

## GraceLink Unchained | BY BONNIE DWYER

The year was 1989. Noelene Johnsson was interviewing for a position in the North American Division Children's Ministries Department. What they wanted, she learned, was a new curriculum for children's Sabbath School, so with her hiring she became swept up in one of the church's largest Sabbath School curriculum development projects for children.

A lot of people wanted to do something about it, she recalls. They were dreaming of what it could be. Because of his work with the Valuegenesis study of Adventist young

people, they got Bailey Gillespie involved, as well as Stu Tyner, to develop the curriculum overview. Later the General Conference brought Pat Habada on board to coordinate the development of materials for the world church. They brought together forty people from around the world, from every division, for a consultation session in England, because once adopted, the material would be used in all divisions. They started right at the beginning, studying character development, and how children learn. They went at a snail's pace as they discussed different learning styles and the emotional needs of children that go along with learning. Consideration was given to not just the Biblical lesson, but to how the whole hour of Sabbath School should be spent. There needed to be a basic plan for religious education incorporated into the curriculum.

From the onset, grace was the key experience they wanted for the children. After all, the Bible is the story of grace from the Old Testament forward to Jesus' second coming. He is coming to demonstrate grace. He died as a defining act of grace. Grace is embodied in Jesus. Every lesson should be about grace.

Of course, it is one thing to tell a story, but another to say why a story is in the Bible. Where is grace in any particular story? Once you have seen grace and thought about what it means, the natural response is to worship. Worship is not only singing, praising, and praying; worship is also obedience to God and living His way. Grace is not just received; it is meant to be shared with others within the body of Christ (Community) as well as others outside our faith community (Service). These became the core concepts of the curriculum that was given the name GraceLink:

- Grace (Jesus loves me)
- Worship (I love Jesus)
- Community (We love each other)
- Service (We love you too).



Editors chose this whimsical style art by Kim Justinen for the early edition of the Primary GraceLink lessons.



sure that virtually every Adventist doctrine was taught at some point during the twelve-year curriculum. “Even very young children learn of baptism by immersion, the state of the dead, the Sabbath, and other essential doctrines in an age-appropriate manner. These and others are taught through stories in coherent thematic clusters and reinforced through activities during the Sabbath School hour. The bedrock Adventist message is taught at every level with the most effective methods of instruction,” according to the official description of the curriculum.

Meanwhile, at the Review and Herald and Pacific Press publishing houses, work began on illustrations. Cutting-edge artists were hired to give the new material an age-appropriate contemporary look. However, hand-drawing all the needed illustrations soon overwhelmed them. With at least two illustrations for each of the 624 lessons, there was a lot of drawing to be

**Left: Primary GraceLink art by Kim Justinen showcasing her revised, more realistic style. Below: Junior GraceLink art created by GoodSalt’s Lars Justinen and Steve Creitz, illustrating a gritty, realistic style.**

With the core concepts in place, an international group of writers was identified and assigned lessons. The work began of putting on paper a twelve-year curriculum composed of 624 lessons, all to be firmly grounded in Scripture. According to the description of the curriculum on the church’s web site, “Because each lesson centers on a single message, each telling of a Bible story is focused . . . This is a thematic curriculum, only one teaching point is made at a time from a specific Bible story.” And everything in the program on a given Sabbath centers around that message. The songs, activities, and crafts are all assembled to reinforce the message in the Bible story lesson. So, in addition to the writing of the Bible stories, ideas and suggestions for songs and activities to expand upon the lesson were assembled for the teachers’ edition. Emphasis was given to experiencing a concept, active learning. Just presenting the facts of a story was not enough. Of course, the writers also needed to keep in mind the age of the children for whom they were writing.

Next, the Biblical Research Institute reviewed the lessons for theological soundness, making



done. The Review turned to the Justinens, artists whom had a proven track record of delivering.

Kim Justinen took on the GraceLink assignment for the primary age. She was known for having many illustration styles but the committee went with a whimsical look. She drew the Biblical characters with Middle Eastern-type features, similar to those in Disney’s “Prince of Egypt” telling of the Biblical story

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of Joseph. With computer drawing software to assist, she was able to produce the large number of illustrations needed in a timely manner. About one-third of the way through the project the editors asked her to make the artwork more realistic. Then, later, when the first illustrations were to be reprinted in the four-year cycle, they asked her to go into the first few quarters and make some of that artwork more realistic, too. And she complied.

At the beginning no one realized how much work would be required, Johnsson says. The entire project stretched out over a ten-year period. Finally, the General Conference turned it over to the world divisions and those in children's ministries. It became their responsibility to show teachers how to use the new curriculum, because it required a new approach to teaching. The divisions also invested in the translation of the materials into the languages appropriate for their division. The editors continued to find new ways to present the material, too. Animated videos of the lessons were produced and put on YouTube. A Sabbath School app was eventually developed. Teachers could compose their own felt-board illustrations on the computer.

By 2000, when the lessons were finally appearing in Sabbath School classrooms around the world, the church—through its divisions and their unions, conferences, and publishing houses—had a huge multi-million dollar investment in the project.

In the churches, some teachers loved the material. It packaged everything needed to produce a lively weekly program of songs, Bible stories, and activities that all pointed to a single lesson. No longer were children just being talked at, they were actively involved in the Sabbath School program.

