

 *community through conversation*

# SPECTRUM



## REFLECTIONS ON THE VIRUS AND THE CHURCH

*Rocks Along the Way* | *Three Congregations Creating Community While Apart*  
*The (Little) Beast* | *The Gospel of Yes* | *Prayers for Ben*

community through conversation  
**SPECTRUM**

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SPECTRUM is published by Adventist Forum, a nonsubsidized, nonprofit organization for which gifts are deductible in the report of income for purposes of taxation. The publishing of SPECTRUM depends on subscriptions, gifts from individuals, and the voluntary efforts of the contributors.

SPECTRUM can be accessed on the World Wide Web at [www.spectrummagazine.org](http://www.spectrummagazine.org).

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Letters to the editor may be edited for publication.

ISSN: 0890-0264

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**ARTIST'S STATEMENT ABOUT THE ART**

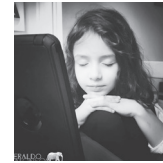
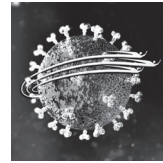
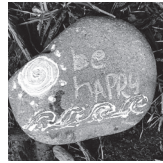
Originally created for a 2019 exhibition in the Netherlands titled *From Synergy to Energy*, this acrylic painting, *Shortage*, depicted draught and a lack of water. While watercolor would have been the artist's preferred medium, given the subject matter, she chose acrylics. A suitable title for this *Spectrum* cover might be *Waiting for the Living Water*—what Jesus said to the woman at the well in Samaria.



**ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST: AAFJE BRUINSMA**

Aafje Bruinsma worked as a translator for the Seventh-day Adventist publishing house in the Netherlands. Later, after she moved to the Cameroons and other countries, she worked as a freelance book translator for several book publishers in the Netherlands, mainly from English and German into Dutch. After her return to the Netherlands, and retirement from translating, she took several art courses, including one in portrait painting. Last year she was invited to take part in the *From Synergy to Energy* exhibition. Twenty artists, professionals and amateurs, were given twenty subjects around that theme. Her assignment was *Shortage*.

## CONTENTS



### Editorial

- 2 Rocks Along the Way | BY BONNIE DWYER  
5 This Troubling Time | BY CARMEN LAU

### Noteworthy

- 7 General Conference Executive Committee Zooms in for Spring Meeting | BY BONNIE DWYER

### Bible

- 12 Book Review: Sigve Tonstad's *Revelation* | BY DARIAN LOCKETT

### Reflections on the Virus and the Church

- 19 The (Little) Beast | BY JEAN-CLAUDE VERRECCHIA  
22 The Adaptive Approach: The New Normal of Adventist Education | BY HALLIE ANDERSON  
25 Zooming In and Branching Out | NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION  
30 The Gospel of Yes! | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN  
33 Imagination in the Time of Coronavirus | BY HANZ GUTIERREZ  
37 Three Congregations Creating Community While Apart | BY ALITA BYRD

### Religious Liberty

- 42 2020, Pulses of Global Conversations: Window to A Larger World | BY GANOUNE DIOP  
50 The Church-State Issue in the Paycheck Protection Program | BY RICH HANNON

### Prayers

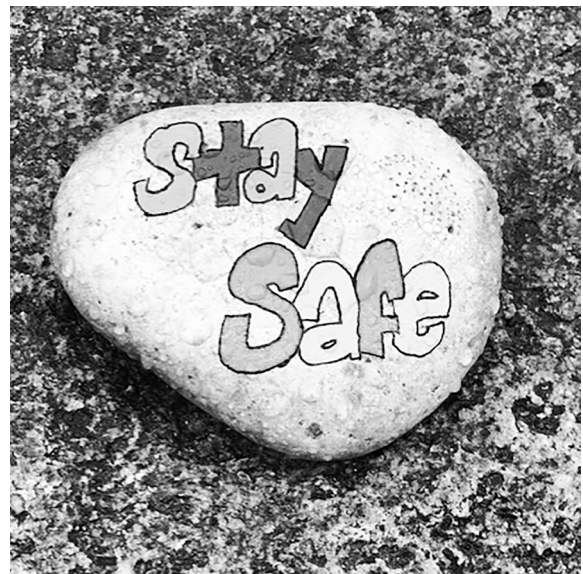
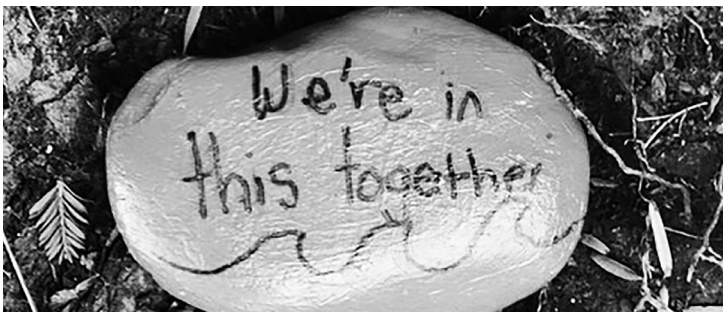
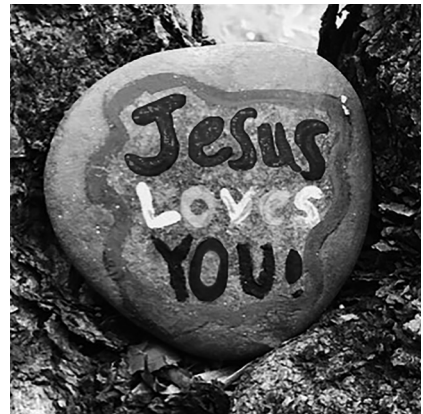
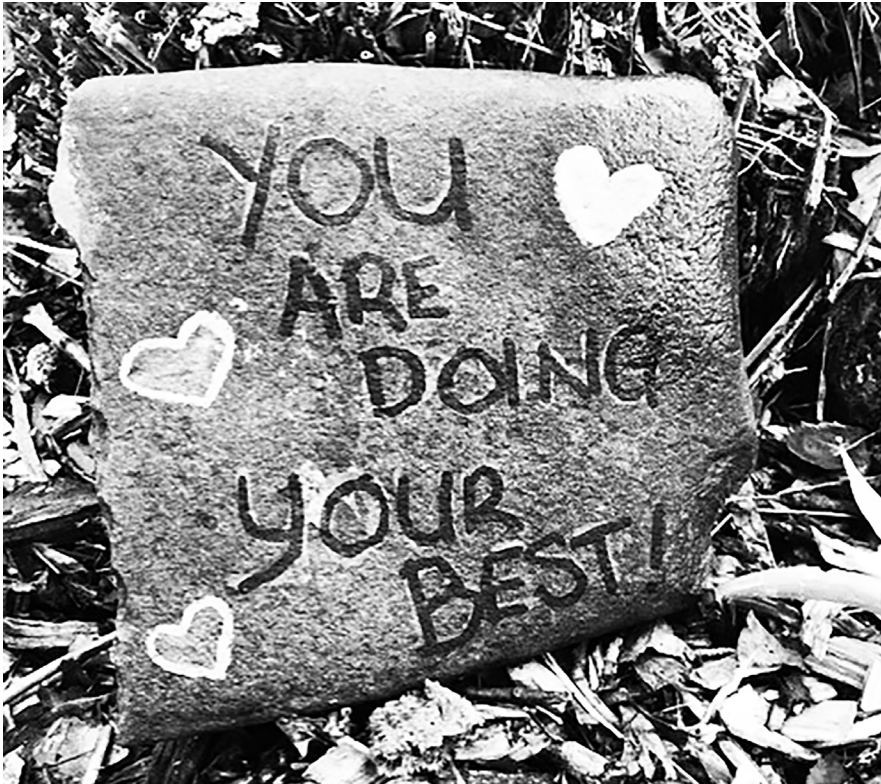
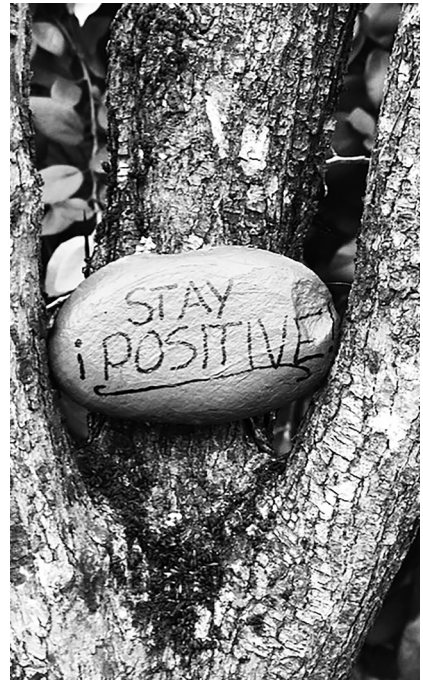
- 56 Prayers For Ben | BY DARYLL WARD

### Endings

- Back Cover Prayer During the Pandemic | BY NANCY LECOURT



# EDITORIALS





# Rocks

## ALONG THE WAY

BY BONNIE DWYER

In this time of physical distancing, daily walks in the neighborhood are a welcome relief to the claustrophobia of being inside; you can tell by the number of people and dogs out at any given time of the day. Poets have long revered walking. Robert William Service wrote,

Walking, walking, oh the joy of walking!  
Swinging down the tawny lanes with  
head held high;  
Striding up the green hills, through the  
heather stalking.



hood. In Sacramento, the walking story yesterday was about art, people who chalk the (side)walks with encouraging phrases in colorful graphics.

Out here in the 'Burbs where I live, we have bears, but they are not stuffed. They are, however, attuned to the moment and appropriately attired. My early morning weekend walks are along a divided parkway that winds past a small lake and then a golf course. The sidewalk is separated

But who would have ever thought those walks would become news events? On NBC Nightly News March 30, the broadcast concluded with a story about Teddy Bear Scavenger hunts. In cities across the country, people are placing teddy bears, large and small, as well as other stuffed animals in their windows. Children keep count of the bears they see as they walk through their neighbor-

hood. In Sacramento, the walking story yesterday was about art, people who chalk the (side)walks with encouraging phrases in colorful graphics. Out here in the 'Burbs where I live, we have bears, but they are not stuffed. They are, however, attuned to the moment and appropriately attired. My early morning weekend walks are along a divided parkway that winds past a small lake and then a golf course. The sidewalk is separated from the street with plantings and is particularly beautiful right now, colored by flowering trees and wisteria-topped fences. On a recent Sunday, as my dog Izze pulled me down the street, sniffing every bush and tree, we started spotting small rocks with painted messages along the way. After the first one or two, we started looking for them and taking photographs. As I focused on one, a woman jogged

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Usually, in times of distress, we turn to each other for stories to add perspective and context, to help us understand how others have navigated daunting circumstances.

But few of us have personal stories equal to this virus moment.

by, and then stopped to say that it was her daughter who had turned rock painting into an afternoon art project with a friend, followed by a walk to place them.

These serendipitous moments seem to mean more now—they become stories on the nightly news. They add a bit of poetry to the day, even if it is only a phrase. Usually, in times of distress, we turn to each other for stories to add perspective and context, to help us understand how others have navigated daunting circumstances. But few of us have personal stories equal to this virus moment. Parallel experiences do not readily come to the fore.

Poetry speaks uniquely to this time, and rapidly goes viral. As did the words of Lynn Ungar in her poem “Pandemic”:

What if you thought of it  
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—  
the most sacred of times?

A friend sent me the poem on a Sabbath morning, and it was my verse for the day, the balm in Gilead, a way to claim and calm the moment. There was comfort in her advice:



Cease from travel.  
Cease from buying and selling;  
Give up, just for now,  
on trying to make the world  
different than it is.  
Sing. Pray. Touch only those  
to whom you commit your life.

As I read the words, I immediately wanted to know more about the poet, so turned to Google. She was not far away from me, near Oakland, a minister in the Universalist-Unitarian Church. A mother. A poet who has found the lyrical in beauty, lilies, bread, even with our current obsession with hoarding TP. I found her generous spirit centering.

Know that our lives  
are in one another's hands.  
(Surely, that has come clear.)  
Do not reach out your hands.  
Reach out your heart.  
Reach out your words.  
Reach out all the tendrils  
of compassion that move, invisibly,  
where we cannot touch.  
Promise this world your love—  
for better or for worse,  
in sickness and in health,  
so long as we all shall live.

Poetry, teddy bears in windows, chalked sidewalks, rocks along the way are how some people are reaching out with their hearts, their words, proclaiming their love for the world, for each other. While the current time can be seen as a time of trouble, the worst of times, it is also the best of times as we rediscover our need of and love for one another.



BONNIE DWYER is editor of *Spectrum*.





# *this troubling time*

BY CARMEN LAU

Like a wild animal dropping from a tree, this pandemic has startled, then wrapped us all with a measure of uncertainty.

This troubling time comes to some folks as a forced solitude, demanding a tapping of deep reservoirs of resilience and ritualistic coping strategies in an effort to avoid depression, paranoia, selfishness, and a panicked anxiety.

For others, whose work has been deemed “essential,” new procedures, designed to protect, add a level of complication to tasks that previously were rote or mindless.

In this time of trouble, those involved with healthcare bear a particular burden. Physicians plot paths of care for individual patients without seeing their patients in the flesh. Healthcare leaders, often in make-shift offices

When I recognize my lack of control, then I move toward wisdom and truth.

That is to say: By claiming helplessness, I can move toward God.

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of cramped closets with uncomfortable chairs, race on a treadmill of perpetual planning of strategic systemic responses that attempt to maximize safety, revenue, and access to needed clinical services.

Those involved with patient care face new standards that demand one wear confining gear, which, at times, provides questionable protection. So, this troubling time means that those in direct patient care participate in work that becomes hotter, sweatier, and more exhausting than usual. For some, it means wearing the same mask day after day, an action that previously would have been labeled unsafe for both patient and caregiver. Wearing a fresh mask for extended periods can result in a rash. Re-using the same mask day after day exacts a greater physical toll.

Twenty-first-century society had been high-tech/high-touch; now the high-touch component is becoming a dim memory. Thus, a person lives in this troubling time unable to gain strength from in-the-flesh social networks and incapable of expressing love and gratitude in the usual face-to-face manner. I have heard stories of relatively inexperienced nurses being asked to care for critically ill people without the mentorship that typically would be in place to guide in clinical judgment. Healthcare workers, clad in personal protective gear, can do a task, but this new normal minimizes the physical presence of co-workers and diminishes the ability to use facial expressions or touch to express empathy and connection both to patients and co-workers.

Living in this transitional moment has felt like sliding backwards. Yet, as the days march along, I see that leaving behind my sense of control does two things that, in the end, will be beneficial. First, I will perceive, in the deepest way, the truth that I am like a vessel on a larger ocean. I am not steering this ship, but I am a part of God's system that features love as a primary status. My daily task is to cling to the supremacy of love and to calculate what I can do at this moment to contribute to an ultimate value of love in my circle of influence. Second, when I recognize my lack of control, then I move toward wisdom

and truth. That is to say: By claiming helplessness, I can move toward God.

No matter how this troubling time unfolds, each of us can decide to trudge along in a way that includes a commitment to encourage and support those with whom we come in contact. Such a strategy would be congruent with Holy Spirit work. One meaning for Holy Spirit, or Paraclete, involves the notion of coming alongside. We may not be able to physically come alongside people in this troubling time. But we can listen to their stories and concerns. We can come alongside people by carefully selecting words that show we hear and that we care.

This troubling time reminds us that listening is the first step of Christian witness. Maybe being cloistered in this time of trouble will cause us to revise assumptions that undergird missional focus. Maybe this pandemic will teach us that mutuality and interconnectivity are key parts of God's character that we have previously ignored.



CARMEN LAU is chair of Adventist Forum.



## NOTEWORTHY

# *General Conference Executive Committee*

## ZOOMS IN FOR SPRING MEETING

BY BONNIE DWYER

**A**lthough most of the world was on lockdown because of the coronavirus, the General Conference Executive Committee convened on Tuesday and Wednesday, April 14 and 15, via Zoom. To accommodate the many time zones from which people were calling, the meeting began at six o'clock in the morning (Eastern time). Speaking from his Maryland home, General Conference President Ted N. C. Wilson began by acknowledging the strange times in which we are living. "But, let me tell you the Good News. There are a lot of people asking questions and open to the spirit of

the Lord leading them to truth. And God is going to use this in a magnificent way," he said to the 112 members of the committee who had registered, plus those who were viewing the livestream of the call on the Executive Committee website.

Before the primary issue of finances was addressed, there was prayer for countries with high death rates from the virus, plus prayer for personal requests, including Elder Wilson's for his oldest daughter Emily who has a tumor on her left lung. Prayers were offered throughout the meeting in indigenous languages, often by the treasurers



and secretaries from various regions. Mark Finley provided the devotionals. He likened the whole armor of God in Ephesians 6:12 to the Personal Protective Equipment used by medical personnel as they treat COVID patients. He challenged participants to gird themselves with daily devotions and meditation, to be still and know that He is God.

Good cheer seemed to persist throughout the meeting, despite the dire circumstances in the world and church. Juan Prestol-Puesan, treasurer of the General Conference, focused on the increase in investment earnings that had given the General Conference a positive ending to fiscal 2019, despite the fact that worldwide tithes decreased by \$120 million. Net assets increased by \$2,599,238.39.

Operating expenses were almost \$4 million under the annual budget. The figure for the total budget is determined by a percentage of world tithes, referred to as the Operating Cap. So, while enabling actions had been voted in October to approve using reserve funds, if needed, to balance the budget, the reserves remained untouched.

Further discussion of what will happen in 2020 with the looming economic recession may necessitate a special session of the Executive Committee, members were told. Wilson suggested it will be May or June before the General Conference will have a true picture of what is happening to the tithes since states and countries shut down and in-person worship services at local churches were cancelled.

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Over the next four years, the NAD will be decreasing the percentage of tithes it sends on to the General Conference by half of one percent each year, while the other world divisions will increase their tithes percentage by one tenth of one percent.



Another financial challenge for the General Conference as it balances its operating budget is the tithe parity that was approved in the fall of 2019. Over the next four years, the NAD will be decreasing the percentage of tithe it sends on to the General Conference by half of one percent each year, while the other world divisions will increase their tithe percentage by one tenth of one percent. Prestol-Puesan showed a chart diagramming the projected curve in the decline in funds as this

policy takes place, noting that the General Conference will never again have the amount of money that it had in recent years for its budget. In 2018, members gave the greatest amount of tithe in the history of the church, and the GC Budget is based on a percentage of tithe.

Chairman Ted Wilson called for a voice vote on the Treasurer's report and a cacophony of noise erupted as the microphones were unmuted and background noises overwhelmed the vote itself. But the report was approved.

An additional vote was taken to accept the personnel changes being made because of the anticipated decline in revenues from tithe parity. The General Conference budget is being cut by \$1,756,410, and that has prompted the elimination of three elected positions, as well as not filling three others. What those positions are was not disclosed to the committee. But because of the cuts, the Nominating Committee did not meet as it usually does at this meeting.

