by the country’s national regulator.

Jazz salvation: saving souls through music

Record InFocus host Kent Kingston meets an accomplished jazz saxophonist who’s improvising ways to reach fellow-musicians and artists with the message of Jesus.

Reclaiming Christmas

There seems to be some confusion among Christians, and especially Adventists, about how to celebrate Christmas and what it really means.

Be a blessing this Christmas

A message of encouragement for the season of giving from Dr Barry Oliver, president of the Adventist Church in the South Pacific region.

Ebola survivor returning to work in Liberia

On January 15, SIM missionary Dr Rick Sacra will return to the country that almost killed him.
5 ways Muslims are more biblical than Adventists

If we’re serious about wanting Muslims to consider the claims of Jesus, we need to begin with an attitude of humility, and that means accepting that there are things we can learn from Muslims.
Adventist leaders reflect on Sydney siege

Adventist leaders joined the many Australians grieved by the tragic loss of hostages Tori Johnson and Katrina Dawson following Monday’s siege in Martin Place, Sydney.

“What a heartbreaking conclusion to the #sydneysiege. Devastating for the families of the deceased and for the hostages, police and their families who have been injured and traumatised by these events. Our prayers go out to all involved,” said Pastor Michael Worker, president of the Greater Sydney Conference.

“The hearts of Seventh-day Adventists across Australia go out to those who have had to endure hours of fear and uncertainty as hostages. We grieve with the loved ones of the innocent victims who lost their lives,” agreed Pastor Ken Vogel, general secretary and Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Australian Union Conference.

“As Australians together, we reach out in love and support to all concerned. While the immediate crisis is over, we recognise there is a long road ahead for those directly affected. They will remain in our prayers.”

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) Australia was on standby to provide emergency accommodation to those affected by the siege.

“The Australian Government calls upon ADRA for assistance in times of emergency,” said Braden Blyde, communication coordinator for ADRA Australia. “We provided accommodation for at least one person affected by the Martin Place lockdown.”

Thousands of supportive messages for Australian Muslims have flooded social media after some expressed concerns over Islamophobic backlash following the siege.

The #illridewithyou hash tag has gone viral on Twitter, used to demonstrate that individuals are willing to accompany anyone on public transport needing support and protection.

This flood of support has moved South Pacific Division communication director James Standish.

“Adventists have been the victims of prejudice in Australia particularly during the unjust imprisonment of Lindy Chamberlain—and it's important for us to stand up against prejudice against others,” said Mr Standish.
Pastor Vogel also expressed his gratitude on behalf of the Church to the “authorities who worked so carefully and thoroughly to resolve the matter with a minimum of casualties”.

“This experience is a stark reminder of the state of our world and why we continue to look forward to the promised return of Jesus, the Source of peace and genuine love.”
Wahroonga, New South Wales

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) Australia strongly condemns the Government's deep cuts to Australia's aid program announced by the treasurer on Monday.

The cuts of $3.7 billion over four years come on top of the $7.6 billion of cuts made by the Government in the May Budget. In 2015 alone the aid budget will be slashed by $1 billion—the largest ever cut made to aid in Australia’s history.

ADRA Australia CEO Mark Webster described the cuts as a “deadly decision flowing from a lack of compassion for the world’s poor”.

“Quite clearly our Government does not understand the impact or importance of Australia's aid program—or if they do, they lack the compassion to see it continue,” Mr Webster said.

By 2017-18 when the cuts come into full effect, Australia’s development assistance will fall to its lowest ever level of just 21 cents in every $100 of national income—and will make Australia one of the least generous aid donors in the world.

Estimates, based on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s 2013-14 Annual Report, show the devastating impact these cuts could have over the next four years:

- 600,000 fewer births attended by a skilled birth attendant
- 900,000 fewer children enrolled in school
- 1.5 million fewer children vaccinated
- 1.9 million fewer people provided in increased access to safe water
- 8.8 million fewer vulnerable women, men, girls and boys provided with life-saving assistance in conflict and crisis situations

“Agencies like ADRA are making a lot of noise about these cuts—this is not out of self-interest,” Mr Webster said. “We have a responsibility to speak out on behalf of the people we work with every day—those who are today being robbed...
of opportunity and hope."