Other teachers missed the old way of doing things. They liked the Harry Anderson-style illustrations that had been the staple of past times. They wanted a stronger emphasis on Adventist doctrines. They didn't like the name GraceLink. And they complained loudly to the General Conference.

Johnsson says at first she took the brunt of people not wanting to adopt the new lessons. She felt the materials were so right for the kids, she didn't mind taking credit for its development and approach.

A major complaint centered on the illustrations. Those who disliked the whimsical style would often quote Ellen White's statement in *Publishing Ministry* (217) "The illustrations I could not possibly accept under any consideration. Some of them look as if prepared for a comic almanac."

Kim Justinen points out, however, that it is clear from the context that Mrs. White is referring to illustrations being prepared for her latest adult book. "The effort to somehow connect this to children's illustrations is a stretch."

As a frequent illustrator of children's materials, she notes "Words and pictures share the same principles when discussing what is appropriate for children. If an adult realism style is the only appropriate approach for children's pictures, then it follows that people who write or speak to children should only speak in the words they would use speaking to adults. Of course we would recognize that is a nonsensical stand to take. We all know that we speak differently to primary age children than we do to adults."

For her defense of stylized art, she turns to the Bible. "If there is something inherently wrong with any art that is not realistic, why did God direct Moses to have the hem of the priest's robes embroidered with scarlet, purple, and blue pomegranates? There are no blue pomegranates in nature. Or, why does the Bible state, "... the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing; and all the trees of the fields shall clap their hands." (Is. 55:12)

There was some talk of abandoning the curriculum. Instead, in 2005 a General Conference task force, headed by Vice President Ella Simmons, was put in place to review it and make recommendations. The editors for the curriculum began addressing the complaints. Because some had said that Adventist doctrines were not covered, Gary Swanson, the associate director of the

Sabbath School Department, went through every single lesson evaluating whether or not the twenty-eight fundamental beliefs were covered. At the conclusion of his review, he found that two of the beliefs were not covered adequately, so he set in motion a rewrite to add them.

Regarding the style of illustrations, differentiation between the age levels was put into place. The Junior lessons were illustrated with a realistic style, and some of those illustrations now hang in the lobby of the General Conference building. The complete list of changes was being phased in and were due to be completed by 2018.

With the election in 2015 of new leaders for the Sabbath School Department, however, all that changed. At the spring 2016 Advisory session for Children's Ministries, the department directors from around the world were informed that a totally new curriculum is in the works. Surprised, many expressed their appreciation for GraceLink and requested that it not be abandoned.

Their wishes were not shared with the ADCOM Committee that voted later that week to institute the new curriculum, beginning in 2018. (GraceLink materials for 2017 are already being printed.) An article immediately appeared in the *Adventist Review* announcing the change, and the comments on the *Review* web site following the article were split between the defenders of Adventist orthodoxy and defenders of GraceLink. However, the most critical comment was initially posted on the *Review* website, only to be taken down shortly thereafter. Within the General Conference building, the change created a ruckus among those who had worked to create and refine GraceLink.

GraceLink quarterlies will continue to be distributed while awaiting the new curriculum. In the meantime, those who are unhappy with GraceLink most likely will continue to turn to the "My Bible First" curriculum developed in 2000 by Dr. Phil and Sherry Mills. According to a story in *Inside AST* (Summer 2008), when a Buddhist family began attending their church in the Kansas-Nebraska Conference, Sherry realized that the children had unique needs not being met by the limited materials available for Sabbath School. After attending an ASI Convention, she decided to pursue as her ministry the task of producing materials about the Bible for children. She turned to her mother, Amy Sherrard, a retired missionary, for help. Amy had assisted in the development of a child evangelism program and written children's Bible stories in the past. For illustrations, Sherry turned to a childhood collection of old pictures

given to her by her grandmother and supplemented with pictures from collections of royalty-free illustrations. Other members of the family helped, and soon a three-year curriculum for primary age children was complete. These are the lessons that are pointed to as an example of what the new curriculum will be like.

Only a new logo was shared with the children's ministries directors—an open Bible in the background over which there is superimposed a large hand reaching down to meet a small hand reaching up. Whether there is time for the input from other Divisions that was so crucial to the development of GraceLink remains to be seen. The announced roll-out date of 2018 has already been pushed back to 2019.

Dale Galusha, president of Pacific Press, says "In today's world, churches and families want more options. Expecting one curriculum to meet the needs of all church members in a 19-million-member church—from PhDs to those in developing countries who have been church members for three months—is a stretch. Multiple curricula do not scare me, but if we are going to have them, it's better to have them under the umbrella of the church, in my opinion."

Division Children's Ministries Directors are not so sure about multiple curricula, given the costs and training involved.

Another question that has not been addressed publicly is what happens to all the GraceLink materials that have been developed over the years? They represent a multi-million-dollar investment that could have significant value in the world of Christian publishing where materials for children are a large market. Is that investment simply being discarded?

Historically, Adventists have invested heavily in lavish Biblical materials for children, as exemplified by the ten volume *The Bible Story* books by Arthur S. Maxwell. Those books served the church well, and became the backbone of the colporteur system of book distribution.

Will the next curriculum meet the high educational and illustrative standards of the past? How much will it cost? Will it take longer than three years to produce? And what will happen in 2020 when there is the chance that new leaders could be elected to the Sabbath School Department? ■

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