Auditor Paul Douglas was then called upon to present a report on Compliance with Policy. To begin, he noted that in 2018, audits showed that 79% of church organi-

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Neil Nedley asked if the GC had been notified of plans by an independent ministry to retain the Stadium, run the exhibits, and reap the benefits.

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zations had at least one violation of core policies such as financial reports, lack of audit committees, insurance coverage, conflicts of interest, service records, and operating deficits. The divisions had been given the assignment to come up with a plan to address these issues in their territory. He then read the to-do lists each division had created.

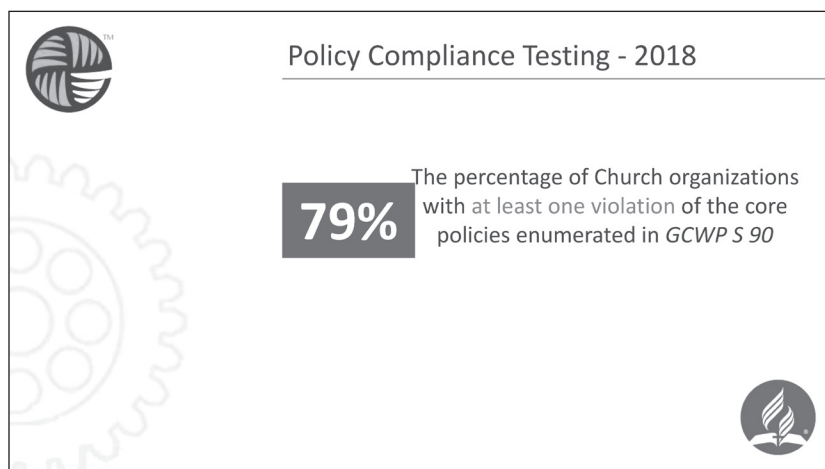
And that was the only discussion of compliance this year. There was no mention of the Compliance Committees voted in the past or the issue of women's ordination that had prompted their creation.

The postponement of General Conference Session until 2021 required re-negotiation of contracts with the Convention Center in Indianapolis, plus the hotels. All activities will now be held in the Convention Center. Lucas Oil Stadium, which was going to serve as the exhibit hall, will not be utilized. When Chairman Wilson asked if there were any questions, Neil Nedley asked if the GC had been notified of plans by an independent ministry to retain the Stadium, run the exhibits, and reap the benefits. Wilson responded that the GC must look at things in a careful way in the future, and that the plan was to go to Indianapolis to do the work of the church and that's all. He also noted that they were considering a virtual exhibit hall, where people could purchase things online.

On the second day of the meeting, Chairman Wilson abandoned voice votes because of the noise ("We're learning as we go," he said), and Committee members got the hang of how to signal that they would like to make a comment, making for much more discussion than the previous day.

Mike Ryan, a now-retired vice president of the General Conference who has helped with the strategic planning process for the past ten years, reported on the next strategic plan for the

One of the slides presented by General Conference Auditing Service Auditor Paul Douglas





The strategic plan for the years 2020-2025, entitled “I Will Go”

years 2020–2025 entitled “I Will Go.” Approved at Annual Council last year, the plan was set to launch at the General Conference Session. Now, with the Session being postponed, the decision has been made to go ahead and launch the program anyway, because “everyone needs to be involved.” The rollout will be online July 3 and 4 with Friday-night vespers, a Sabbath School program, and a worship service. Ray Wahlen said the treasury department would be looking at resource alignment, in other words how budgets support the plan goals. A communication plan has been compiled using social media, YouTube, and podcasts. Jennifer Stymus asked for stories from each division. David Trim described the research that is planned to test the Key Performance Indicators included in the plan. He concluded his part of the presentation with the words of Isaiah 6:8, “Who will go? Here I am. Send me.”

There was no discussion of travel bans and the impossibility of anyone going anywhere anytime soon. Before the affirming vote was taken, Elbert Kuhn spoke about the origin of the idea for the program. Students at River Platte University had conceived it in 2009 and it started a move-

ment. He noted that it’s personal, not possible to outsource, reaffirms mission as top priority of the church, and reaches out to young people and all demographics. It was approved.

Sexual Abuse Prevention, the most lively topic of the Spring Meeting, was the next thing on the agenda. Gary Krause briefly told of the General Conference and Division Officers meeting held last week where divisions brought their local plans for preventing sexual abuse and shared them.

Wilson said that it had been a “tremendous move forward.” He added they would not be publicizing the reports from the divisions. They simply wanted to record that great progress was being made.

Ginger Ketting-Weller had the first question. She suggested that the Mission Institute sessions for new missionaries would be a great place to do training on this topic. Is it included in their curriculum?” she asked.

Wilson turned to GT Ng, who turned to Karen Porter for an answer. “Yes, she said, “it is covered.”

Several others made supportive comments. Then Lael Caesar said that the pauses in the response to the first question made him feel awkward. He thought if an outsider were listening in he might wonder why this issue is not being addressed at the highest level of the church.

Wilson responded that he didn’t understand Caesar’s concern. “We’re giving it the highest attention possible.”

With that, all the various departmental directors who address the issue in some way spoke up—Women’s Ministries, Family Ministries, Children’s Ministries, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, ADRA. Others spoke

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Wilson noted that they did not want to dictate to divisions how to deal with the problem, but asked for reports to get things started. He said that confidentiality kept them from releasing the reports because five had been fairly detailed.

When Wilson announced that ADCOM had decided to Zoom several meetings, including the pre-meetings for Annual Council this year, there were questions.

in defense of Caesar, saying he had a point. With all these various departments addressing it, where is one place to find information?

Wilson noted that they did not want to dictate to divisions how to deal with the problem, but asked for reports to get things started. He said that confi-

dentiality kept them from releasing the reports because five had been fairly detailed.

As the conversation was drawing to a close Ginger Ketting-Weller posed another provocative question, “Why won’t you want to have a worldwide approach to this problem?” she wondered, noting, “training, monitoring, and reporting are the key elements from stopping it,” she said.

Wilson promised that this was just the beginning and that “maybe someday we’ll have it on the agenda in a more comprehensive way.” The vote to accept the report was 95 to 1.

Surprisingly, the issue that received the most divisive vote came at the end of the meeting—the consent calendar with its listing of offerings and meetings. When Wilson announced that ADCOM had decided to Zoom several meetings, including the pre-meetings for Annual Council this year, there were questions. David Trim asked if the ADCOM decision came as a recommendation, since it is the Executive Committee that has been designated to make the decision on how meetings are held. And, if people were going to be traveling to Annual Council anyway, what savings were going to come from Zooming the pre-meetings? After explanations and more comments, the



The General Conference Health Ministries has set up a COVID-19 website to answer questions. It can be found at <http://healthministries.com/coronavirus>.

consent calendar was voted eighty-four yes to eleven no. The 2020 pre-sessions for Annual Council in October would be via Zoom. But members seemed to have found their voices on the new medium. Upcoming meetings may be livelier with members only having to unmute their mics to talk, rather

than having to walk down an aisle to a microphone in an auditorium to be heard.

The meeting closed with prayer for individuals who have contracted COVID.

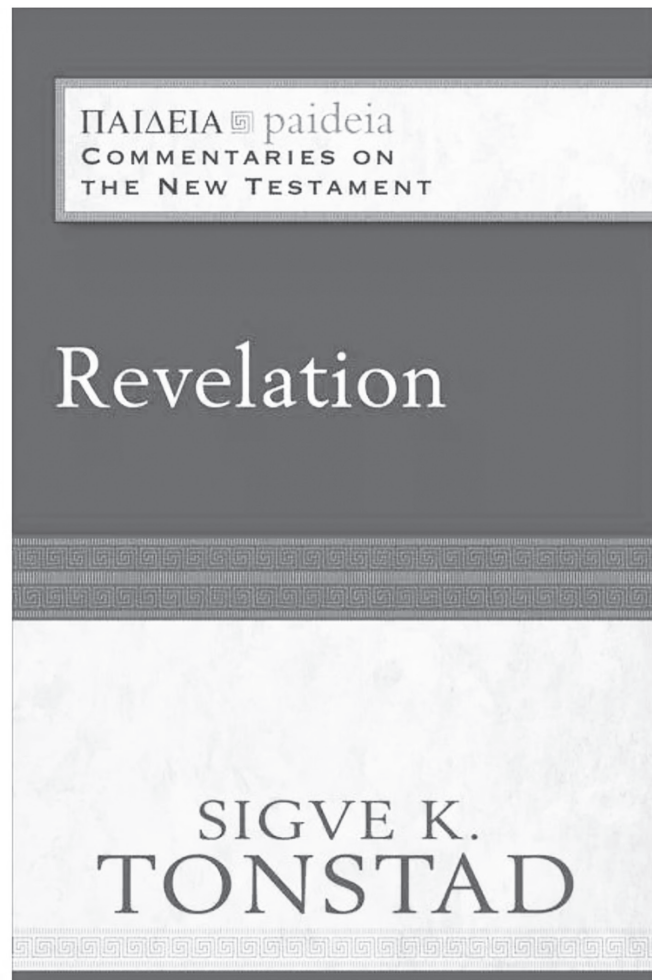
**To read more documents from the meeting, visit [executivecommittee.adventist.org](http://executivecommittee.adventist.org).**



BONNIE DWYER is editor of *Spectrum*.



# BIBLE



Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2019), 416 pages

## BOOK REVIEW:

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*Sigve Tonstad's Revelation*

BY DARIAN LOCKETT

*This review was originally presented as part of a February 29, 2020 panel discussion in Loma Linda on Revelation: Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament.*

Much of the current scholarship on the book of Revelation argues that the visions of the book are concerned with nothing more than a critique of the Roman imperial system. This perspective understands the beast from the sea (Rev. 13:1–10) as the Roman Empire; the wounded head is the emperor, most often Nero, in a thinly veiled reference to the myth of *Nero redivivus*;<sup>1</sup> and the beast from the earth (13:11–18) is the imperial cult or the imperial priesthood in Asia Minor. Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, Wilhelm Bousset said that “the observation that the core of the prophecy in the Apocalypse refers to the then widely held expectation of *Nero redivivus* is in my opinion an immovable point that will not again be surrendered [in contemporary historical interpretation.”<sup>2</sup> In Richard Bauckham’s judgment: “The gematria [referring to the number 666] does not merely assert that Nero is the beast: it demonstrates that he is.”<sup>3</sup>

Sigve Tonstad’s new commentary on Revelation in the Paideia Commentary series (Baker Academic) opens with a deft critique of this preterist, somewhat dominant interpretive framework for Revelation. He insists that Revelation’s perspective is *cosmic* more than *Roman*, its story is shaped by the *biblical* narrative more than by imperial life in the first century, and it is truly prophetic and not only descriptive of first-century concerns (19–20). As an alternative, Tonstad argues for a “Cosmic Conflict View,” which takes into account Roman imperial reality, yet deals with bigger

concerns projected on a wider screen (20). This perspective allows for viewing Revelation’s concerns as both universal and timeless, while at the same time related to events in the first century as much as to those in the twenty-first.

The cosmic view that Tonstad advocates influences three major areas of interpretation in Revelation: one’s understanding of the book’s genre, the connection between violence and God’s reputation, and finally, the centrality of the Lamb for understanding the divine response highlighted in the book. This review will briefly address these three interpretive issues, then, in the end, will offer some remaining questions not fully addressed in the commentary.

### Genre

Helpfully, Tonstad emphasizes that the genre of Revelation is ambiguous in nature. Though often classified as an apocalyptic book, he argues that the nature of apocalyptic as *crisis literature* does not fit. Revelation, for Tonstad, can be described as an apocalyptic book if the purpose is to identify it as revelatory literature (30). Yet, rather than a pure apocalypse, if it should be classified at all, Revelation should be seen as a second Ezekiel because of its prophetic character, rather than a second Daniel. He concludes his discussion of genre arguing that “The potential of genre to help readers is in doubt unless one limits it to the claim announced in the opening word: a *disclosure* is in the making. Revelation resists a simple classification ... [then quoting Gregory Linton] ... Revelation is a text that ‘refuses to stay in bounds,’ from ‘John’s own stand point in the first century ... something new and different from previous similar writings’” (30).

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This perspective allows for viewing Revelation’s concerns as both universal and timeless, while at the same time related to events in the first century as much as to those in the twenty-first.

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It seems Tonstad wants to detach one's reading of Revelation from what might be the typical expectations of scholars' understanding of an apocalyptic text. Tonstad would have readers make this move so that there is greater awareness of the relationship between, in Auerbach's terms, "sensory appearance and meaning."<sup>4</sup> On this point, Tonstad's perspective on Revelation is nuanced and quite helpful. He encourages readers to be cautious about their preunderstandings regarding what the Revelation is about—and, perhaps especially with regard to the Book of Revelation, such preunderstandings are most deep-seated and controlling of interpretation. Assumptions of what an apocalypse is and how it delivers its message have just as much potential to distort as to clarify one's understanding of Revelation's communicative intent. This is a reminder that a *prima facie* reading is inadequate. Revelation's disclosures are reserved for "anyone who has an ear" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 13:9), and it calls for a mind that has wisdom (13:18; 17:9). Tonstad urges readers to attend carefully to the "sensory appearance" of the text and to follow the trajectory of such appearances toward their intended and ultimate subject matter. He suggests that Revelation is in the business of "aural circumcision,"<sup>5</sup>—"he who has an ear, let him hear what that Spirit says ..." is the refrain throughout the text. The disclosures of the text, which extend beyond identifying the genre, depend not only on what is said, but, perhaps even more, on what is heard by the (original or subsequent) audiences.

As mentioned in greater detail in the next section, Tonstad argues for a much larger role for the demonic in Revelation and he insists that "the remedy against someone who does not tell the truth [in the book] is *revelation*." He continues, "*Witness*, a key word in John as much as in Revelation, is a virtual synonym for the revealing errand (John 5:31–36; 8:13–18; 10:25; 18:37; 19:35; Rev. 1:9; 6:9; 11:7; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4; 22:16,18). *Witness* will make right what has gone wrong" (32). Tonstad hints at this direction at the very opening of his commentary as he poses the questions: "Does this mean that God's remedy for 'false speech' is 'more speech'? Does it mean that God's remedy is—*revelation*?" (25). Rather than staking great claims regarding the precise genre of Revelation, Tonstad encourages readers to listen to "more speech," the very revelation that is to be heard that constitutes the divine response to deception and lies.

## Violence and God's Reputation

For anyone reading Revelation, the question of violence and its reflection upon God's character is unavoidable. Some would argue that the book shows no interest in transforming the world, but is only a program for destroying God's enemies.<sup>6</sup> Susan Hylen notes "Most scholarly interpreters treat the violence of Revelation as a problem to be addressed"<sup>7</sup> and John Phelan claims that "any appreciation for Revelation must be tempered by reflections on what some might call the 'dark side' of Revelation."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps one could divide interpreters of Revelation into two general categories: ones who justify how Revelation's violence makes theological and ethical sense, and those who call it out as problematic.<sup>9</sup> Poignantly, Paul Decock asks, "why this divine violence goes hand in hand with the nonviolence of the earthly Jesus and his followers."<sup>10</sup> Now, perhaps this assumes the ministry of the early Jesus was always nonviolent, but it does raise the issue of the violence in Revelation and that often this violence is assumed to originate from either God or Jesus.

Many interpreters understand that God himself is behind the violence in Revelation. These interpreters understand the divine passive—"it was given"—to refer to instances (at least sixteen out of twenty-one) where the divine agent gives permission to inflict harm.<sup>11</sup> For example, many commentators argue that the plagues come from heaven and are not caused by independent powers, but proceed ultimately from the sovereign hand of the one God. Therefore, the logic of *retribution* tends to dominate interpretations of Revelation, as when John J. Collins finds in Revelation "the projection into the future of what was unfulfilled in the past. Jesus did not destroy the wicked in his earthly life, but he would return with supernatural power to complete the task."<sup>12</sup> Tonstad would suggest that such a view is, at least in part, influenced by assigning the book to the apocalyptic genre.

However, along with Anton Vögtle, Tonstad argues that God "is not the only one who is at work in this world—as the Apocalypse makes so abundantly clear."<sup>13</sup> For Tonstad, this is one of the most important observations for interpreting the book. He understands that the devastation which unfolds in the sequence of the seals (6:1–8:1), increases in the sequence of the trumpets (8:2–11:19), and finally is completely unrestrained in the sequence of the bowls (16:1–21), is not an indirect way of



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articulating divine activity. In another publication, Tonstad notes that John goes out of his way not only to show the demonic quality of the action but also to link the action and the acting subject with such clarity that the reader virtually finds the passport, driver's license, fingerprints, and copious amounts of DNA of the acting subject at the scene.<sup>14</sup> And of course, for Tonstad, the acting subject is not God, but demonic agents. He argues that "The calamities of the seal sequence occur at the point where divine *permission* intersects with demonic *commission*" (140). And rather than be understood as Messianic judgments, "The exposé of demonic agency continues in greater detail in two more cycles, the trumpets (8:2–11:19) and the bowls (15:1–16:21)" (140).

Raising the issue of divine permission and its relationship to demonic commission is a helpful and nuanced theological reading of the text. This of course is tricky territory, but territory nonetheless through which pastors must capably and confidently lead their congregants. Though Tonstad does not provide a systematic discussion of God's will vis-à-vis evil at work in the world, the fact that he raises the theological issue will alert pastors and Christian interpreters that the text is actually referring to these necessary theological realities. This is a deft example of connecting "sensory appearance" to the theological "meaning" of the text. Again, the strength here is not so much that Tonstad solves or even attempts to solve the tension as such, but that he raises the issue as a logical consequence of reading the text in the way he has suggested.

The cosmic approach allows Tonstad to read Revelation as an exposé of demonic agency and this understanding of the role of demonic power directly influences the text's depiction of God's reputation. The divine reputation looks better if one sees the calamities of Revelation as unambiguous, unmitigated demonic

activity. The implication is that divine permission must be distinguished from divine agency. Though divine permission poses problems of its own, Tonstad claims that these problems are ameliorated by the recognition that the acting subject in Revelation's relentless portrayal of destruction is not God himself, but the demonic.

This is an intriguing and thought-provoking approach to the problem of violence in Revelation and this reviewer appreciates how the cosmic approach provides such an alternative interpretive option. However, it is not clear that Tonstad can substantiate the claim that all problems of divine agency and responsibility are ameliorated by his approach. Though it is a great strength, especially in a commentary, that Tonstad raises the theological issue of divine permission versus demonic commission, the commentary itself does not resolve whether the "divine enablement" or permission refers to a positive or negative activity. Thus, it seems not all the problems are ameliorated. However, the commentary is to be commended because it builds a solid bridge from careful exegesis to thoughtful theological reflection—even if it has not solved the theological problem itself.