Mr Webster said Australian aid is making a real difference in the world, but the continued raids on the program are damaging the futures of the world’s poor and undermine the predictability, stability and effectiveness of Australia’s aid program.

“There is no precedent for these cuts. Instead, they represent the latest in a succession of broken promises and empty talk from who once called Australian aid the ‘flagship of its foreign aid policy’. Right now Australia’s aid program is leading the way—but in the wrong direction and with deadly consequences,” concluded Mr Webster.

ADRA Australia is encouraging people to voice their concerns with their local MP by visiting <www.micahchallengeadvocacy.org.au/adra-enough-is-enough> or calling their electorate office directly.
Cooranbong, New South Wales

Avondale College of Higher Education has become the first Australian non-university higher education provider granted self-accrediting authority by the country’s national regulator.

The classification from the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) means Avondale can self-accredit all of its higher education courses, including higher degrees by coursework and by research.

“Self-accrediting authority is not granted lightly,” says TEQSA’s acting chief commissioner Professor Nick Saunders. Avondale submitted its application in July—the initial documentation exceeded 2000 pages—and a “rigorous” assessment process followed. But as Professor Saunders notes, TEQSA benefitted from accrediting multiple Avondale courses over the past few years. This gave the regulator a better understanding of Avondale’s academic governance and of its quality assurance processes. “TEQSA looked for evidence of proven experience, a history of low risk and most importantly, strong academic governance and the ability to self-assure critical higher education processes,” he says.

“It’s probably impossible to say any one milestone is the most significant, but this has to be right up there,” says the chair of Avondale’s governing body, Dr Barry Oliver, who has served on Avondale College Council for 17 years.

President Professor Ray Roennfeldt describes the granting of self-accrediting authority as a “new era for Avondale”.

“While self-accrediting authority does not provide university status, it does require that the institution’s internal processes are at least as robust and rigorous as that of a university,” he said. “So, in this regard, it is a large step towards the fulfilment of Avondale’s vision to be an Australian Christian university.”

He is grateful to all members of Avondale’s staff, particularly vice-president (quality and strategy) Professor Jane Fernandez who “capably managed the application process”.

“Our staff make Avondale what it is; a provider of quality higher education that motivates people to serve humankind,” said Prof Roennfeldt.

He notes, though, that with new responsibility comes new challenges. “We must—and will—live up to the trust that has been extended to us.”
Established by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1897, Avondale has been a registered higher education provider since 1974. It has been offering postgraduate masters degrees since the early 1990s and doctoral degrees since 2006.
“Shouldn’t you be at church?” My wife’s colleague looked confused. He knew she was a Christian and that’s what Christians did for Christmas. “No,” she replied. “We don’t necessarily go to church on Christmas. I’m available to work Christmas morning.” It was the first Christmas we would celebrate alone as a married couple, not able to see either family because of our work schedules. A couple of hours’ work on Christmas morning was a nice Christmas present for my wife’s bank account and we still managed to have a special lunch and a relaxing day.

However, there does seem to be some confusion among Christians, and especially Adventists, about how to celebrate Christmas and what it really means. After all, most people know that it’s very unlikely that Jesus was actually born on December 25. So does Christmas really celebrate Jesus’ birth? Should it?

Many Christians, like my wife’s colleague, celebrate Christmas by going to a mass or some kind of church program on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning. For some, this may be one of their only “compulsory” church attendances for the year.

Adventists seem to have three distinct attitudes about Christmas, although there are those who cross over a little. There are those who say that Christmas is a pagan holiday, hijacked by the Roman Catholic church and now an ode to materialism and excess. And they are right. They tend to boycott Christmas altogether. No presents, no church services, just another day that happens to be a holiday. We’ll call them the boycotters.

Then there are those who embrace Christmas in all its glory. It’s the most wonderful time of the year! They go all out to decorate their homes and trees, they enjoy time with family and are very generous at this time of year. It’s all about the spirit of the season, giving and living and carolling. They recognise that Christmas is not really Jesus’ birthday so they separate it from their faith. And they’re right. We’ll call them collaborators.

