

Sabbath Thoughts: September 19, 1998

By Jennifer Cline

I have just arrived in Rhode Island. I start an internship on Monday. I still haven't found a place to live. I am frantic to move out of my car and into an apartment, but instead I am calling the hotel desk to see if I can borrow an iron.

For on the fourth time in three years, I am going to church. I tell myself that I could spend the morning so much more productively. I need to go over the ads for apartments in the paper one more time. I need to leave more messages for realtors. I want to explore the area better. Once work starts I really won't get much time to see the sights. When I realize that I have produced the ultimate of excuses ("The Starr Report" has just been released), I go back to my car, find the garment bag, unwedge a few boxes to uncover some suitable shoes and grab a coffee from Best Western's continental breakfast table as I pick up the iron.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church of Wickford, Rhode Island, est. 1960—the sign is small with dark blue lettering outlined in gold. In a place where most buildings date back to the early 1800s, I wonder why they have bothered to include the 1960 establishment date at all. The building obviously is not historic. Here in the east, where a sense of history is so important, I guess it is better to have some link to the past, however limited. It is really only by chance that I have found the church, located right across from a Rhode Island welcome center. Perhaps it is because of this symbolic finding of an Adventist church in the town where I decided to look for an apartment that I feel compelled to be here this morning.

At 9:25 a.m. my Cherokee is one of four cars in the parking lot. I try to find an anonymous place

to park, but this is next to impossible. Besides, it will be obvious that I am *the* visitor. Hiding the California license plate is the least of my problems. As I open the double white painted doors I feel strangely at peace. There is blue carpeting in the foyer. There is a table filled with adult lesson quarterlies. Even the standard scenic photograph on the cover of the bulletin is familiar, putting me at ease.

While signing the guest book I find myself telling the hostess, a wonderful Italian grandmother named Mrs. Parisi, all about my last two days in Rhode Island. I describe what my internship will entail, where I have been looking for an apartment, where I went to college and "maintain" my church membership. Practically my entire life story spills out into her warm handshake. And to my surprise she hugs me. Kisses me on the cheek. Tells me how happy she is that I will be with them for the next six months.



I gulp. Did I really promise to come every week for six months? What have I gotten myself into? Next thing I know she will be asking me to play special music. Sure enough, when I begin to listen again I hear her asking me what my talents are. Talents? "Ahhh," I pause as I politely try to back myself out of any obligation that might require singing. Quietly I take a seat near the back of the church.

About this time I look around and realize how few people are here. I count 21. This includes me. Wow! This phenomenon is totally foreign. I grew up in Loma Linda where people are packed into the large sanctuary for both services. I glance at the bulletin and see that the service will begin with church followed by Sabbath School, and then potluck dinner I imagine. Because I am a visitor and here this early, I will be required to stay for all the activities, I think. Ouch. I didn't calculate on having to spend the day here. I thought I might get it over with early and then go on to my apartment hunting.

I motion Mrs. Parisi over and ask, "Will anyone be offended if I don't stay for Sabbath School and lunch?" Then I go for the confession and tell her shyly about my appointment to look at an apartment. She takes my hand, and gives me the sweetest smile. "That is between you and God, honey." I am left to ponder the words, because she needs to take her seat. The piano is playing. Elders are taking their place on the platform. I look closely, trying to determine which one is the pastor. Seat order and ties do little to illuminate which man this might be. There is one good omen. A woman is joining the men already kneeling. I immediately feel more at ease.

Song of Prayer, Call to Worship, Invocation, Opening Hymn, Receiving of Tithes and Offerings. I check them off in my mind as we go. *Offering Meditation. Doxology. Scripture Lesson.* Everything is progressing in traditional form. But suddenly I am confused. People are speaking out from the congregation. This seems highly unusual. I look down at my bulletin to see where we are in the program. *Prayer of Intercession*, yes, that's the right order, but speaking out like this, I don't know

I listen more closely and realize how deeply personal the requests are that are being spoken. People are sharing their truest heartfelt needs. The

trials facing their families—children, spouses, siblings; illnesses inflicting them; friends' faces they are missing; their trials at work. Mrs. Parisi, bless her, is even interjecting on my behalf, "*and help Jennifer to find a safe place to live, Lord, you know she needs to find an apartment.*" I find myself flushing in embarrassment, but no one is looking. This kind of appeal is totally natural to them. They are used to sharing their problems with their church family and calling upon God to assist with their most intimate needs.

A smile comes to everyone's face as the pastor shares his weekly car trials. In what must be ongoing saga, he tells of his "auto mechanic skills" and thanks the Lord for being able to get his ailing car through another week of commuting.

The rest of the service is a bit of a blur to me. I remember the sermon seemed wise, focused on the tribulations our country is facing politically. But while the rest of the church received the pastor's blessing, I could not get past what I had just witnessed. Wickford church shared a level of intimacy I had never felt in an Adventist church before. It began with Mrs. Parisi, her warm greeting, and then her words of wisdom, "That is between you and God." The prayer circle in which 21 people barred their souls to each other openly, and called upon their God in faith introduced me to a church family that had found a way to bring God into their daily lives. Somehow it all collided with my twenty-something Adventist angst and made me realize the beauty of my Adventist heritage.

I don't know how often in the next six months I will feel compelled to search for that suitable pair of shoes early on Sabbath mornings. I now define my relationship with God outside and beyond my traditional Adventist upbringing. But the Wickford Church of Rhode Island, established 1960, helped me to reexamine my Adventist roots, the role it plays in shaping community, how it can inspire faith and most importantly what it means to have a sense of where to find God.

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