### **The Central Role of The Lamb**

A final issue is the centrality of the Lamb: "Then I saw one like a slaughtered lamb standing in the [middle] of the throne and [in the middle] of the four living creatures and [in the middle of] the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth" (Rev 5:6). Tonstad argues that this is the pivotal scene and the foremost revelation in the entire book. The fact that the lamb is standing as slain in the middle of the throne, in the middle of the four living creatures, and in the middle of the elders does not escape Tonstad's notice. He connects a preoccupation with the middle to Ezekiel and concludes:

This is easily the most critical issue in the book and the key to its theology. To focus on the Lamb that breaks the seals matters more than the content of the seals, especially when we concede that the content, in qualified terms, brings very little that is new. The entrenched scenario of retribution yields the ground to scenes of revelation, and the Revealer is in his own person the one who transforms perceptions. (140).

Corresponding to the concern with God's reputation already noted, Tonstad emphasizes God's way of power is not through violence, but through the absorption and extinguishing of violence in the person of the Lamb.

Revelation's Lamb Christology consists of three major points: 1) he is worthy because he is slaughtered (5:9); 2) the fact that the Lamb is slaughtered is essential to his identity—it is not just something that happens to him, it is constitutive of how he is (5:12; 13:8); and 3) the slaughter is not an image from the sacrificial cult, but one of butchery and murder. Tonstad argues that though often translated “slaughtered,” the connotation of the verb is of violence. He notes that the passage announces the lamb “has won the war” (5:5). In the context of battle and warfare, being killed with violence usually indicates defeat, of losing the war, but here, by absorbing violence in himself, the Lamb is the paradoxical winner. Being killed by violence, therefore, is part and parcel of the Lamb's identity (116).

Understood in this way, the Lamb's role in Revelation is revelatory. The slaughtered Lamb appears “in the middle of” the divine throne in heaven (5:6, KJV; cf. 7:17) in order to show that, in Richard Bauckham's words, “Christ's sacrificial death *belongs to the way God rules the world.*”<sup>15</sup> Tonstad adds: “If this is ‘the way God rules

the world,’ we must add that this is how God defeats the opposing side in the cosmic conflict. Looking beyond the symbols, the Lamb that has been ‘killed with violence’ must be a self-giving person” (116). And it is in this ultimate act of self-giving that God wins the cosmic conflict.

Tonstad's concluding comments are worth quoting in full: “Few images put the Roman paradigm under pressure as much as the idea that the Lamb ‘was killed with violence from the foundation of the world’ (13:8); few images deserve more to have the final say concerning the theology of the book.” Then quoting Leonard Thompson, Tonstad concludes:

There is a permanence to the crucified Lamb that cannot be captured by locating the crucifixion in time, for example under “Pontius Pilate” or “in the first century of the Common Era.” To put it differently, the crucifixion is much more than a momentary event in history. That permanence is captured in the book of Revelation through spatial, not temporal imagery. The “slain Lamb” appears not only on earth but also in heaven, close to the throne (5:6). The Lamb was not slain at a particular moment in time; rather the Lamb was slain “from the foundation of the world” (13:8; cf. 17:8). The crucifixion is enfolded in the “deep,” permanent structure of the seer's vision, and it unfolds in the life of Jesus and those who are his faithful followers (L. Thompson 1990, 85), (216).

This, more than any other example, demonstrates the theological power of the cosmic-conflict view. The relevance of Revelation extends far beyond the mundane events of the first or twenty-first century to the universal

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conflict settled by God's final work in Christ.

However, it is just here that questions arise. First, does this perspective relegate Revelation to an other-worldly and world-denying vision that has little to do with the practical evils encountered by God's people? Perhaps the cosmic view offers a "pie in the sky" salvation rather than a vision for living in the world. Although Tonstad carefully connects his understanding of the text to its historical setting, and at many points he considers how the text relates to contemporary issues, the question remains as to whether his approach too quickly moves past these mundane issues to the cosmic.

Second, there are several questions that will arise regarding how the cosmic view relates to the ways Revelation has traditionally been understood in particular communities. In what ways might the cosmic view be jarring to readers who are more likely to see direct connections between Revelation and current events? The commentary clearly seems to be offered as a guide in helping just these kinds of communities understand Revelation, while holding off unexamined assumptions about the focus and content of the text. There is much in the commentary to appreciate, yet some will find such appreciation hard because Tonstad challenges long-held notions of what Revelation is all about.

These last questions are intended as constructive means of probing the strength and relevance of Tonstad's work. The commentary was a joy to read—well-written and clearly pastoral. Tonstad has provided a commentary that is both accessible (and useful in the church!) and academically rigorous at the same time. For this reviewer, the commentary is an example of the best of scholarship, academic learning put in service of the church.

## Endnotes

1. The *Nero Redivivus* legend was a popular belief during the last part of the first century. It held that the Roman emperor Nero would return sometime after his death in AD 68. See, Hans-Josef Klauck, "Do They Never Come Back? *Nero Redivivus* and the Apocalypse of John," *CBQ* 63 (2001): 683–698.

2. Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1906), 120.

3. Richard J. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (London: T&T Clark, 1993) 389.

4. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 49. In another publication Tonstad draws attention to Auerbach in this regard.

5. The term is borrowed from Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 3.

6. Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 36.

7. Susan Hulen, "Metaphor Matters: Violence and Ethics in Revelation," *CBQ* 73 (2011): 777–96.

8. John E. Phelan Jr., "Revelation, Empire, and the Violence of God," *ExAud* 20 (2004): 66.

9. Hulen, "Metaphor Matters," 777.

10. Paul B. Decock, "Images of War and Creation, of Violence and Non-Violence in the Revelation of John," in *Coping with Violence in the New Testament*, ed. Pieter G. R. De Villiers and Jan Willem van Henten, *STAR* 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 185.

11. The term ἐδόθη is used a total of twenty-one times in Revelation: 6:2; 6:4 (twice); 6:8; 6:11; 7:2; 8:3; 9:1; 9:3; 9:5; 11:1; 11:2; 13:5 (twice); 13:7 (twice); 13:14; 13:15; 16:8; 19:8; 20:4. Five of these occurrences are "positive" (6:11; 8:3; 11:1; 19:8; 20:4), describing privileges given to the redeemed. One is ambivalent (7:2). The remaining instances refer to permission to inflict harm.

12. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 278.

13. Anton Vögtle, "Der Gott der Apokalypse," in *La Notion biblique de Dieu*, ed. J. Coppens (Gembloux: Éditions J. Duculot, 1976), 383.

14. Sigve K. Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation: The Theological Function of Pistis Iesou in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation*, *LNTS* 337 (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 108–114.

15. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (NTT; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 64.



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# REFLECTIONS ON THE VIRUS AND THE CHURCH



## COVID-19 *and the Church*

Artist: Mervyn Weir

# THE (LITTLE) *Beast*

BY JEAN-CLAUDE VERRECCHIA

The Adventist Church throughout the world focused on the study of the book of Daniel during the first quarter of the year 2020. Many members rejoiced in this study. Is not prophecy at the heart of Adventism?

One of the major themes of the book of Daniel is that of power and greatness. As early as Chapter Two, the statue seen by King Nebuchadnezzar is impressive. It describes the succession of empires, strong and powerful, as well as fragile. A stone is enough to destroy them. Nebuchadnezzar, we know, is not satisfied with this foretold

succession of empires. He claims power and strength for himself alone. His reign will never pass. Many other potentates after him have thought and acted likewise.

As early as Chapter Six, animals enter the scene. First, lions charged with devouring Daniel. Nothing happens. These animals, emblems of mighty Babylon, have their mouths shut by the divine messenger.

In Chapter Seven, the animals take on another appearance: they are monsters, “four great beasts” (7:3), hybrid beings that no one has ever seen before. The lion

has the wings of an eagle, the legs and heart of a man. The second animal is (like) a devouring bear. The third is a leopard flying like a bird, with four heads. As for the

fourth animal, it is a “terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong,” one (7:7), with iron teeth, which devours and breaks in pieces and tramples everything left with its feet. Eleven horns complete its description.

Chapter Eight continues on the same note. Of course, there are only two animals left, the ram and the goat, but they both display unheard-of violence, one against the other, until a

great horn grows, whose activity reaches up to the sky.

For thirteen Sabbaths, the faithful of the Adventist Church rubbed shoulders with this biblical menagerie, as fantastic as it is frightening. Any reader not initiated into apocalyptic prophecy would probably be terrified by these descriptions of power and violence. The good, traditional Adventists would not. And with the help of the Revelation of John, they will even add to the menagerie by completing the Danielic bestiary: a dragon and two more terrible beasts (Rev 12 and 13). The Adventists walk

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in the arena with confidence. For behind the symbols, they have identified the hidden enemies, especially the great enemy. They know, not without reason, that the latter will be defeated. They know they have nothing to fear. They know that deliverance is at hand.

But meanwhile, in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China...

Meanwhile, incognito, comes a little beast, very small, with a name that almost sounds like a biblical reference: COVID-19. Unidentified little beast. We don't really know where it comes from, what it feeds on, how it dies, or at what age. As mysterious as Melchizedek! A tiny beast that in its size is like a small stone that destroys empires and becomes a great mountain. Such is the COVID-19, which brings not only all the empires of the world to their knees, but also the weakest countries. It is a ruthless beast. Doctors and biologists despair of it; no one seems able to stop it.

The arrival of this microscopic animal, with its terrifying effects, is food for thought, isn't it? The chances are that attempts will be made to explain this disaster. Is it

God who wants to teach us a lesson? Or is it Satan who is trying to teach us a lesson? Or is it the long-awaited sign of the end of the world and of Christ's imminent return? Some people may even find a Bible verse that refers precisely to what is happening before our eyes: "The Bible has said so. It is written." So let me try to look at it another way.

First reflection: the totally unpredictable and dazzling nature of the pandemic. The bug did not announce itself. Perhaps it had been at work for a long time without our knowledge. But in a few weeks, some two billion people around the world, on all continents, are affected by this disease. Our prophetic calendar, which extends over several millennia, is taking a hit. Our list of prophecies already fulfilled is impressive. But, according to our system of Adventist interpretation, there are still a certain number of them pending, which may give the impression that it would take a relatively long time before they are fulfilled. COVID-19 urges us to be absolutely vigilant. No one knows how we will get out of the crisis. But in just a

few short weeks, the face of the world has been changed. It is a stark reminder to us: the Lord is coming like a thief, at a time when we do not expect him.

Second reflection: our interpretation of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation focuses on great political and religious systems. Babylon the Great, with its supposedly impregnable defences, is the first reference. Then comes the Roman Empire, which is a formidable war machine, an overwhelming power. The Papacy that succeeds it is the enemy present everywhere, insidious, evil. The United States of America is the fearsome lamb, the world's greatest army and economy. The greater it is, the more fearsome it is. Especially because on the other side, there is only the faithful remnant. It certainly has some divisions, but it is unarmed. Consequently, the final victory will be more extraordinary, showing that the Lord is alongside his people. Doesn't COVID-19 show



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# COVID-19 forces us to ask ourselves in new terms how we are present in and for the world.

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us that the most powerful is not necessarily the most impressive? Is there some reason to reconsider our list of hostile forces? Are the powerful of yesterday still the powerful of today? Doesn't COVID-19 force us to redraw the map of the final battle?

Since the time of the pioneers, we have laid out on the table the symbols of all the forces that we believe are involved in the final battle. Regularly, church generals meet to see how the battle is progressing. We have moved the pawns sometimes. The dreaded Turkey of yesterday is no longer part of the picture. Perhaps China, which wasn't there, deserves to be in the picture. There are those who want to add the Islamic hordes to this great map of forces. Perhaps the pandemic is telling us that a smaller agent is now far more threatening than the powerful ones. In short, COVID-19 could force a significant change in our interpretation of apocalyptic prophecies.

The third reflection is more existential. Doctors tell us that many of us are infected with the virus, but asymptotically, without visible signs. The little bug is inside us, not just outside of us. When that happens, we have developed beneficial antibodies. For those who have not encountered the virus, life goes on as before. But for all of us the question arises: how will we live after the crisis? Different options are possible.

The first is to protect ourselves even more from other people, who do not respect the safe distance, who spit in our faces. Jean Paul Sartre was right: "hell is other people." So let's flee, far from the cities, to the countryside and the mountains, to save our own skin. This tendency already exists in some parts of Adventism, in a religious form of nationalism and escapism. I certainly hope the current crisis does not give it any further justification.

The second option is to brave the risk, to meet, touch, talk, even up close. This is what Jesus did, and on several occasions: he cut the "cordon sanitaire" [safe zone] that Judaism had established to protect itself from non-Jews.

The third option is to protect oneself as much as possible, while remaining in contact with others. Gloves, masks, coveralls. The technology available to us today allows everything, without touching, from a distance.

In conclusion, COVID-19 forces us to ask ourselves in new terms how we are present in and for the world. There are no ready-made answers. We need to reflect in depth. And as in any war, the sooner the better.



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Napa Christian Campus of Education students gather via Zoom for class time. (Photo via the school's Facebook page)

# THE ADAPTIVE APPROACH:

## *The New Normal of Adventist Education*

BY HALLIE ANDERSON

COVID-19 has dramatically changed the world in a short amount of time. The places we work, play, eat, sleep, and learn have all been confined to one space lovingly referred to as home. One place has been especially rocked by this upheaval—the classroom.

Adventist schools everywhere in North America have closed temporarily, moving classes online. Teachers are instructing inside virtual classrooms. Students are home.

Figuring out how to run school this way is just the beginning of what is shaping up to be a logistical nightmare. Even when these final quarters and semesters of the 2019–2020 school year crawl to completion, the years to follow are uncertain. Enrollment will inevitably decline in private schools as parents face unexpected financial crisis. Faculty, staff, and management will lose their jobs as budgets and corners are cut to keep business running. Those who

remain will have larger workloads that could easily come with smaller paychecks. We are left with questions about what this means for Adventist schools facing uncharted territory. As we look to an uncertain future, many are wondering what this means for the Adventist education system.

The sustainability of Adventist schools was already in question before COVID-19 surfaced. Similar concerns about the future of Adventist education were presented to the North American Division when President Dan Jackson stated last fall at the NAD Year-end Meetings that 256 Adventist schools had closed in the last seven years. At the time, this information stood starkly against the many great selling points of why “Adventist Schools Work” listed on [adventisteducation.org](http://adventisteducation.org). Adventist schools come with an ideal student-teacher ratio, multifunctional classrooms with a family atmosphere, a spiritual focus, and an emphasis on community service. Furthermore, students excel academically in Adventist schools. According to CognitiveGenesis, a four-year (2006–2009) study on the academic abilities of students in Adventist schools and academies, “students in all grades, in Adventist schools of all sizes, outperformed the national average in all subjects.” There were 51,706 students who participated in the study, from more than 800 Adventist schools in the United States. Based on the findings, the Adventist school model is one that has the ability to produce leaders, overachievers, and deep thinkers. So why would there be an issue keeping them open?

I had a conversation with the NAD vice president of Education, Arne Nielsen, on the topic in early February, before COVID-19 had changed the discussion. None of us were talking short-term. Questions were about the next ten years of Adventist education, not the next ten weeks.

He was joined by his office staff, complete with Dr. Leisa Standish (Director of Elementary/Curriculum), Stephen Bralley (Director of Secondary Education/Accreditation), Evelyn Sullivan (Director of Early

Childhood/REACH), Martha Ban (Director of Technology and Support), and Desiree Bryant (Assistant Director, Project Manager). We began with numbers.

The conversation was first directed to Martha Ban, the expert on data. She explained how data for Adventist schools is gathered and tracked, saying that each school is assigned an organizational ID through [eAdventist.org](http://eAdventist.org). When a school opens, it receives an ID and is marked “active.” When a school is closed, it is marked “inactive.” But it is not necessarily that cut and dried. “For years we had elementary schools and academies on the same campus with two different principals,” she explained. “So as the administrative model changed to have one principal over both campuses, the organizational IDs would reflect that.” Essentially, one school being marked as “inactive” does not necessarily mean a loss of students or even a campus.

However, there is no denying that schools have closed their doors in a more literal sense in the last several years. Nielsen explained that many of these campuses were one-teacher elementary schools where enrollment had dissipated almost entirely. Other schools that have closed are boarding schools as parents are no longer as likely to send their kids away for high school.

“You can’t really discredit data,” Vice President Arne Nielsen stated.

So the data does show that we’ve closed a lot of schools. If that can be our starting point, we would like to suggest to you that Adventist education is in a place right now where we feel that we have turned a corner on school closings. We are actually starting to open schools. It is not unusual for us to open one to four schools every year.

While breaking down these numbers and understanding the data was clarifying, it is not lost on

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According to CognitiveGenesis, a four-year (2006–2009) study on the academic abilities of students in Adventist schools and academies, “students in all grades, in Adventist schools of all sizes, outperformed the national average in all subjects.”

He recounted the well-known fact that families in North America are having fewer children as a generation, meaning there are fewer students altogether.

anyone that the landscape of Adventist education—and Adventism as a whole—has changed.

“In the 70s and 80s, we were bursting at the seams in Adventist education. The population of Adventists was great at the time,” said Nielsen. He recounted the well-known fact that families in North America are having fewer children as a generation, meaning there are fewer students altogether.

In addition to population, Nielsen explored other factors contributing to the shift in numbers we see in our schools. Closing an Adventist hospital or moving a conference office will impact the Adventist population of a community as people relocate. The demographics of Adventism have changed, too, as we see more immigrant groups coming to the United States and becoming an integral part of the church. These groups are not always

financially able to send their children to private schools. “The change in demographic has had some impact,” Nielsen stated. Others still have opted to homeschool their children, numbers not reflected in the statistics that count how many children are in Adventist schools.

It is not all bad, and it is not all good. That is the general takeaway from the endless conversation there could be on the topic of enrollment. We know what Adventist education used to look like and we know it has changed. We know parents have a wide range of options and that many personal factors weigh into their decision-making when choosing a school. What we are left with is the question of what this means for the future of Adventist education.

“That story has yet to be written,” Stephen Bralley contributed. “It’s not that there aren’t concerns. There



Parents and kids decorated their cars to show how much they love their teachers and school while picking up their resources for distance schooling due to COVID-19. (Photo from Leisa Morton-Standish)



are. Adventist education is different than it was in the fifties, sixties, seventies, and it's well past time to begin to grapple with those changes in the church in general, not just in education," he continued. "I will say I don't believe it will look the same. It must change in some ways."

Dr. Leisa Standish, originally from Australia, agreed with Bralley. She explained that there are changes happening elsewhere and change is possible. "Our schools are thriving in the South Pacific, but they're 70%–95% non-Adventist," she shared. "They're serving a 'missional' purpose within the church." She is hopeful this will happen in North America, too, as there is a growing intentional effort of reaching the communities where schools reside.

This intentional reaching in and of itself is not a new concept in the Adventist church; it is actually quite foundational. Bralley explained the idea of "spheres of influence," the cornerstones of work the Adventist church does: healthcare, education, church. "We're looking at the original intent of our health message, and education, and church and using all three when we go into a community to reach the everyday perceived needs of that community and begin to create a relationship before we even get deep into theology," said Bralley.