Then there are those who make their churches Christmas friendly. They use people’s generosity at this time of year to raise funds. They plan big events for their communities to remind people of the real “reason for the season.”. They have a Christmas tree with presents for the needy and a nativity scene at the front. Their Christmas programs are amazingly produced; seeker-friendly and sometimes leave you with a tear in your eye. They know that there has to be more to Christmas and it’s their job to tell the world. And they’re right. Call them hijackers.

All these groups are right. They approach Christmas differently but are all driven by good motives and the strength of
their convictions.

We all fit mostly into one or another of these groups. Often it depends on our upbringing or the people we surround ourselves with. Different cultural groups tend to do things in a certain way.

However, let me suggest a fourth option. We need to reclaim Christmas. How do we do that? Let me explain by way of an example. A Christmas carol that brings back many fond memories of my mum’s Christmas programs is called “Christmas in the scrub”. It’s an Australian Christmas carol. A line in it says, “At Christmas time / the outback rings / all for the birth of God.” Now as long as Christmas has been around, it’s been celebrated in Europe and the medieval world during winter. There is no outback or beach picnic. But here in the southern hemisphere we have a strange mix. Santa wearing a heavy woollen coat with board shorts. The sleigh pulled by boobers (kangaroos). Christmas lunch with gluten steaks, roasted veggies and gravy along with macadamia, mango and avocado salads, summer fruits and barbecues on the beach. We borrow elements of Christmas tradition but insert our own to make it more practical to our needs.

This kind of subversion and substitution is something that Jesus practised during His ministry. Probably the best example I can think of was at the Passover meal. He took the traditional elements of the wine and unleavened bread and imbued them with new meaning. “Do this in remembrance of me.” Passover was a Jewish celebration, filled with meaning and ritual but Jesus reinterpreted it for His purpose. He reclaimed it for His kingdom.

You might be asking what this has to do with how we celebrate Christmas? Well, we need to use Christmas to make an impact in the world. There should be nothing wrong with a Christian celebration or holiday. After all, God gave the Jews plenty of events to celebrate and remember Him by (see Numbers 28 and 29). So let’s reclaim Christmas from the culture. Revolutionise it and see if we can flip it upside down. Not sit out on the sidelines. Not get sucked into the materialism or the individualism but take the good elements and fill them with Christ; take old traditions and give them new twists and meanings.

The key is to approach it with intentionality. We are called to do everything for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). So why not how we celebrate Christmas?

Here are some practical things we can do:

1. **Use the momentum of Christmas.** People may quibble over whether Christmas is actually Christ’s birthday or if it comes from a pagan celebration but Christ’s name is spoken more around Christmas time in the secular world than at any other time, bar Easter. Christ said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). So use that momentum. Neighbours, colleagues or friends might be more open to talking about Jesus at this time of year than at any other. If they bring up His name, ask what they think is the “reason for the season”. We shouldn’t be afraid. Although it can have the opposite effect (unless we’re very careful) of leading us into a lengthy explanation of why we don’t celebrate Christmas because of this and that. If they don’t bring it up, find creative ways to work Christ into the conversation. Talk about what He means to you and what His coming to this earth really means in your life today!

2. **Be generous.** Don’t expect gifts but give them. Buy your neighbours gifts or give them a card with a nice message. It might be a good way to break the ice and meet new people. Go around your neighbourhood and offer to help people with gardening or other chores in the name of Christmas giving. Do random acts of kindness for strangers who will be more receptive at this time of year.

3. **Run a Christmas program for the community.** Lots of churches do this very well. They hold their yearly Christmas carols or sacred concert at a community park, hall or school and invite the neighbourhood. As brilliant as a program is, it can be intimidating to walk into a church. Go to your community. Run things with them. Maybe as a church you can think of other creative things to do, like carolling in nursing homes or having a trash and treasure day where stuff is free.
4. **Open up your home.** Throw a Christmas party. Invite friends or neighbours over. Find people in your community who have to work at Christmas and will not be spending time with family. It’s terrible to be alone at Christmas so open up your home. Enjoy eating and laughing together. And pray. Pray that you can share Jesus with them before they arrive, and when they do arrive, pray for them and the meal. Just a simple Christmas grace.

5. **Buy people charitable gifts.** Buy a goat or a sewing machine for someone in Nepal or Uganda and do this for others, especially if you can’t think of a meaningful gift for them. Encourage them to pass it on so the generosity continues.

Christmas is a day like any other but it can be a great opportunity and it must be turned toward Christ, whichever camp we fall into. As Ellen White says, "There is no divine sanctity resting upon the twenty-fifth of December; and it is not pleasing to God that anything that concerns the salvation of men through the infinite sacrifice made for them, should be so sadly perverted from its professed design. Christ should be the supreme object; but as Christmas has been observed, the glory is turned from Him to mortal man, whose sinful, defective character made it necessary for Him to come to our world."

I’m sure you can think of other ways to reclaim Christmas. Make it, like the angels proclaimed, a time of peace and goodwill. Be bold and courageous. Jesus loved to eat and drink with people, so much so he was called a glutton and a drunkard (Matthew 11:19). He liked to celebrate. Celebrations are where friendships are forged. So be like Jesus this Christmas. Subvert, be intentional and reclaim Christmas. And rediscover the real reason for the season.

---

*Jarrod Stackelroth is an associate editor of Adventist Record.*
I could have easily written this editorial on the 100 ways Adventists are more biblical than Muslims, but I haven’t. If we’re serious about wanting Muslims to consider the claims of Jesus, we need to begin with an attitude of humility, and that means accepting that there are things we can learn from Muslims.

1. **Inshallah:** *... you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that’ (James 4:15).*

In the past Christians regularly used the phrase “God willing”. But today there’s very little thought given to how we include God in our day-to-day plans. But Muslims regularly modify their statements with inshallah—God willing. It’s a reminder that God is sovereign.

2. **Respect for God:** *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (Proverbs 9:10).*

Muslims have a very high view of God and are usually careful to discuss spiritual matters with respect. When we rush to criticise their out-of-reach deity, we miss the opportunity for some self-examination.

Contemporary Christians too often take God for granted. In an attempt to connect with the divine we invent a false God in our image—“Jesus Dude”, who will never call attention to the vast differences between our tiny humanity and God’s eternal majesty. The Muslim doctrine of submission offers something of value.

3. **Modesty:** *But every woman who prays or prophesies ... she should cover her head (1 Corinthians 11:5-6).*

Modesty among Adventists in the West is a dying art. Historically we promoted “dress reform”—modesty, quality and simplicity as well as good health (looser, less constricting clothing was recommended).

In contrast, Islam is seeing a resurgence of hijab, particularly among women—although it should be pointed out that Muslim men are also expected to dress modestly. In the mosque and during prayer, women cover their hair—not such a strange practice when we consider the words of Paul, quoted above.

4. **Sharia:** *Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? (1
In these individualistic times, the greatest social faux pas is to “judge” somebody. It’s becoming harder to deal with church discipline matters; it seems impolite to delve into private difficulties. Under sharia principles however, congregational discipline continues. Disputes around ceremony, theology, diet and marriage are heard and decided by a panel of religious leaders. Too formal and legalistic? You be the judge.

5. Prayer and fasting: *She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying (Luke 2:37).*

It’s hard to deny that Muslims are people of prayer. And the Ramadan fast, far from being a month of miserable self-denial, seems to be a time of spiritual focus, fellowship and celebration.

These “rigid” Muslims put many Christians to shame when it comes to their prayer life—regular, committed, sincere. And despite the many biblical mentions of fasting, it’s a practice that’s almost unknown in many Adventist congregations.

Food for thought?

---

*Kent Kingston is assistant editor of Adventist Record.*
Ebola survivor returning to work in Liberia

International Christian mission agency SIM (www.simusa.org) confirmed today that Rick Sacra, an SIM doctor who contracted Ebola while serving in Liberia, was transported to the United States for treatment and recovered, will return to work in that country on January 15.

Sacra, 52, a family physician from Holden, Mass, will treat patients at SIM's ELWA Hospital in Monrovia. He will not be working at the Ebola treatment units on the ELWA campus, but will treat patients with malaria and chronic health issues, such as high blood pressure and diabetes, as well as provide maternity and pediatrics care—much-needed services with so few hospitals available. He is expected to remain in Liberia for about a month.

Click HERE to read more.