The NAD Office of Education has been working to make these intentions a new reality. Nielsen shared that there is "behind the scenes" work being done to set foundational next steps. "We're hoping to roll that out in February of 2021 to all of our leaders and our educators across the division. We do have a big vision and we do have a foundation that's a work in progress right now," he stated. Upon hearing that, I said that it was good to hear that it does not seem that the church's commitment to Adventist education is being set aside. He agreed. "I would take it a step further. Our pastors at the seminary at Andrews are taking a course in Adventist education. It's a course they've never had before but has been in place now for the last couple of years." He continued to say that this supports the symbiotic relationship schools and churches need. "We're strengthening our partnerships. We're thankful for that."

Other intentional changes and focuses are in the works, too. With students either homeschooling or going to the many other school options available (both private and public), the product Adventist education is offering must be top-notch. "It's really on us to make sure we

## ZOOMING IN *and Branching Out*

In an effort to provide a close-up view of what forward-thinking leadership looks like inside an Adventist school, another conversation was also started in February with Principal Matthew Jakobsons and grades 7–12 Vice Principal Tonja Rasmusson of Sacramento Adventist Academy. SAA is a K-12 Adventist school, equipped with forty-eight full-time and part-time faculty and staff members who are teaching 334 K-12 students and twenty-eight preschoolers. SAA is nestled in Northern California with Adventist Health and the Northern California Conference SDA headquarters nearby. While they are in a fortunate market, their real strength lies in visionary leadership. Their goal is to offer quality, Christ-centered education that encourages collaboration and embraces trying new things.

SAA, like many Adventist K-12 schools, is not standing alone. In the Sacramento Valley, several Adventist schools share the region within reasonable proximity. They also share families, friends, church members, and even zip codes. Rather than competing, Jakobsons views this as an opportunity for partnership and a chance to capitalize on resources. He believes Adventist education can be "bigger than brick and mortar schools," and that in sharing communities, there is the opportunity to better link kids together, creating "hubs" with focused strong points. He said, "We can connect ourselves as believers in Jesus, ready to work together."

When students were no longer meeting in those brick and mortar buildings, the conversation changed but the objectives did not. Rather than feeling their dreams of bringing people together were no longer possible, Jakobsons and Rasmusson were only further inspired.

"We have to ask ourselves, 'Where's the silver lining?'" Jakobsons says. "Perspective is everything."

**Continued on page 26**

Continued from page 25

For SAA, the silver lining has been witnessing the school's ability to quickly adapt in these times. Their sights are set on how to get back in the classroom, equipped with the new tools they are mastering now.

"We can take these skills we are learning now back with us into the regular school years ahead," Rasmusson added. In action, that could look like a student from one Adventist school tuning in virtually for a class only offered at another Adventist school. Jakobsons and Rasmusson said they had "already started those conversations" well before March and are now even more excited about the possibilities. The opportunity would be especially useful for making AP classes more widely available. Jakobsons said that this "dive" into the COVID-19 digital era has only further "created talking points."

Adventist schools have partnered before when it comes to sports tournaments and band festivals, but the potential to connect kids within the classroom remains largely untapped. Jakobsons says they hope to inspire other schools to look to the future possibilities and to use their technical talents as an opportunity to "strengthen not just Adventist schools individually but as a collective system."

Similar discussions are happening higher up at the conference levels, too. Albert Miller is the Superintendent of Schools for the Northern California Conference, the conference that oversees SAA. Miller noted there are some positives of distance learning they hope schools take into the future. Right now, educators from all over the conference are invited to join an optional weekly meeting via Zoom to share their ideas and talk about what approaches and lessons have worked best in the new environment so far. In those dialogues, ideas have been thrown around about the possibility of virtual, conference-wide science fairs and spelling bees when distance learning subsides. As teachers and students master video conferencing and online meetings, they are creating future opportunities to connect with each other. The schools that will do it successfully will be the ones willing to keep stretching themselves.

have quality education," Nielsen said adamantly. That quality education is recognized through a comprehensive accreditation process and by offering excellence in curriculum that is competitive.

If that excellence is experienced early on, it is more likely to be worth staying for. To that end is another effort currently being put forth by the NAD—early childhood education. Nielsen called it "a new responsibility" that will grow Adventist education.

Evelyn Sullivan, a champion of early childhood education in the NAD, agreed with those sentiments. "The foundation years are very important and what we have done within the NAD is we have brought in our early childhood programs and we've started many pre-K classrooms." She explained that this "bridges a gap," connecting early years to primary and on to secondary. "It's a complete package."

The numbers show this to be a worthwhile effort after a study in Florida that, according to Nielsen, found 50% of students who were put in early childhood programs continued in Adventist education. He interpreted this as an indicator of the power and importance of the early childhood programs to the school system, providing something for parents very early on.

Nielsen concluded the conversation with a relevant quote from Ellen White's *Education*, page 296. White was writing about the purpose of an Adventist education as it directs students to a higher calling and a lasting relationship with Christ. It begins with "Something better" is the watchword of education, the law of all true living."

Something better. Nielsen builds on this concept. "Our focus right now as an Office and with our union directors is to search for something better in Adventist education. You're going to hear that theme as time goes on."

Time hardly had a chance to go on before COVID-19 became the biggest obstacle that needed addressing. Within one month of that February 11 conversation with the NAD Office of Education, the virus had turned the world upside-down. Quickly. The [adventisteducation.org](http://adventisteducation.org) website now displays a large pop-up alert that reads "Important Coronavirus COVID-19 Information and Recommendations." Click on it and it takes you to a "collection of resources and information for schools and



Napa Christian Campus staff pack Project Based Learning boxes and pray together before delivering boxes to students' homes.

communities to use in the ongoing response and efforts in preventing and slowing the spread of this serious disease.” Tabs include links to nationwide school closure maps, helpful instructions for teachers and pastors experiencing a digital learning curve, communication templates for schools to use for consistent and accurate wording, and AdventHealth’s extensive “Coronavirus Resource Hub.”

School is a computer-generated experience now as class is conducted via the Internet. Staff and students alike experience full days of phone calls, emails, and online classes and meetings using multimedia video communication services. Teachers have learned how to use Zoom, Google Classroom, Seesaw, and whatever else it takes to make school happen. Assignments are submitted digitally and assessments are administered virtually. In an unimaginable time, administrators from the top down have had to put on a brave face.

I had the opportunity to speak with the division’s education leaders again on April 9, and Dr. Leisa Standish spoke of how administrators, parents, and teachers are all handling this unexpected transition.

“Adventist Education is committed to continuing to

provide excellence in education whether it is in a brick and mortar building or distance education,” Standish states. “Our teachers have risen to this challenge and the response has been outstanding. In fact, we had some

Adventist schools that closed on Friday, March 13 and were delivering distance education to their students on Monday, March 16.”

Teachers across North America strive to keep the classroom a tangible, creative, and Christ-centered experience for their students. She expounds, saying they “have continued to engage their students in regular worships,

Bible study, prayer, chapel and one-on-one support.” Students continue to learn all materials they would normally find in their classrooms, including the recently launched Bible Encounter curriculum which has been a foundational part of their day. “The love and nurture our students get every day in school has been seen in so many ways by our school families.”

The North American Division Office of Education says they are impressed with their teachers and administrators who are continually “showing wisdom and

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It is not all bad, and it is not all good. That is the general takeaway from the endless conversation there could be on the topic of enrollment.

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courage as they meet this challenge head on,” an answer to their prayers. Standish shared two examples of how Adventist schools are trying to meet the challenges of distance learning with inventiveness.

Napa Christian Campus teachers in Napa, California, have been using “project-based learning to continue distance learning though the end of the school year.” Standish further explains, “Each student receives a box in the mail from the school with materials to complete their tasks. This is a real-life project that integrates all the subject areas and engages the children in the learning experiences.” While communication is largely virtual, learning is hands-on.

Forest Lake Academy students in Apopka, Florida, have paired their education with efforts to combat COVID-19 itself by partnering with Mass General Brigham Center for COVID Innovation to 3-D print N95 masks and protective face shields. The innovative masks are “designed by a team of biomedical engineers at the Medical University of South Carolina.” According to Standish, one Forest Lake Academy student put it best:

“We are using what we have learned in the innovation lab at FLA along with the talents God has provided to make a difference for the people who need it most.”

Administrators at the division level have been flooded with stories of how Adventist schools have come together to continue to provide education for their students. And while administrators are happy with results so far, they also acknowledge an opportunity to continue preparing educators for times such as this. Professional development and training are being scheduled for this summer, such as Burman University’s online course “Educational Change During Time of Crisis.”

All the resources these schools need to make distance learning successful are not cheap. Adequate technology must be made available to all students and their teachers. In a brief conversation with Albert Miller, Superintendent

of Schools for the Northern California Conference, it was stated that sixty-five students in the conference alone were initially without the devices they needed to connect with their teachers. Miller mentioned the conference recently received funding from the Pacific Union Conference to help in instances like this. This funding will make it possible to provide Chromebooks for students without a computer, laptop, or smartphone to access resources like Google Classroom and Zoom. This kind of financial support that conferences and unions can offer their schools can come from an unlikely source. For instance, the Gulf States

Conference qualified for government funding to help pay school employees. One school, Hoover Christian School in Alabama, received over \$60,000 thanks to the timely assistance.

Adventist schools carry onward, reliant on the investment of many. “We have funding partners that continue to support our schools in unprecedented ways,” NAD Vice President Arne Nielsen shares. “Versacare just provided \$1.4 million dollars in STEM equipment for our schools, two other foundations provided much-needed funds for small schools to purchase Chromebooks, and SFFC continues to provide scholarships for our students.”

Among those generous supporters counted are people who sponsor children attending Adventist schools, parents who sacrifice to make an Adventist education part of their child’s life, and members of the church who “faithfully pray and remember Adventist education in their personal giving.” He asks and answers,

Is it making a difference? Absolutely. Our schools are providing high-quality, distinctly Adventist education, we have dedicated teachers who nurture and support our students and bring them daily to the feet of Jesus, we have committed administrators who are continually strategically planning and making data-driven and spiritually-enriching decisions, and we have leadership who are looking to our Adventist



Napa Christian Campus student gets messy with another Project Based Learning box. (Photo from Leisa Morton-Standish)



heritage to follow our God-given charter while driving Adventist education strategically in curriculum, instruction and assessment.

While this past month of pivoting has been a tremendous achievement for Adventist schools, continued help from believers is critical. The weight of these unprecedented times is felt and shouldered by educators who miss their school families and students who need their classroom. The consequences of the COVID-19 era will ripple out to affect much more than just these final months of one school year, and help is needed if Adventist schools are to withstand it all.

“We also want our supporters to know that we continue to need their prayers, that our families need and appreciate their financial support, and that if they feel impressed to know what more they can do that they visit our [adventisteducation.org](http://adventisteducation.org) website and go to our project page to make a sustainable difference in the life of a child.” Nielsen continues, asking on behalf of the administrators and the students they serve:

We need dedicated Adventists to financially support our schools to meet and beat this COVID-19 crisis. Our early leaders in the Adventist church knew how important our institutions are. When our church was small, was poor, was relatively uneducated and was struggling to make ends meet—they went forward in faith to start schools, hospitals, colleges, and missionary outposts. We need to have that same faith to meet this crisis. If we follow God’s leading and meet it together, God has promised to bless us. He loves His children.

He concludes, “We implore our supporters that the time is now to pull together in faith and in financial support to continue our great tradition of Adventist Education.”

The future cannot be predicted but it can be affected. The plans and people put in place to guide Adventist education must be nimble yet firmly focused with goals and the means to achieve them. Whether leaders are striving to improve the next ten years, ten months, or even ten days of Adventist education, this much is clear:



Desmond Doss School student prays together with classmates using an iPad.  
(Photo from Leisa Morton-Standish)

an adaptive attitude and an honest acknowledgment of the need to create something better is the only way to reclaim an Adventist education system that thrives, not just survives.



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# THE GOSPEL OF *Yes!*

BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

**T**he time is here to say Yes. The viral hiatus affords opportunity to pull weeds, bake bread, and do our best to love those we're stuck at home with. Also, to reflect—and here the Yes attitude, as we might call it, is surely better than one that feels like No, where fears, resentments, and funks take over.

The other day a phone conversation steered me into the path of Yes. My friend said that more Adventists than we think are living above the negatives of church life—above the shortfalls, the outrages, the cynicism. They throw themselves into congregational life, driven by grace and hope and mission shared. He mentioned

a much-loved woman pastor in Maryland. She would have little interest, he said, in many of the controversies that consume people like him and me. It happens, too, that she is Brazilian, something we would not, given stereotypes about South American Adventism, really expect. Yet she is there, evidence *against* letting the negatives take over.

The time is here to say Yes. I cried the other morning—men like to say “teared up” but it was more than that—while I was sharing a passage from Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* with Becky, my wife. The protagonist in the book is an aging pastor with an ailing heart. His six-year-old son will never, as an adult, know him. So, he is writing a long letter he intends his son to read in later life. After describing a moment when the little boy delighted in showing his dad how to suck the sweet out of honeysuckle blossoms, the father writes that someday he will wonder, as adults do, what he’s really accomplished in life. You may think then, he says, that it was “no great thing to have been the good child of an old man in a shabby little town,” but you would be wrong. Then the old man declares, “You have been God’s grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle.”

That was the Yes attitude shining through. It made me tell Becky, “You’ve been God’s grace to me.” Then it made me think—this was a Sabbath day in the midst of the pandemic—of my own tiny Adventist congregation. Members here cannot boast of fancy degrees; most, it seems, rely on Doug Bachelor for useful information. But the head elder, who has spent time (during civil war) in a Liberian jail, calls to check on Becky and me. The head deacon has himself been in prison, but the addictions that led to this are behind him now and he is at once a productive citizen and generous parishioner. A few days ago, the congregation’s other elder—a woman but not, so far as I can tell, a proponent of women’s ordination—came by with her son, bearing

oranges, a couple of quarterlies, and a loaf of bread. All these people, in their several ways, are God’s grace to me.

During the hiatus I’ve checked in, through Zoom, with three Sabbath School classes that have blessed me in the past, one on each coast and one in Ohio. The faces and the voices recall good times—I have lived in all these places—and they still convey the sense of friendship and shared regard for deeper understanding. Most are more like me than the members of my current congregation. They tend, for one thing, to know church controversies from A to Z, and to feel weighed down by them. But they and the people I hold membership with today are alike in channeling God’s grace precisely—to me.

To be brothers and sisters who bless one another, we don’t have to be exactly the same. It may be humdrum to say this, but it may also be a provocation. Doubter or fundamentalist, African or Swede, capitalist or socialist, teacher or mechanic, male or female, gay, lesbian, or straight, anyone can be God’s grace to somebody. Anybody can bless anybody. Anybody can put anybody on the path to Yes.

It’s time—especially now when so much feels so negative—to say Yes. Fears, resentments, and funks are always, like sin, crouching at the door. I do know that fears are sometimes rational, but often they’re not; they’re just ignorance and bias piling on the way football players do before the whistle blows. Away with them!

Two more people who channel God’s grace to me just now are bull-session friends (one my roommate for two years) from student days at Walla Walla. After college, we took different paths—they are both physicians—and we lived in different places. We did not keep in close touch. A couple of years ago, however, we decided to read one book each quarter—together. We would take turn picking the books, read them at the

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More Adventists than we think are living above the negatives of church life—above the shortfalls, the outrages, the cynicism. They throw themselves into congregational life, driven by grace and hope and mission shared.

Doubter or fundamentalist, African or Swede, capitalist or socialist, teacher or mechanic, male or female, gay, lesbian, or straight, anyone can be God's grace to somebody.

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same time and then comment in back-and-forth emails.

The most recent choice was Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, surely one of the most compelling autobiographies of the twentieth century. Before Mandela became, at age seventy-five, the first president of post-apartheid South Africa, he had been an often fugitive or imprisoned activist in the cause of the African National Congress. As to leadership, he was, from the beginning, gifted—resilient against difficulty, demanding in self-assessment, and generous in the assessment of others, humble enough to change his mind. Besides apartheid itself, he had to deal with disagreement among his fellow Africans, some of them impatient with his commitment to “reconciliation.” As would befit a Christian, he sought to befriend people, not to dismiss or exclude them. “My idea,” he wrote, “was that our movement should be a great tent that included as many people as possible.”

Mandela embodied the Yes attitude. In the lifetime of even the oldest among us, how many human beings have accomplished more?

Communities do, of course, have boundaries, distinct qualities and purposes. Michigan Adventism's early leaders had it right when, at the organization of their conference in 1861, they made a covenant “to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.” That agreement (not a long statement of doctrine) would set the boundary that would make them a community. But just *that* covenant evokes the Yes attitude, the conviction that anybody can receive and share the grace of God. Ethnicity, biology, status? Not one of these—here I have in mind Galatians 3—can get in the way. Everyone can be a reason for gratitude and joy. Everyone can be a reason to say thank-you.

That covenant ought still to govern Adventist life. It is violated, certainly, whenever we slip into No, letting fears, resentments, and funks determine the individuals

or groups we're inclined to exclude or look down upon. True Adventism is all-peoples Adventism. It is *Christian*, distilled from the Gospel, shorn of bias and self-satisfaction, quick to say thank-you. Thank-you to God and to the humans who, no matter their color or kind, are gifts from God. We may forget this, or even resist it, but God never tires of nudging us back to ... Yes!



CHARLES SCRIVEN is the former board chair of Adventist Forum, the organization that publishes *Spectrum*.





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# *Imagination*

## IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

BY HANZ GUTIERREZ

*This article was originally published on the Spectrum website on April 9, 2020.*

It is Florence, Italy, 1348, when the Black Death was ravaging the city, as portrayed by Giovanni Boccaccio in his famous *Decameron*'s description of plague's effect on people and places. The Black Death was the most devastating pandemic recorded in human history, resulting

in the deaths of up to 90–120 million people globally (in Eurasia and North Africa), peaking in Europe from 1347 to 1351. Whole families died. Neighborhoods were empty. In Italy, the population of Florence was reduced from 110,000–120,000 inhabitants in 1338, down to 50,000 in 1351. The average mortality rate was around 30% in the total population, while the lethality rate was around 60%. In Europe and the Mediterranean alone, the Black Death

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Imagination can and should become an important part of any strategy to reconstruct our personal and common life after this destabilizing pandemic.

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killed up to 50 million people, sowing fear, despair, and great uncertainty. While chaos reigned in the streets of Florence, and every friendship or kinship was broken by the plague's fear, seven young gentlewomen invited three young men to gather in the church of Santa Maria Novella, not far away from the campus of our Adventist University of Villa Aurora today, to pray and try to find out some way to face the situation. The oldest of the group, Pampinea, suggested they leave the city and thus avoid the sad vision of deaths, risk of contagion, and the lack of authority which eventually had weakened all social and moral controls.

It seemed like a good idea to get out of a city filled with contagion. There was nothing to do but watch the bodies pile up and hear the news about who died. They did not have to travel far to escape the horrors of the city, and in about two miles they reached Fiesole, a lovely hill near

Florence, where they managed to stay. These ten young people spent the next two weeks (except for four days of religious observances) improvising, creating, imagining, and telling one story per day on a chosen theme. "Ten days" (in Greek: "Decameron") for telling a hundred stories which represent the corpus of Boccaccio's narrative. A completely unexpected, unconventional, and weird way of facing a pandemic. They faced it with the "strength of imagination."

The stories are largely grouped thematically: stories of happy and unhappy love, the tricks everyone plays on everyone else, and so on. You will find here the sources of several Shakespearian plays, or episodes within them, as well as Keats's "Isabella, or The Pot of Basil" and Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*. And, of course, Boccaccio himself had taken the plots from any number of pre-existing originals. This may be one of the reasons the stories are still popular. They are part of beginning the European humanist tradition. Scorn for the clergy is a recurrent theme, and indeed Martin Luther retold the second tale, in which a Jew, curious about Christianity, goes to Rome to see how the Pope and his entourage behave. One is amazed, after reading Boccaccio's account, that no one thought to have him horribly executed. In a roundabout way, the book was an inspiration for Protestantism.

Mario Vargas Llosa's applause and praise of the *Decameron*, in his book *The Tales of the Plague* ("Los cuentos de la peste"), is based on the capacity and vision Boccaccio had to relate. Love, desire, and the power of imagination are the key factors for social resilience and change. What is unsatisfactory and impractical in daily life can be savored without guilt or consequences in those stories that remain floating in the sphere of the imaginative. In Vargas Llosa's book the plague itself takes on a metaphorical character—something that Pushkin or Albert Camus, among others, had already done—because in addition to the appalling physical agony caused by the microbe, the pandemic was accompanied by moral devastation and an absolute ruin of civilized coexistence. The revelry of the survivors between corpses and the dying, the looting of abandoned properties, contempt for the plagued, ineffectiveness and collapse of public institutions, the end of humanitarianism and empathy with others, the mutual conjugal support broken, hatred between parents and children unleashed—in sum: *sheer brutality*. All this takes over the city: evils that

emerge every time coexistence sinks due to the breakdown of social order; collective convulsions, terror, generalized violence or wars; atrocities that are embodied in the symbol of the plague as an emblem of bestiality.

These ten young people in their countryside self-quarantine are saved from the destructive effect of the plague and its psycho-social effects, Mario Vargas Llosa emphasizes, because they channel their antisocial instincts through the fictions that they tell each other. If these impulses are diverted to an imaginary plane, satisfied in fantasy, they can have the ability to preserve ethical balance and social order of their community. This is the central lesson that Vargas Llosa conveys, since irrationality and dissatisfaction can be conjured up through fiction, as in the *Decameron*, before their devastating effects on real existence are unleashed. Narration, imagination, and literature have the capacity to produce a kind of existential catharsis that keeps the worst in us under control, and at the same time opens up the best in us for fostering social resilience and change.

Even though this COVID-19 pandemic has not reached the mortality and lethality rate of the Black Death of 1350, the situation is nevertheless dramatic. At this writing around 1.5 million people have been infected and 88,538 people have now died worldwide since the outbreak was first identified at the end of 2019, according to official statistics kept by Johns Hopkins University. Italy remains the worst affected country, with 17,669 deaths so far, followed by the US where the death toll is 14,798. Spain is third-worst affected, with 14,790 deaths. But New York City alone has registered 4,685 deaths. The United Kingdom last Wednesday recorded its highest daily death toll, at 938, bringing the number of total coronavirus-linked fatalities there to 7,097.

But the health issue is not the only problem we are now facing. The United States Labor Department stated

that US jobless claims rose to 6.65 million, up from 3.3 million the previous week. Elsewhere, the latest figures from Spain, which already had one of the euro-zone's highest unemployment rates, was similarly bleak. Spain has seen almost 900,000 jobs disappear since it imposed strict measures to fight coronavirus. It is the highest monthly rise in unemployment ever recorded in the country. The economic scenario for the near future has turned apocalyptic and the recession ghost has turned real. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair told BBC radio on Monday that he was "terrified" at the economic damage the lockdown was doing to the UK economy, estimated by the Centre for Economics and Business Research at £2.4 billion (\$2.9 billion) per day. Goldman Sachs said last Wednesday that Italy's GDP will fall 11.6% this year due to the coronavirus crisis: France's forecast is 7.4%, Germany's 8.9%, and Spain's 9.7%.

National states, public institutions, and civil communities are trying to work out the best political, social, economic, and healthcare strategies to face the situation. Will all this be both appropriate and sufficient? Certainly not. It may be appropriate but not sufficient. We also urgently need the power of imagination with the cultural attitude and human substratum it implies. Western societies, as highly rationalized groups, have become disenchanting societies and tend to leave no room for imagination in strategic decision making. At best, imagination is granted and tolerated in peripheral activities such as entertainment, sports, arts, or religion. But imagination can and should become an important part of any strategy to reconstruct our personal and common life after this destabilizing pandemic.

Consequently, we should welcome initiatives like that proposed by the Ministers of Culture and Arts of Italy (Dario Franceschini), Germany (Michelle Müntefering), and Spain (José Manuel Rodríguez Uribes), in a common

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While chaos reigned in the streets of Florence, and every friendship or kinship was broken by the plague's fear, seven young gentlewomen invited three young men to gather in the church of Santa Maria Novella to pray and try to find out some way to face the situation.

pronouncement this week, titled “Together we are Stronger than the Virus,” where they say:

The coronavirus emergency is a stress test for the European community. Whether we choose the path of selfishness or solidarity will also decide the future of Europe ... We are painfully aware of the fact that the pandemic, which is a challenge for us all, makes no distinctions of citizenship or nationality. The virus is everyone’s invisible enemy. If we need to shut down borders and minimize physical contact in order to stem its spread, this means that in Europe we must promote and strengthen social dialogue and cohesion with even greater determination. ... And the strength of our international arts and education policy can make a substantial contribution by helping us to come together in this time of need ... It is also becoming clear that culture can offer solutions ... The many creative ideas emerging in the heart of our societies and all over Europe, are encouraging, and show us how we can overcome this period. The values of our civil society lead us to develop digital spaces for the benefit of all, as we turn away from selfishness and embrace greater solidarity. ... What would become of us in a time like this, without books, films and music in which to find refuge and support? What would our societies be without those who created them? Without artists. We are therefore even more determined to protect our most precious asset: our faith in solidarity and the power of culture.

What about Adventism? Are we an imaginative church? Are we a collaborative church? Or, are we stuck in an iron-caged identity? Are our leaders visionaries for the world or merely faithful bureaucrats of a true but idolatrous and self-referential tradition? Are we able to imagine a different world, made up not only by Adventists, and then offered to others, but rather a world made up *together with* others while we wait the coming Savior? Is the message we are offering an enchanted message of mercy and reconciliation, or it has become an obsessive and paranoid end-time warning? Do we pretend to be at

the center of the world scenario or are we still able to put the world at the center of our hearts and care? All these timely questions remain open and maybe only a renewed imagination, stimulated by this unpredictable world crisis, will help us at least understand them properly. Must we continue to wait for visionary and courageous Adventist answers?



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Pastor Chad Stuart of the Spencerville Church in Maryland, Pastor John Brunt of the Edmonds Church in Washington, and Pastor Jennifer Scott of the St. Petersburg Church in Florida share how ministry has changed during the pandemic.

# Three Congregations

## CREATING COMMUNITY WHILE APART

BY ALITA BYRD

*This article was originally published on the Spectrum website on April 10, 2020.*

Three pastors talk about what their churches are doing during this difficult time, and how in some ways their community feels even closer, and even more people are “attending” church than usual. Pastor Chad Stuart of the Spencerville Church in Maryland, Pastor John Brunt of the Edmonds Church in Washington, and Pastor Jennifer Scott of the St. Petersburg Church in Florida share their technology struggles and how they think the pandemic will change us permanently.

**What do you see as the most important thing you**

**and your church should be doing during this time of the coronavirus pandemic, with social distancing, quarantine, isolation, sickness, worry, and even death?**

*Chad Stuart:* I believe the most important thing doesn't change, which is to make disciples. The way we go about it changes and I think maybe even improves! It improves in that we are, by nature of the situation, thinking first of people's needs and through those means witnessing for Jesus.

*John Brunt:* Our most important need is to stay together and keep up some kind of communication. Even though we have to be physically distant, we need to stay together spiritually and emotionally. This is especially



Pastor Chad Stuart preaches to a largely empty sanctuary. The only people in attendance were those participating in the worship service.

important given how much anxiety many are having. We want to come through this even closer as a community. If the church isn't serving in a time of crisis like this it doesn't deserve credibility.

*Jennifer Scott:* My thinking has been that the most important thing to do is to create togetherness while apart.

Our last Sabbath in church together was really memorable and special.

On March 10, I received a call from Shellamae and Mike who had been waiting for the right Sabbath. It was Tuesday. "Pastor, how about this Sabbath for our baptism?"

"Absolutely!"

Something in my heart told me to invite another couple, Eddie and Lilly, as they were ready too, even though it was now Friday. It had been a crazy week. Just that morning, my daughter, Camryn, got the last ticket to Tampa from Valencia, Spain to arrive home at 11 p.m. Sunday, ending her sophomore year abroad early.

"Pastor we are on our way, with our bathing suits!"

"Okay, I'll have the robes!"

It was now Sabbath morning, March 14. The church was sparsely attended and we sat spread apart. I got

word that our sister churches nearby had closed, and several calls wondering if we were open. Eddie and Lilly, Shellamae and Mike were all on their way. It felt like the Spirit was orchestrating our Sabbath morning service.

It was a perfect way to have our last "in-church" service together. And in hindsight, it feels even more special. The very next week, I was on Zoom, linked to our YouTube channel, live with my laptop. The pews empty.

**How has your congregation adapted to the new reality? What are you doing differently?**

*Chad Stuart:* They have adapted quite well. Everything feels different and I have to admit, different for the better. Many churches the size of Spencerville [over 1,200 active members] are busy being busy. We have a committee for everything and the idea is always to program ourselves into an answer. Now all the events, programs, committees are on pause and yet we are discovering that a larger percentage of the body is activated for ministry. Go figure—we program less and reduce the burden on people's schedules and they are freed up to do hands-on ministry in their neighborhoods and for fellow church members.

*John Brunt:* We are obviously not meeting. We are not

even having small meetings. We are also not a very tech-savvy church (which is surprising since we have a bunch of engineers who design airplanes at Boeing). We have never live-streamed our services, for instance. So, we are using simple stuff, primarily our church Facebook page. Here is what we are doing:

Every night, Monday through Friday at 7:30 p.m., I do a livestream on our Facebook page for about 15–20 minutes. I ask the congregation to email me prayer requests throughout the day. I read these, read a Scripture verse and pray, and share some ideas for staying together. Members have been great at giving suggestions. For example, one artistic member sent in designs for kids to download and color.

I do a livestream, one-person, Sabbath School lesson study from my house at 10:00 a.m. every Sabbath morning.

I do a livestream, one-person, worship service with prayer requests, prayer, a children’s story, and sermon from my house at 11:00 a.m. on Sabbath morning. (These are on our Facebook page and are archived there, but after the fact they are also archived on our website.)

Our music leader puts together a playlist of six praise songs (the same number we usually do in our worship service) from YouTube for people to watch and hopefully sing along with after the sermon. It stays on the page all week so people can come back to it.

At 7:00 p.m. on Friday and Saturday evenings our church administrator, a recent Walla Walla graduate with a wonderful voice, has a livestream hymn sing from her home. It is seen live and then archived on the Facebook page. She sings alone and invites watchers to sing along with her. They can also give real-time requests for hymns. It has been quite popular.

Every Sabbath afternoon the seven elders and I divide up the church list and phone all the members. We wish them Happy Sabbath, ask how they are doing, and if there is anything they need. People seem quite appreciative.

We are doing committee meetings with Zoom.

Last autumn we had small groups for ten weeks. We had about seven groups with a total of fifty people participating. We had planned to start again the third week of March. We didn’t, but we now have four group leaders who are willing to do small groups via Zoom. Our plan had been to use my new book (*Enjoying Your Bible*).

The first group will start this week, the others the next week. We’ll see how many participate.

*Jennifer Scott:* We are creating a prayer board for those we know personally who are front-liners and most vulnerable.

We are continuing our mid-week online studies with prayer and encouraging Bible verses and are, step by step, expanding them to include more classes and more people. Our Zoom breakout room kicked everyone out not once but twice because I was learning “on the spot” how to set the timer correctly, even though I had practiced. Everyone was very patient.

We’ve gathered our deacons to redefine our job descriptions while being a “stay at home” church.

### **What are you and your church doing during the divine worship hour on Sabbath morning?**

*Chad Stuart:* Spencerville is still streaming its services every Sabbath morning. We have been doing this for several years so that is not different. The differences are that we have shortened the service and it is much more produced. People are set in place, camera angles are set, etc. This makes it all roughly fifty minutes.

*John Brunt:* At first, we planned on having a small group at the church do a livestream with some music and about five participants. But then, since we are in the middle of one of the worst outbreaks (it is now beginning to subside a bit), we decided to be completely safe and just do the one-person children’s story and sermon from my home.

*Jennifer Scott:* The first Sabbath it was just me online for a sermon, figuring out technology—just my kids and me. Since then we’ve added a remote Zoom panel of members discussing Sabbath School, family moment videos, special music recordings, and Gulfcoast School updates.

Technology has been bumpy—much less than perfect. I tell myself it’s not about perfection but connection, even though last Sabbath I had an awful audio loop and the week before my videos were in slow motion while going live.

### **How many attendees/online watchers have you had?**

*Chad Stuart:* We have definitely increased in our live viewership, but where we are seeing the largest increase is in the viewership beyond the live service—our on-demand viewership. I don’t really know all the specific numbers,

but I think we are getting 1,000–2,000 views on Facebook and then another 600–1,500 on YouTube and then we are also on Hope Channel and It Is Written TV and I don't even have a guess at the increase (if there is one) on those platforms.

*John Brunt:* Our usual church attendance on Sabbath morning has been about 140. I have no idea how Facebook counts viewers, but according to their count, we have had about 250 views for the worship services and about 100 for the evening church family updates. One of Sophia's hymn sings had over 400 views. I know that a couple dozen different people comment during the livestream.

*Jennifer Scott:* Our membership is about 260. We average 100 in attendance. Our online viewing is humble in number, but growing, maybe tripled from before the coronavirus. We are seeing chats from young adults and snowbirds who visited us and are now viewing out of state.

**How has your church budget been affected during this crisis so far? What plans do you have to weather the storm financially?**

*Chad Stuart:* We are blessed with a generous church so we went into this crisis from a really strong financial position and in the first month we didn't see a major decline—in fact, our tithe might have even grown a little, and best of all our member-assistance fund has grown wonderfully as we've made special appeals in preparation to help our members that will experience job loss and income cuts.

*John Brunt:* So far, so good. We had a very good month of online giving in March. We hope it will keep up. We have a video from the North American Division on the Facebook page explaining online giving.

*Jennifer Scott:* Florida Conference anticipated a possible 30% reduction in giving for the month of March, but it is still being determined. We are still clarifying our own congregation's totals for March; I think our totals will match the predictions. I do know that our people were generous as two members created a drive-by Quarterly

pick-up, where members also gave donations.

**What things have your parishioners had to deal with so far?**

*Chad Stuart:* Thus far we haven't had any cases of COVID-19 in our church. We do have some members that have had to go to the hospital for various other reasons and it is hard because we are not able to be there for them in those challenges due to the hospital visitation restrictions.

*John Brunt:* We have had at least three lose their jobs so far. No major catastrophes, but families are getting a bit stir-crazy staying inside.

*Jennifer Scott:* The deacon team and I are calling all of our members, looking to see how everyone is really doing now as we are following "safer at home" guidelines, which are not as strict in Florida yet. Some members have lost their clients, especially those in hospitality industries. I think everyone stands in between holding on to normal and a healthy dose of fearful expectation of what might be.

**How have the subjects of your sermons changed in the last few weeks?**

*Chad Stuart:* I definitely reference COVID-19 in my sermons but I am not dwelling on it week in and week out. Our desire is to give people hope in this time and so we stuck to the sermon series we had planned which is a sermon series on the words of Jesus from the cross. Hope is the greatest need and Adventists love to talk about hope, so I believe we have a very relevant message for these times.

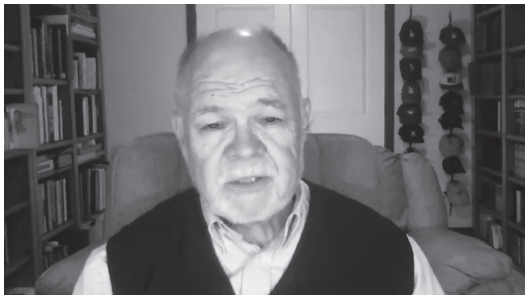
*John Brunt:* They haven't really changed, since I'm doing a series leading up to Easter, on the cross and resurrection in Mark, which lends itself well to the current crisis.

*Jennifer Scott:* The pandemic is framing my sermons. It's framing all of the sermons I hear. As it should—it is a living illustration that is making us adjust and think. My first sermon topic focused on the Blood of the Lamb, over

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Pastor John Brunt (far left) gives an "EAC Family Update" via Facebook on April 27. Pastor Jennifer Scott (left) preaches online via Zoom/YouTube on April 25.

the doors of our hearts, which is the Passover, for those who believe. Last Sabbath we took Communion together, remotely.

**How do you think this pandemic will change the way that church happens for you and your congregation in the long run?**

*Chad Stuart:* I'm seeing a congregation that is being much more intentional about engaging their fellow church members and the neighbors in their community. Every chance I get I am reminding all of us that we are to be physically distanced, but we must find ways to draw socially close to one another and those in our community in need—which is really all of us right now. My prayer is that we will come out of this season of isolation actually more connected. That seems like a contradiction, but I see it happening and the member outreach structure we have established with our elders and various other members was created with the idea that every member (active and inactive, in state and out of state) will be in contact with the church family throughout this process. That is more than we were doing entering into this trial.

I also believe we have the great opportunity to have better control of the calendar when this ends. We are discovering what we need and what we really don't. I also think this time of living in the digital world for ministry has pushed us to see the importance of having a much larger and more consistent footprint than we did previously. Whether we like it or not, a lot of folk are in the digital world and so we need to go and meet people where they are.

Finally, I hope this will help individuals to have a greater appreciation for the value of meeting face to face, week in and week out. Many members have said they didn't realize how much they would miss church. We often times don't value things until they are gone—maybe this time will recalibrate us on the importance of "not giving up the habit of meeting together."

*John Brunt:* The tech folks have already committed themselves to beginning regular livestreaming of our worship services once we are back in the sanctuary. I'm hoping that there may be a surge in attendance when we first start back because people have missed being together, but who knows? There are people forming new friendships as they commiserate with each other, and I'm sure that will continue.

*Jennifer Scott:* I think this whole experience will change things a lot going forward. Only by the Spirit will it be the things that really need to change.

I am enjoying my kids, not running to so many events, but missing the opportunity to hug everyone like I used to.

We are watching everyone get creative during this time, and being inspired by their ideas.

I am praying each day that we/I can grow closer to others, more honest with ourselves, and more connected with our Lord during this time that presses us. It seems that the Spirit of God always uses times like this for that purpose. With that said, we are also laughing about the toilet paper thing, while still making sure we have some. We are both worried and hopeful. We are concerned and positive. Together while apart.



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# RELIGIOUS LIBERTY



## 2020, PULSES OF GLOBAL CONVERSATIONS:

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### *Window to A Larger World*

BY GANOUNE DIOP

**T**he following speech was the Clinton Emmerson Annual Address on February 14, on the occasion of the Charles Elliott Weniger Society for Excellence Forty-Fifth Annual Awards Presentation. Four Seventh-day Adventists who have and are contributing to make a difference in their various areas of expertise and services have been honored. These awards commemorate a life of excellence, that of Charles Elliott Weniger, who distinguished himself as a person of a brilliant mind and a humane humble heart. The speech was offered before America woke up to a grim reality: the current COVID-19 pandemic. The coronavirus crisis reset all the buttons. On the one hand, the flow of human trafficking slowed down, air pollution in cities decreased, the emission of carbon dioxide significantly diminished and is bound to continue to diminish. There is less urban congestion. Most cities in the northern hemisphere are shut down. Travel ban is the new normal until further notice. On the other hand, over one million are currently infected. Thousands are dead in every corner of the globe. The whole of creation is subjected to groaning and suffering and dying. Prior to this upheaval, the challenges underlined in this reflection seemed to have been global priorities. Some will take a back seat, but some of the issues are perennial problems of human beings struggling to be human and humane. A global tour of the issues could still be helpful.

Looking at our world from the perspective of international affairs, 2020 is set to be an eventful year. The first few weeks have demonstrated the accuracy of such a statement. Our world presents multifaceted wounds in nearly every domain of human existence. At the outset, let me specify that the following speech is not an apocalyptic speculation regarding all that is wrong with our world, nor is it a cataclysmic series of predictions of

signs of the times and end-time events. Rather, I would like to submit to your consideration what the international community is focusing on, trying to find solutions to better the living of billions of people around the global home in which parts are more connected than generally assumed. What happens in Tokyo or Los Angeles is not without consequences for the species living in the Amazon. What happened in the Hubei province mobilized scientists from all over the globe.

## **I. Issues which Attract Public Conversations, Debates, and Polarized Opinions**

In the global political world, the United Nations is a significant hub to test the pulse of global conversations and priorities. In 2020, several UN agencies and activities put emphases on important global issues that seem to matter to the international community. Five of them will probably take center stage. A sixth one emerged in recent weeks with the outburst of the coronavirus. The latter seems to mobilize epidemiologists from around the globe. What has taken center stage as 2020 unfolds are the following:

### **A. Climate Change, Climate Crisis, and Climate Justice**

A major issue which will continue to draw global attention and mobilization is variously referred to as climate change, climate crisis, and climate justice. The connections of so-called greenhouse effect, global warming, desertification, rise of ocean level, and poverty

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Prior to this upheaval, the challenges underlined in this reflection seemed to have been global priorities. Some will take a back seat, but some of the issues are perennial problems of human beings struggling to be human and humane.



Dr. Ganoune Diop, director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church, presents the Clinton Emmerson Annual Weniger Address titled “Window on a Larger World.”

with its connections to migrations, have been established beyond reasonable doubt. This issue, however, will continue to stir passionate advocacy but also stubborn denial.

In spite of the lack of consensus at the recent twenty-fifth meeting of the UN climate talks in Madrid, the COP 25, ecosystem restoration has nevertheless become a global priority.

The UN decade on ecosystem restoration will be launched in 2021. It has become a global priority.

The need for urgent climate action seems to mobilize various sectors of civil society, from thousands of scientists to hundreds of thousands of youth activists.

## **B. Gender Equity and Equality**

On another issue, 2020 is considered a pivotal year for the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls everywhere. The issue of gender equity and equality will continue to mobilize the human rights’ agenda.<sup>1</sup> According to UN Women, the epoch-defining resolutions of the Beijing + 25, arguably the most comprehensive blueprint for advancing women’s rights, will be revisited to assess progress and challenges.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of

1995 has been recognized as the most ambitious road map for the empowerment of women and girls everywhere. In 2020, it will be twenty-five years since the Beijing Platform for Action set strategic objectives and actions for the achievement of gender equality in twelve critical areas of concern.

1. Women and poverty
2. Education and training of women
3. Women and health
4. Violence against women
5. Women and armed conflict
6. Women and the economy
7. Women in power and decision-making
8. Institutional mechanisms
9. Human rights of women
10. Women and the media
11. Women and the environment
12. The girl child

Then came the MDG, especially Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women.

The consensus and adoption of the text “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals,” including seventeen universal sustainable goals, were hailed as an event that



made history.<sup>2</sup> This was nothing short of a miracle, if I may say, because of almost unsurmountable hurdles to overcome. In 2015, the SDG's were born.

Though all SDGs are interconnected, of particular interest for this workshop and for the following symposium planned for a later date in 2021, are SDG 5 and 10. Respectively,

- Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- Reduce inequality within and among countries.

There are of course targets attached to each sustainable development goal. This is very well known.<sup>3</sup>

The year 2020 is considered a pivotal year for the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls everywhere. The issue of gender equity and equality will continue to mobilize the human-rights agenda.<sup>4</sup>

The global challenge of the realization of gender equality and women's rights will continue to generate deep debates and divisions as to the scope of these rights, including among religious traditions. Nevertheless, this topic has been sealed as a priority and as an incontrovertible part of not only the previous millennium's development goals, but also the current agreed sustainable development goals: goals 5 and 10 in particular.

### C. Elections and the Question of Democracy vs. Populism

At national levels, the elections in the US promise to impact several interrelated issues, not only regarding domestic and national internal affairs but also pertaining to foreign policies, international affairs, and the intersections of public policy and morality.

### D. Global Persecution of Christians

A gloomy reality has drawn more attention: the rise of persecution of Christians. This global phenomenon most definitely will continue to be part of conversations and plans of action. It has also been instrumentalized

and politicized to the extent that some governments have seized the opportunity to champion the cause of persecutions of Christians in the Middle East for example, to advance their own political agenda.

### E. Religious Liberty and Civil Rights

During the current pandemic, government prohibitions on gathering in churches have triggered complaints that the government has no right to restrict people's freedom of religion, especially freedom of assembly. This is misinformed. Suffice it to say that there are two aspects inherent to freedom of religion or belief according to international law: the *forum internum*

and the *forum externum*. The *forum internum* should never be violated.

It is a person's right to form, to hold, and to change beliefs and convictions. This should have absolute protection. However, the *forum externum*, a person's right to manifest or to outwardly display one's religion or belief can be

legally subjected to limitations. This aspect of religious freedom is not absolute.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Article 18 (3), specifies: "Restrictions on the freedom to manifest religion or belief only if limitations are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others." [ICCPR Art. 18 (3)]. In the current pandemic therefore, it is a matter of public health and safety to limit freedom of assembly.

Prior to the current pandemic, a surprising turn has occurred in the domain of religious liberty. In the current global context, the framing of rights is at times done in competition with one another. The misunderstanding of religious freedom, also called freedom of religion or belief, is part of the global landscape. Consequently, religious freedom is unfortunately positioned against other civil rights. Because of the accusation that religious freedom has become a tool for discrimination it has become urgent to revisit the very nature of freedom of religion or belief and contribute to helping the global community recapture the centrality of this fundamental freedom. The Seventh-day Adventist church can play a pivotal role as it has

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consistently done since its beginnings and its charting of the first international religious liberty association in 1893.

What is the meaning, significance, and scope of religious freedom, also called by the international community “freedom of religion or belief”? What is appealing about this particular good that people dedicate their lives to promote it? Despite the fact that more than five billion people do not enjoy this freedom, and despite the fact that its universality is challenged in academic circles, its importance cannot be underestimated.

Religious liberty or “freedom of religion or belief” is part of the repertoire of the international community, used in legal, political, cultural, existential, and international relations contexts. It is positioned as Article 18 of the international human rights barometer, “the universal declaration of human rights.”

Along with civil rights, religious freedom is recognized as a constitutional provision designed to secure the prerogative of every citizen. In the United States, to underline its primacy among fundamental freedoms, many experts call it the first freedom. In fact, it undergirds all other freedoms. It presupposes freedom of thought, of conscience, and of choice. It is key to self-determination. Religious freedom translates into freedom of association, of assembly and worship.

But there is more to religious freedom than meets the eye. From a faith-based perspective, religious freedom is a sign, a symbol, and even a seal of a covenant or a possible social contract to signify how human beings should relate to one another—that is, with respect, deference, and even reverence before the mystery of life. It is a sign according to which we should relate to any other human being with care, caution, without fear, and most certainly without violence.

Religious liberty is freedom from being harmed, hurt, humiliated, discriminated against, or criminalized and subjugated to any form of violence. This freedom from violence should help us reimagine what life would be if it

were fully embraced. The outcome would be peace and security. But there is still more to freedom of religion. It is more than a rediscovery during the Renaissance or an insight from the Enlightenment era.

Religious freedom is not just a right, a legal or legislative provision to promote and protect. There is something about religious freedom which transcends the realm of legislative provisions. It is not just something to be voted by lawmakers. It goes beyond that. Its roots are deeper than social arrangements.

From a faith-based perspective, religious freedom is primarily a divine attribute. And since, from this perspective, humans are created in the image of God, humans reflect divine attributes (a theologian would specify communicable attributes). Religious freedom is part of the image of God the Creator. This divine attribute is therefore reflected in humans.

It is, moreover, the root and tangible expression of human dignity. Human conscience, the locus of moral decision, corroborates this dignity. To deprive humans of religious freedom is to dismiss their conscience and trample on their dignity. Everyone ought to be respected on the basis of human conscience, the inner sanctuary in every person.

Freedom of belief or conscience, and of conviction, is therefore primordially an intrinsic attribute of every human being. It is connected to what it means to be human. In other words, it is a sign of our humanity.

Nelson Mandela eloquently stated, “To deny any person their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.” So, to deny any person or any institution their religious freedom is to deny their humanity or institutional existence.

## **II. The Synergy behind the Mobilization to Solve World Problems**

The mobilization of nations to create international organizations to build bridges, and not continue to wage

wars, was a significant incentive and driver for Christian churches, for example, to begin talking to one another, to stop irrational animosity and wars, and to open the possibility to partner to do good for society.

A brief reminder of key religious and geopolitical events and conflicts may be helpful to understand where we are today globally on our human collective experience.

The Thirty Years' War, fought in Europe between 1618 and 1648, brought a staggering number of eight million deaths. It resulted in the Treaty of Westphalia, an event seen as the beginning of the European nation states as we know them. The principle of *cuius regio eius religio* ["whose realm, his religion"] was a good step forward, though it was not the ideal arrangement for religious freedom.

Identifying major world treaties can be a good entry point to understand the geo-political and global religious issues.

The First World War resulted in sixteen million deaths. Nations were faced with a choice: continuing to wage wars and self-destruction of the human family or build bridges for peaceful coexistence. The Treaty of Versailles marked a new era in international relations. The creation of the League of Nations to mediate, arbitrate, and solve problems before they escalate into open conflicts and wars was a major step forward towards peaceful coexistence.

Peace did not last long. World War II came with its staggering number of sixty million deaths; after which the UN was created and the UDHR (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights) was ratified on December 10, 1948.

The root cause undergirding the various international problems is the issue of violence: People in our world are addicted to violence.

Even the quest for power and prestige, privilege and position above others can be motivated by the almost irresistible drive to dominate, to subjugate, and therefore to harm. That has become the dark side of human nature. To violate other people's integrity, whether physical, mental, emotional, social, or spiritual is to injure their God-given dignity.

Historically, our world has been the theatre of incalculable violence, not just political, such as the *munera* during the Roman empire, but also religious. Mass violence as in genocides, but also personal, domestic, verbal, and non-spoken violence, mute coercion meant to create fear and pressure. It is a form of oppression.

At personal and collective levels, religious people are often tempted to use verbal violence in the name of prophecy. We knew from the Apostle Paul that prophecy without love is nothing. Prophecy is at time weaponized, used to cover violence. The message of the Prince of peace has been turned into violence, hate speech, discrimination, and criminalization of others.

Taking metaphors of beasts as real metonymy, to refer to others as part of a web of evil, assimilating those who believe differently with threats is beyond decency. To believe in the conspiracy theories of the resurgence of inquisitions, persecutions, and demonization of Roman Catholics, presuming that they have already received the mark of the beast, is mistaken. According to Ellen White, "the mark of the beast" will be affixed during the last act



Photo Credit: Erno Müller

This year's recipients for the Charles Weniger Award included (from left to right) Ganoune Diop, director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church; Reinder Bruinsma, retired pastor, educator, author, and church administrator; Andrea Luxton, president of Andrews University; and Richard Hart, president of Loma Linda University.

of the drama of the great controversy, when a Sunday Law will be imposed or forced upon all the inhabitants of the world. Bringing the future into the present, as relates to people as enemies, cancels the relevance of the gospel.

A mission to help people fall in love with Jesus can be turned into a proof that the Adventist message is irrelevant for educated people, learned ones, and higher classes in society.

The name Seventh-day Adventist has two components and two possible pitfalls when its essence is forgotten. The seventh day is an expression of the good news; before being a commandment it was a gift of God, who modeled what God expected from those created in His image. The Sabbath was offered for the purpose of celebrating creation of God's image and the gift of life and fellowship in love. It can be turned and confined into a test, confusing a God who is love with earthly monarchs jealous and nervous about losing their prerogatives and privileges.

Likewise, the word Adventist is part of the good news. It is called the Blessed Hope. It is the announcement of the healing of all the wounds of human existence. There will be no more sorrow, sickness, suffering, death, conflicts, hurt, harm, pain. Peace and harmony will finally become universal realities. This can also be turned into a morbid focus on end-time disasters, signs of the times, persecutions, suffering, and natural catastrophes. These are not the everlasting good news. They are not the liberation of creation which suffers. They are not the healing of our world.

At Jesus' Second Coming, there will be universal reconciliation, no more climate crises, no longer gender inequity, inequality, and injustice, no more tribalism, ethnocentrism, or racism. No more populist propaganda based on fake news, no more persecution of Christians or

of any minority or majority, no more trampling of any person's dignity or freedom, or freedom to believe.

To commit to covenants according to the dictates of one's conscience will become universal again in a new world where there will be no more violence—only peace and fellowship in love.

## Afterword

The current pandemic has most certainly taken center stage. The responses and collaborations of the international community are remarkable. People of other denominations and of other faiths and philosophies are mobilized in amazing fashion. This is also happening in a larger world in which God stirs the minds, hearts, and hands of humans who selflessly dedicate their best in solidarity to other human beings by virtue of their humanity.

For those interested in consulting a repository of resources regarding faith-based responses to COVID-19 you may look at the following link:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1\\_sOJqwSM8XPI0nr1BITVFFkKtu9ykPeLS9NkcDLoyZc/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_sOJqwSM8XPI0nr1BITVFFkKtu9ykPeLS9NkcDLoyZc/edit?usp=sharing).

## Endnotes

1. On the website of UN Women, we read the following: "The twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995). A five-year milestone will be reached towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. 2020 is therefore a pivotal year for the accelerated realization of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, everywhere."

2. "In September 2015 the United Nations made history. After months of negotiations, all 193 member states formally adopted 'Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,' including seventeen universal sustainable development goals (SDGs). ... Yet three years earlier, no one thought

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From a faith-based perspective, religious freedom is a sign, a symbol, and even a seal of a covenant or a possible social contract to signify how human beings should relate to one another—that is, with respect, deference, and even reverence before the mystery of life.





The annual vesper program at Loma Linda University connects past Charles Weinger Award recipients and supporters of the society to encourage the pursuit of excellence in all Adventist church members.

that a set of universal sustainable development goals could be negotiated using a broad-based, consultative process that involved not only UN member states but also representatives from civil society; the private sector; UN agencies, programs, and funds; and other nonstate actors. At a point in history when many were questioning the future of UN multilateralism—multiple countries working together on a given issue—and member states were increasingly failing to reach consensus on key decisions, the outcome of these negotiations was not only considered to be a major accomplishment but also gave both the United Nations and multilateralism a new lease on life.”

3. 5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.

5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.

5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.

5.5 Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.

5.a Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance to national laws.

5.b Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communication technology, to promote the empowerment of women.

5.c Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

4. See Note 1.



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# THE CHURCH-STATE ISSUE

## *in the Paycheck Protection Program*

BY RICH HANNON

**O**n March 27, 2020 the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act was signed into American law.<sup>1</sup> It is a 2.2 trillion dollar stimulus package intended to blunt the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing has necessitated massive business closures, with a resultant tsunami of layoffs. One provision of the CARES Act is the Paycheck Protection Provision (PPP). A significant, and somewhat controversial, allow-

ance in this provision is that faith-based organizations can apply for loans that would then be used to forestall layoffs within their enterprise, under the same terms given to secular businesses.<sup>2</sup> This has raised concerns about whether such an inclusion violates the Establishment Clause of the US Constitution, the relevant text in that clause being: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”<sup>3</sup>

Concerns flow in both directions: that is, government

giving money to religious organizations, and religions taking money from government.<sup>4</sup> In the “giving” direction the fear is that government would be the initiator of a creeping and inappropriate bridging of the Establishment Clause. In the “taking” direction, the typical Adventist reactions I’ve seen, in article comments and on social media, is that this would violate the longstanding Seventh-day Adventist position on separation of church and state.

On April 10, *Spectrum* republished an article from the North American Division, which states that the NAD is counseling American Adventist administrative entities to *refrain* from applying for these monies. The relevant section states:

Great care has been taken by the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s administrative, legal, and human resource functions to evaluate these available programs. The need to balance ... was carefully considered.

North American Division leadership, in consultation with the leaders of its nine union conferences, has recommended that church entities abstain from participation in portions of these programs providing direct financial assistance to the church. They are asking church leaders across the division to prayerfully consider both biblical prophecy and principles as well as the church’s long-standing warnings on the intermingling of church and state prior to obtaining government assistance.<sup>5</sup>

The article links to the official guidance statement. Relevant sections from that document are:

[T]here have been questions regarding how receiving this money fits into the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s longstanding and historic

commitment to the separation of church and state. ... While the risk associated with this money is uncertain, NAD leadership’s primary concern is remaining faithful to the counsel we’ve been given regarding church-state relations.

We acknowledge that the April 3, 2020 guidance regarding this issue stated that at that time Office of General Counsel saw no “strings” that would be objectionable to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. ... however that is not the primary motivating factor of this more specific guidance. ... in light of the teachings of Revelation 13, NAD leadership believes that regardless of the legal implications of these programs not participating is most consistent with our long-standing beliefs and practices.<sup>6</sup>

Several things are evident to me from this verbiage. First, legal counsel saw no “strings” that would be objectionable. Yet, “in light of the teachings of Revelation 13,” NAD leadership recommends non-participation. But, however much we are assured that “great care” was taken—and I don’t question the sincerity of those words—I do question whether this decision has been adequately thought through. The documents make clear that the core concern is theological, not pragmatic, but there is no explanatory verbiage detailing just *how* the PPP provision is theologically wrong; even though legal counsel sees no entanglement. Now, such vagueness would be of little consequence if the ramifications of some wrong decision were minimal, but the risk here involves potentially laying off a large number of church employees. If that risk proves to be real, then it seems to me that the NAD needs to have a strong, defensible case for their position, adequate to justify the consequences—serious harm to many faithful Adventist employees.

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“North American Division leadership, in consultation with the leaders of its nine union conferences, has recommended that church entities abstain from participation in portions of these programs providing direct financial assistance to the church.”

Now, my guess is that a significant majority of readers, at this point, would be in disagreement with my questioning. I think the Adventist subculture is thoroughly infused with the idea that *we just don't take government money!* Full stop. And the reasons are presumed to be obvious—notably the risk of entanglement, whereby acceptance of money forces the church into compromise and dependency. And *that* type of risk is certainly important and should be avoided. But is this what's happening in the PPP case?

There are a number of interconnected issues that, I think, deserve detailed examination. And it's difficult to lay the argument out linearly. Key questions are:

- How do Adventists typically consider the church-state question? Is it always valid?
- What is the cost to the church if PPP money is not pursued?
- What is the government trying to accomplish with the PPP program? Is there a classic church-state risk?
- Is the NAD recommendation actually an adequately grounded *theological* position, or is it essentially pragmatic?

### Categorical Thinking

The generic Adventist aversion to the state being involved with the church, in any capacity, is an example of categorical thinking. A categorical position admits no exception, and this is how I'm seeing it played out in this context. Here are some categorical-sounding comments I've seen on the internet relating to PPP:

- “This is a direct violation of the First Amendment separation of church and state.”
- “Hands across the gulf!”
- “I'd be worried about Marshal [*sic*] Law coming if the government is paying pastors salaries.”
- “The further religion and government stay apart,

the more comfortable I am.”

But there are two things here that are very important to note.

1. A categorical position is extremely hard to defend. All it takes is one exception to defeat the position. The classic example is the maxim: “All swans are white.” At one time the civilized world had not encountered any black swans, until one was seen in 1697, in Australia. This surprise occurrence is part of the historical context where the term “black swan event” has come to mean an unusual and surprising exception. The point is, we theoretically ought to be tentative in making categorical assertions because we don't know everything, and thus cannot always have adequate confidence that a current situation might not be an exception to an otherwise appropriate general rule.

2. People, somewhat subconsciously, develop categorical working rules to help them navigate life. In the bestselling book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, author Daniel Kahneman uses the term *heuristic* to describe a simple procedure, or rule-of-thumb, that helps find adequate, though often imperfect, answers to complex situations. And humans need such heuristics, a “thinking fast” approach, for making quick decisions that usually work. We cannot possibly deliberate at length—“thinking slow”—about everything that requires judgment. The problem occurs when our heuristic, which usually serves us well, fails due to an exceptional situation where “thinking slow” would be the right move.

Now, in pointing these two things out, I am not suggesting that *this* situation *is* an exception to the general rule that church-state mingling is dangerous. Just that it might be. And, depending on how severe the consequences of ignoring that possibility are, it might be proportionately appropriate to step back and not simplistically assume “all swans are white.” So, let's consider possible consequences

The documents make clear that the core concern is theological, not pragmatic, but there is no explanatory verbiage detailing just *how* the PPP provision is theologically wrong ... such vagueness would be of little consequence if the ramifications of some wrong decision were minimal, but the risk here involves potentially laying off a large number of church employees.



in the current economic repercussions to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### The Cost/Benefit Calculation

The necessity of social distancing has precipitated what will likely be a massive, worldwide recession. JP Morgan estimates the US economy could shrink by 4% this quarter and 15% for the year—a figure that rivals the 1930’s Great Depression.<sup>7</sup> The St. Louis Fed has estimated that US unemployment could reach 32%, which translates to 47 million workers rendered jobless by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>8</sup> These are *massive* numbers and projections. And it seems unlikely there will be a quick bounce-back, the so-called “V-shaped Curve.”<sup>9</sup> Some job losses are already permanent as their employers were at risk before the pandemic hit. Others will quickly reach the insolvency tipping point and their laid-off workers then would have no chance of being re-hired. This is exactly the concern of PPP, and why speed in delivering relief is crucial.

Now, church closures have compromised revenue to the conferences, which is needed to pay salaries. And a number of conferences are already struggling with inadequate working capital. But it is the increasing, massive unemployment that will provide the major, unrelenting blow to the Adventist Church. Many church members have already been laid off. But recessions and depressions are all about collapse of demand. And the demand projections look bleak. The virus is not going to magically disappear soon, and people will be unlikely to resume normal spending when they still risk infection. This first wave of unemployment, plus changed spending habits, is depressing demand and breaking more businesses, which will necessitate additional layoffs and depress demand further. It is a vicious circle. Church revenues should decline in direct proportion to the increasing layoffs and, as tithes and offerings fall through the floor, the church will also face layoffs, just like any “business” that needs revenue from “customers” that have income to spend. Now, there might be some mitigation of this bleak scenario because many members consider the tithe to be a sacred obligation. But, if you live paycheck-to-paycheck and lose your income, you have nothing to tithe from. All this means the church is going to be faced with the unavoidable necessity of major reductions in force. Thus, many pastors, teachers, administrators, secretaries,

etc. will fall victim to the economic consequences of the pandemic. Because there is somewhat of a lag between member unemployment and giving, the peak problem has not yet hit the church. But by summer it will be severe and economic rebound very unlikely in the near term. Thus, there is a *big* price to pay for passing up the PPP money: avoidable layoffs within the institutional church. Consequently, deciding that declining government money is the proper choice ought not to be considered casually! But categorical “thinking fast” is exactly what the average Adventist is likely to do. If church administrators don’t do better, they risk great harm to their employees. Thus, the NAD position should be vetted with the utmost thoroughness.

### A Category Mistake?

It is important to understand the intent of the PPP provision, as I think the sort of casual reactions I quoted above are likely short on literacy. The CARES Act in general is an attempt to massively infuse liquidity into the economy to hold back the sort of rolling demand collapse I’ve just sketched out. And the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) is the government—the only place where cash can be created “de novo”—stepping in to provide employers enough liquidity to forestall the otherwise inevitable layoffs. It starts as a loan, but that loan is forgiven if the employees, who would be paid from these funds, do not get laid off. In essence, it is an attempt to “freeze” current demand conditions in the economy by protecting jobs so, when the virus wanes and business and government try to ramp the economy back up, the wreckage will not be as severe as if no intervention had occurred. And the reason church entities have been included is that this Act is treating jobs *agnostically*. That is, there is no differentiation considered. From an economic perspective, a job saved is a job saved—regardless of what the job does. The intent is to provide uniform access to the money, so the post-COVID economy is not skewed by job category. Looked at this way, if churches were not allowed to apply, the government—far from being engaged in *establishing* religion—would, in fact, be *dis-establishing* religion. Any stipulations on who can apply amounts to social engineering. Setting the religious question aside for a moment, the government could, for example, have stipulated that brothels, abortion clinics, or casinos be

## It is the increasing, massive unemployment that will provide the major, unrelenting blow to the Adventist Church.

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disallowed access. Then those sectors of the economy would disproportionately be at risk of failure. The great irony here, from a religious liberty perspective, is that PPP is an attempt to be *religiously neutral*.

A better way to look at PPP has been suggested by economist Paul Krugman who, in a recent *New York Times* op-ed, compares the CARES government intervention to *disaster relief*.<sup>10</sup> The artificial, but absolutely necessary economy shutdown is in response to a physical disaster that, analogous to a hurricane, threatens to “flatten” the landscape. But it is not physical buildings being destroyed, it’s jobs. Interestingly, the government has in the past provided disaster relief, during Hurricane Harvey, where FEMA made funds available to churches as well as secular businesses.<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, there was concern raised about church-state boundary crossing in that instance, and one can make a “slippery slope” argument, especially as the Trump administration has actively courted evangelical Christianity. But the rationale for FEMA’s opening their “wallet” to religious institutions was to allow the community to rebuild, as before, without *disadvantaging* religion. Had FEMA not been egalitarian in that situation it could be viewed as “prohibiting the free exercise” of religion, in *violation* of the Establishment Clause.

I recognize that framing the PPP this way involves a big paradigm shift, and the mental adjustment from the standard suspicion of government offering cash to religion is likely to be a “bridge too far” for some people’s worldview. But I’m suggesting that we should consider the possibility that this situation is *really different* from the normal, categorical church-state aversion argument, and to frame it in the standard way is actually a category mistake.<sup>12</sup>

### Principle or Pragmatics

An allusion to Revelation 13 is, so far, the only stated religious rationale provided by the NAD for their recommendation. It is not controversial, I think, to say that if a strong *religious* case for declining aid in this situation can be made, then the NAD recommendation is

well-grounded. But I do not think this can be adequately done. And the cost of getting it wrong is heavy.

Consider this alternate-reality thought experiment. Suppose the NAD had been given a Urim-Thummim device by God, with instructions that it could be used one time only, and it would then vanish such that only those insiders employing it would ever know it existed. So, the NAD, in consultation with the unions, decides to use it to answer this PPP question. They essentially ask God: Is it okay to apply for the money—yes or no? Now, let’s say the device responds—*no*. This then is an infallible answer to justify declining the money. And we don’t really even have to know the reason. God is God and we’re not. A few people might ask for some rationale, but mostly it would be accepted as consistent with Adventist tradition. But what if the device said—*yes*? Now any supposed theological basis for declining disappears. God is okay with it and any remaining issues are purely *pragmatic*. But, in this case, a major problem still does exist. Accepting money would mean the church was making a significant exception to the norm, and a detailed explanation would be needed to assuage a skeptical Seventh-day Adventist public. Even then there would be severe criticism. So, leaders would face difficulty in “selling” this to Adventism. This impediment would exist even if leadership infallibly knew God did not object to seeking aid.

Now of course, no such device exists. The leaders can only *think* they are acting out of moral-religious reasons, and not pragmatic ones. Consequently, they need to provide, at least in their own minds, strong theological justification. Failing that, whether they wish to frame it this way or not, the decision is mostly pragmatic and involves reticence to subject themselves to inevitable criticism.

### Summary and Conclusion

This has been a long article—longer than I would like. But the argument I’ve laid out is complex, and even considering the possibility that the COVID-driven economic crisis is “black swan-ish,” is hard to understand. We are all conditioned to apply the standard church-state

heuristic. So, at the risk of some redundancy, let me here summarize the argument:

The NAD has recommended that church administrative units in the US not apply for funds available under the PPP provision. As quoted above, this is portrayed as a theological stance, alluding to Revelation 13, and certainly is consistent with Adventism's historic religious liberty position. But no real case has yet been made available, in the NAD's public statements, to support this stance. And if a clear "connect the dots" argument cannot be made to buttress their recommendation, then it suggests the decision was in the main more pragmatic than principle driven. Adventists have always opposed government money, to avoid compromise. And, if the consequences of getting this recommendation wrong were minimal, then why not stick with the default position?

But the consequences, so say I (and I have tried to demonstrate), will be severe. I believe many church employees will be laid off. Yet there is a lag between the present near-term waves of unemployment and consequences to the church when a dramatically lowered giving capacity translates into gaping holes in revenue. Come this summer I would predict a cash-flow crisis severe enough to precipitate these layoffs, especially in conferences that already have financial problems. But, as it hasn't happened yet, church leadership might very well be underestimating the severity of the consequences and opting for a "play it safe" position of declining government help.

And a "play it safe" posture is understandable, even defensible to a degree. If this situation really is an exception and ought to be framed outside the traditional church-state aversion model, then a difficult and complex explanation must be given to the Adventist public. And many people in that populace, psychological research would suggest, are either unable or unwilling to adequately engage in a "thinking slow" exercise, such that they could be persuaded that this really was a "black swan" event.

I think, therefore, given the consequences of a mistake, the NAD should be obligated to give a defensible theological reason for their recommendation, if they can. Especially, as their legal counsel has found no objectionable strings attached. I frankly question whether this can be done, but would welcome it. And, if a solid case cannot be made then the NAD recommendation

seems to simplify into a trade-off: layoffs vs. conservatively sticking with tradition. Seen in this light this seems to me an unacceptably high price to pay for taking the default position.

## Endnotes

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coronavirus\\_Aid,\\_Relief,\\_and\\_Economic\\_Security\\_Act](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coronavirus_Aid,_Relief,_and_Economic_Security_Act).
2. <https://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/SBA%20Faith-Based%20FAQ%20Final.pdf>.
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Establishment\\_Clause](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Establishment_Clause).
4. <https://www.alternet.org/2020/04/so-much-for-church-state-separation-us-government-to-pay-pastors-salaries-with-relief-funding/>.
5. <https://spectrummagazine.org/news/2020/nad-leadership-provides-guidance-government-funding-assistance-due-covid-19-crisis>.
6. <https://www.nadadventist.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/NAD%20Counsel%20Regarding%20Coronavirus%20Government%20Aid%20Final%5B3%5D.pdf>.
7. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/us-economy-likely-to-shrink-by-4-in-q1-down-by-14-in-q2-jp-morgan-120031900031\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/us-economy-likely-to-shrink-by-4-in-q1-down-by-14-in-q2-jp-morgan-120031900031_1.html).
8. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/03/30/coronavirus-unemployment-could-top-32-47-million-lose-jobs-fed-says/5091156002/>.
9. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/v/v-shaped-recovery.asp>.
10. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/opinion/notes-on-the-coronacoma-wonkish.html?searchResultPosition=4>.
11. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/january/new-fema-policy-allows-aid-churches-flooded-harvey-houston.html>.
12. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category\\_mistake](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category_mistake).



RICH HANNON, a retired software engineer, is Columns Editor for SpectrumMagazine.org. He has served as a member of both his local conference committee and his regional union committee.

# PRAYERS

## PRAYERS *for Ben*

Photo: Southern Adventist University

BY DARYLL WARD

istockphoto.com/Goran13



KEYWORDS: Ben McArthur, prayer by email, suffering, “if it be Thy will”

**M**y prayers, and all Christian prayer, begin with Easter.

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 3/27/16

Heavenly Father, on this day when all of His faithful followers rejoice in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ your only begotten Son in whom you vanquished death, remember your faithful servant and my beloved friend Ben McArthur with a full measure of your grace. Fill his heart with the peace that flows from your perfect love. Show him your faithfulness in the trial that has descended on him. Answer his devotion and gratitude for blessings you have already given with still more bounty, I pray. Add to his strength that he may banish the alien that threatens him. In the name of the resurrected one, amen.

### **The Will of God and Disease**

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 3/28/16

Gracious Lord whose earthly life is above all else the story of healing and with it hope, begin, I pray, to heal your faithful servant Ben with rest this night. Tomorrow, when he gives himself over to the ministry of medical art, infuse the labor of all who care for him with your invincible love. As you taught your first followers to pray, so I pray now that your Father’s will be done. I put my trust in your plain and glorious declaration that since we have seen you, we have

seen the Father. I do not pray that the Father’s will be done out of uncertainty regarding that will, but out of certainty that your ministry of healing reveals the Father’s rejection of all suffering and death. Much more is this Paternal Will manifest in your resurrection. Confident then as faith in you allows me to be, I do most earnestly pray that the Father’s will be done. And remember as well Callie, Emily and her family, and Mills. In this trial give them the peace that passes understanding. Add your grace to their love of Ben and make it a means of his healing as well. In your name and in the name of the Father and the Spirit, amen.

### **The Sabbath and Enemies**

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 4/8/16

Gracious Lord, thank you for coming to us as always in these blessed hours. Again Lord I pray that you will give my friend Ben restorative rest. He needs both rest and restoration. I’m grateful you have sustained him from last Sabbath until this one. I’m sure he is grateful too. He needs more. Reward his gratitude with a full measure of what he needs. It’s been up and down this week. Push back the chaos that drags him down. Fill him with your healing power. Ben loves this holy day you have given us and will gladly rest from the work of recovery, but can only do that if you fight the fight for him. You who against all the odds broke down the walls of Jericho, drowned the Egyptian hordes, set the Midianites to fighting each other and eliminated the army of Sennacherib defeat the enemies of Ben’s well-being and lift him up. In Jesus’ name, amen.

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I do not pray that the Father’s will be done out of uncertainty regarding that will, but out of certainty that your ministry of healing reveals the Father’s rejection of all suffering and death.

Ben loves this holy day you have given us and will gladly rest from the work of recovery, but can only do that if you fight the fight for him.

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### **A Message Thread on Evil**

FROM: BEN

TO: DARYLL

DATE: 4/23/16

It was very good to return to my Sabbath School and church today after many weeks away.

The SS lesson focused on Jesus as healer. In the midst of our discussion something struck me I hadn't considered before. In virtually all of our conversations and prayers regarding healing from serious illness we qualify our entreaty with the proviso of "if it be Thy will." But when we look at Jesus's healing ministry, it seemed always to be His will to heal those He encountered. Are there examples of His refusal to do so?

If we believe that all power is available to us today that was manifested in Christ's life, and if we believe His will for our well-being is a constant, then why would God not choose to heal us now? Wouldn't the qualification—"if it be Thy will"—be strengthened if we had at least one biblical example of Jesus's responding that God would be glorified best by the continuation of the disease? (I know we can point to Lazarus, but Jesus's delay in addressing his illness set up an even greater display of power through his resurrection.)

There may be no contradiction here at all. Help me see it.

Ben

FROM: JAMES LONDIS

TO: BEN, DARYLL, EANDERSON, JERONCIC, LDILLER, ZANE.YI

DATE: 4/23/16

Hello Ben,

It seems to me that in the presence and ministry of Jesus, everyone he encountered as the Gospels tell it, would be healed as a parable of his messianic mission. In some cases, people were healed who neither knew who he was or had heard but still not believed. In the case of the Apostle Paul, he repeatedly prayed that his "infirmity" be taken away, but it was not (speculation runs from poor eyesight to homosexuality).

For me, as I indicate in my book on healthcare, the issue is primarily "healing" in the sense of finding strength, hope and peace regardless of what we face. "Curing" can and does happen, but not consistently as healing would for those who believe. This question, Ben, is at the heart of all theistic faith. It is very challenging, but not impossible to integrate with thoughtful Christian theology.

Praying for your complete recovery nonetheless and hoping to see you soon.

Jim

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN, JAMES, ERIC, ANTE, LISA, ZANE

DATE: 4/23/16

Hi Ben and friends,

The only place in the Gospel narrative that I am aware that comments on Jesus' not healing those who needed it is the reference to a visit to Capernaum where it is said that Jesus "could not" heal many because of the lack of faith he found there. That is problematic in itself, it seems to me, since faith is not best understood as a virtue or an achievement. The connection between healing and faith is puzzling to me, especially when one recalls Paul's conversion where Jesus appears to him when he is actively engaged in enmity toward the Messiah. That story, along with Paul's own interpretation of the significance of Jesus in which he says that faith is a gift, are two reasons why I find the connection between faith and healing puzzling.

But I don't think the Capernaum reference is a helpful place to think about your question, Ben, which points to the formulaic qualification of our requests for healing with the phrase, "if it be thy will." Instead, I recommend the Lord's prayer in which we are taught to pray that God's will be done. That prayer has two powerful implications. God's will is not being done in the earth as it is in heaven. And we are told to pray that the conditions of this world that are contrary to the will of God be subjected to His will.

I suggest that we can pray for the healing of every disease every time knowing that we are praying that God's

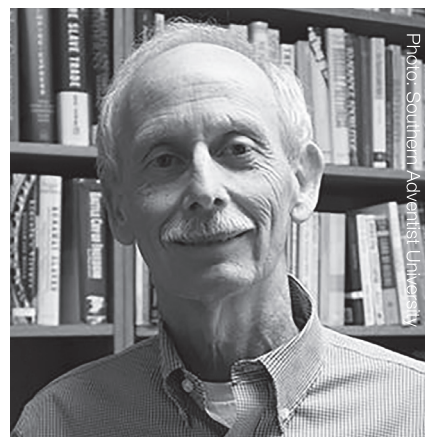
will be done, that it is God's will that the person be well. I agree with Jim's response that your question raises the deepest one possible in relation to what we want to and can say about God.

I remember very clearly my first reading of Karl Barth's assertion that Christian theology does not need to engage in theodicy, the rationalization of belief in God with our knowledge of the world and its suffering. At the time I rejected his

idea. It seemed of great urgency to me that we answer "the problem of evil." But the more attention I have paid to the various answers that have been given to this problem (Rick Rice's recent book *Suffering and the Search for Meaning* offers a compact, lucid summary and typology of those answers) the more convinced I am that they all make the problem worse in that they pose as "solutions." They offer a way to think about suffering that makes it, one way or another, "coherent" with the divine. But that is precisely what evil cannot be. There is no better definition of evil in my mind than the antithesis of the divine will. Evil is what God rejects. God does not want people to be sick.

Consequently, I am almost more offended by theodicies than I am by the horrors that provoke them. (I should mention that Rick has an interesting way of removing some of that offense in that he interprets the various responses to suffering that might be called theodicies as ways of coping with devastating loss that can threaten to shatter any meaning life seems to have. I can tolerate theodicy as a coping mechanism. I find it intellectually obscene.)

When I deliver myself of these sentiments in class or elsewhere the immediate response I get is, "well then why does evil happen?" The simple answer isn't the answer to the question. Children are born with microcephaly because of the Zika virus. OK but why? And to this question I have but one response. I don't



Daryll Ward (left), a humanities professor at Kettering College, wrote his friend Ben McArthur (right), a history professor at Southern Adventist University, messages of prayer before McArthur's death on April 10, 2017.

know. There is only one way I can fathom that evil can be harmonized/coordinated with the divine will and that is by the elimination of evil. I find this idea so necessary as to reject even the distinction between what God wills and what God allows. To speak of evil as allowed by God is to fashion a positive link between evil and the divine will, a thought that seems as incomprehensible as a square circle. If we understand our terms, God and evil, we know that they cannot be combined in a coherent totality. If, as John declares, "God is light and in him is no darkness at all," then God never in any way says yes to evil.

The prayer formula, "if it [be] Thy will" more than

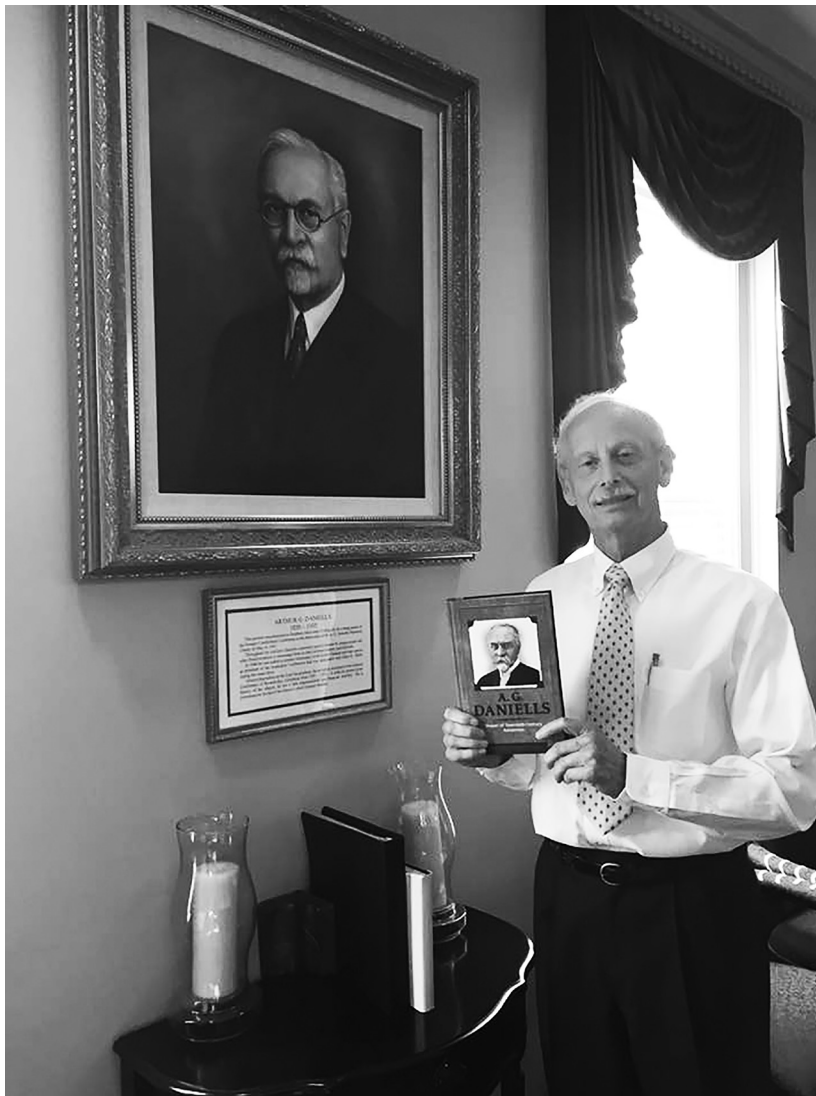
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If we believe that all power is available to us today that was manifested in Christ's life, and if we believe His will for our well-being is a constant, then why would God not choose to heal us now?

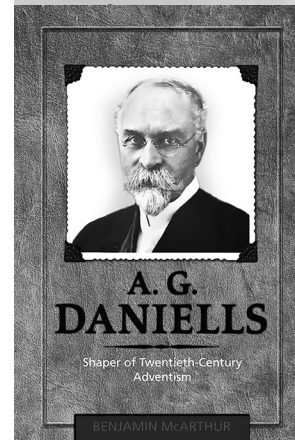
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likely is practiced as an imitation of Jesus in the garden on the eve of his crucifixion. But to interpret the crucifixion as the enactment of the divine will strikes me as incoherent with the resurrection. If the Father wanted the Son dead (a weird thought for a properly trinitarian theology by the way) then there would have been no resurrection. The will of the principalities and powers was the death of Jesus. The will of the Father was the resurrection of Jesus. The will of God in the story of Jesus is the

overpowering of every will contrary to His. The vision of the new earth offers powerful confirmation. When God's will is done on the earth as it is in heaven, then there will be no tears or death because "the former things," those things antagonistic to the divine will, will be no more.



To Students and Faculty  
 of School of Social Work.  
 AGD would approve of  
 your work.  
 Ben McArthur



Dr. Ben McArthur signed the book he wrote on A. G. Daniels, after whom the Southern Adventist University Social Work building is named. Dr. McArthur's book was published in 2016. (Photo Credit: Southern Adventist University School of Social Work Facebook page, September 5, 2016.)

Christian faith is resurrection faith. It is trust and confidence in God who does not let the depredations of evil stand. And Christian faith is, in my heart and mind, inseparable from Christian hope. Our faith makes sense only as hope that God will reverse every evil just as he reversed the torture and death of Jesus.

So, for what it's worth, Ben, I pray for your completed healing, grateful that a good beginning has been made and certain that when God's will is done, you will be whole. With Jim I would say that people like Marie Robinson, who affirmed "He's Been Faithful to Me" during the two years of her mortal illness, experience "healing." But in my mind what they experience is peace of mind that God will, in due course, even if it is after good Friday, vanquish evil, erase it, frustrate it, negate it. On occasion I have offered thoughts such as these to sufferers only to belatedly recognize that they were worse

than useless. If that be the case here, hit "delete."

FROM: BEN  
 TO: DARYLL, JAMES, ERIC, ANTE, LISA, ZANE  
 DATE: 4/24/16  
 Daryll:

"If it be thy will" as a necessary qualification to petitions for health (or most anything) probably finds its greatest support in Christ's prayer in the Garden. That is a strong precedent for our petitions that are necessarily of lesser significance.

But I agree with you: Why wouldn't it be God's will to make us whole? Evil is evil, to be effaced at every turn. Yet where we want physical relief and well-being, God's desire may well be for a healing at a deeper level, as Jim suggests.

Regarding theodicy, I think it will always be with us. An entire book of the Bible is devoted to it, as well as



To speak of evil as allowed by God is to fashion a positive link between evil and the divine will, a thought that seems as incomprehensible as a square circle.

---

Christ's fielding a question about why a tower fell and killed people. At the same time (as Job suggests), we aren't going to get satisfactory answers. Even Christ's answer to the above seems veiled to me. Christians can't avoid the matter, if only because for so many people the matter of pain, war, evil of all kinds, calls into question God's goodness or even existence.

Ben

### **Being**

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 5/19/16

Dear Lord, there are times, not nearly as often as there should be, when I tumble to the meaning of something I have heard numerous times and just as many times dismissed as wrong, inscrutable, insignificant or trivial when the notion is actually none of those things. Today for a very brief moment I believe I comprehended the wonder that some people experience by considering "being." The mere fact that I am, not what I am or who or how but merely that I am struck me as miraculous. But it was only for a moment. It may be an immediate confirmation of the miracle of your creation of everything. Some say so. But as marvelous and mysterious as it is I don't know what else to do with this, dare I say epiphany? But there is one thing I can do with it and that is offer you my gratitude. And I am also grateful for Ben's being and pray that you might grant it to him in such full measure that he will see the day when his grand-children present him with their own children. In your name, amen.

### **Protest**

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 6/6/16

Dear Lord, it's me again praying for my friend Ben. His treatment has weakened his system making more treatment a problem. This is not OK Lord. Of course his cancer is not OK. I want to protest. I do protest. And at

the same time I pray that you will give him your perfect love that casts out fear. This too is a miracle. Give him that unbreakable peace and then give him back his health I pray. One of your prophets once asked his people, "Is the Lord's arm shortened that it cannot save?" So that's my question for you, "is your arm shortened that you cannot save?" I know better Lord. Let me see the truth of what I know. In your name, and the name of the Father and of the Spirit, amen.

### **How Can I Come Before You?**

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 7/22/16

Heavenly father, how can I possibly come before you? Unlike the Psalmist I cannot phrase the question on behalf of all human beings. His answer is doubtless the right one, because you made humanity valuable, a little lower than angels. But I am not that paradigmatic man. I am only one man, pitiful in my own eyes and that thought itself is no doubt grounded in pride, the ur-sin. Why should I be anything other than unremarkable? And yet your Son invited all of his followers to come to you as our Father and so I come. I offer gratitude for a life of astonishing privilege and I ask for mercy to pardon an un-submitted spirit. And as you are willing, hear the cries of all who enjoy none of my blessings, who want for everything and are being killed and, worse, tormented all day long. Strengthen my resolve to do more. And could you do more as well, for all who need what you alone can provide, beginning with Ben. In Jesus' name, amen.

If you would come...

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 8/28/16

Gracious Lord, my suspicion that Ben's cancer had moved into his lungs was confirmed by him this evening. The words of Martha fill my own heart. If you were to come Lord, not to end history but merely to help our

Dear Lord, it's me again praying for my friend Ben. His treatment has weakened his system making more treatment a problem. This is not OK Lord. Of course his cancer is not OK. I want to protest. I do protest. And at the same time I pray that you will give him your perfect love that casts out fear.

---

friend, your friend and mine, he would not lose his life to these mindless aliens. It is only in your absence that evil does its filthy deeds. Please come Lord and rebuke the devourer. As you know I am reduced to silence confronting the question why you elect absence so often. But here and now please don't remain far away because I am unworthy to ask for your deliverance. Can my sin matter? Surely what matters is Ben's life and health. Come for him, Lord. Not because I ask but because he needs. Amen

### **God Won't Do Your Dishes**

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 9/13/16

Heavenly father, a thought occurred to me a while ago. I imagine myself telling people trying to think about you, "God won't do your dishes." I thought as well that I wouldn't deny somewhere sometime you might do someone's dishes. But as a rule it surely is true ... and troubling to me. It expresses my concern that on that level of the ordinary you don't operate. My friend Jill reported our church consultant's recommendations and remarked that what the Kettering church needs to do is help "millennials" see that God is important in their lives. And I thought, God won't do your dishes. Maybe youngsters feel or ask questions about the ultimate meaning of their lives. But its the dishes that occupy most of their psychic space. And then my little accident this evening, ladder crashing off the front of my house and I ride it down, not much worse for the wear. Were you there? Did you shield me from broken bones, paralysis, other crippling injury? I say thank you. I am really grateful. And of course you know what my friend Ben needs. In Jesus' name, amen.

### **Death**

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 10/25/16

O Divine Redeemer, lunch today meant reflections on death with my friend Dave VanDenburgh who introduced his preoccupation with it into our curriculum as a class titled "Death and Dying." We had a most deferential dispute about it, never acknowledged as such by either one of us. The depth of my dissent from his spiritual proposal may be best expressed by my saying that he wants to pervert that loveliest of words, "reconciliation," by joining it to our last enemy, death. No, I say, no, no I am not and will not be reconciled to death, my own or anyone else's. Indeed it is just because you have reconciled the world to your eternally alive self that reconciliation is exactly what cannot encompass death. You did not reconcile yourself to the kingdom of death. Rather you reconciled the kingdom of death to yourself, thereby destroying the destroyer. Neither do I find myself resigned to death. Both reconciliation and resignation treat with death. I offer no treaty. I offer only enmity. Nevertheless, your perfect love has indeed cast out my fear. My wonder at your mighty redemption rises up to ecstasy just because I do not deny the reality of death in the least degree. Oh yes, death is very real. It is really the ultimate alienation. And so I thank you with every ounce of my strength for dissolving that alienation in your reconciliation, your reunification of the world with yourself. It seems all but certain that the day of my death will arrive, I know not when. Although Paul did say that we will not all die. Death may well wear the face of rest in the end, given its ugly work in the days that precede it. But once it has finished with me, you will have only begun. And this affords peace that passes understanding. In the name of the risen one, amen.

## Victory

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 11/3/16

Dear Lord, it was a real kick to see the Cubs win it all. Victory is sweet. Today I offered my class the thought that your cross is what it is because of your victory Sunday morning. We know nothing of the countless mere victims of Roman rule. But we billions who know of your suffering and death know of it because of your return to life, because of your victory. For us it has been a long, blood soaked, agonizing time since that ecstatic morning, a time, however, filled as well with joy in love and in the beauty of the creation. I address you as Lord in reverence and gratitude but also in supplication, for I and all of your creation need you to rule as well as reign. We've been waiting longer than Cubs fans for victory. And Lord I'd be more than thrilled for you to completely heal Ben. I'm still asking Lord. Better yet would be your putting an end to our waiting for your total victory. Even so, come Lord Jesus. Amen.

## Love and Need

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 12/19/16

Dear Lord, you turned water into wine so that a wedding party could proceed. I love you for that. You forgave a woman caught in adultery and instructed her to be pure. I need you for that. You touched a leper and cured him. I love you for that. You gave sight to a man born blind. I need you for that. You stanchied a bleeding woman. I love you for that. You raised your friend Lazarus from the dead. I need you to rescue my friend Ben from death. You rose from the dead yourself. I love you for that and rest in confidence that Lazarus, and I and Ben will surely all one day thank you for life everlasting. In your marvelous name, amen.

## Bringer of Peace

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 1/20/17

Blessed Lord, you appeared at the burning bush and called Moses to set your people free. This day, beginning in twilight at sunset, offers peace through your presence. My father's tradition was to quote your call to each of us, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me for I am meek and lowly and heart and you shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Give Ben rest on this holy day Lord. Give him the rest that we can know only if we are given the gift of your presence. Make it real Lord. Make it unmistakable. You visited a terribly ill teenager in Escalante Canyon, orphaned by his father's suicide and his mother's temporary abandonment and offered him peace. He said, "Lord I sure need it." And you gave it to him, healed him. Come to Ben, Lord, Come. In your merciful name, amen.

For us it has been a long, blood soaked, agonizing time since that ecstatic morning, a time, however, filled as well with joy in love and in the beauty of the creation.

## Table Fellowship

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 2/4/17

Dear Lord, thank you for making this Sabbath holy. Surely you were with us in our discussion in Sabbath School. You blessed Pastor Hafner with spiritual wisdom calling us to welcome everyone, including gay people, into our fellowship as the Kettering Church. The students who shared our table were engaging and in no hurry to leave. So here, amidst turmoil and terror in the world, despite the loss of Chuck Allen at the end of the week, despite Desiree's chronic pain inflicted by an IED in Iraq, despite Ben's and Callie's ordeal, you gave me a sign that we and they will one day enjoy table fellowship with you. It can't come soon enough Lord. In your holy name, amen.

## Goodbye

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 3/26/17

Dear God, thank you for this day that you gave to Ben and me. We do not know, neither one of us, how many more days we will have. Nevertheless all the days that we have we receive as gifts from you. This one let us hear each other's voices. We said goodbye but because of the faith you have given us both we rest in assurance that the time will come when we enter into the eternal youth of life with you. Then once again we will be friends as we were now four decades and more ago, young men filled with an appetite for discovery, for understanding, for truth. In Ben's trial and as the days add their mortal burdens, grant us solace in the knowledge that there will be joy in the morning. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Held Fast in the Hand of God

FROM: DARYLL

TO: BEN

DATE: 4/9/17

Heavenly father, one of Israel's singers once declared, "if I ascend to heaven, you are there, if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle in the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me fast." Your now ancient poet was acknowledging that there was no way he could flee from you. We do not want to flee so his words may comfort us with assurance that there is no place that we may be carried but that you will be there. And because Jesus, your Son, taught us to call you father we know that to be with you is to be "held fast" in your love. Hold Ben and Callie tenderly in your hand I pray. In Jesus' name, amen.

*Ben McArthur died on April 9, 2017. He left this message to his students.*

Students:

By the time you receive this note I will be gone. My departure wasn't of my choosing. But I find myself at complete peace with God's will.

Some of you I know relatively well; others I haven't gotten acquainted with, which I regret. I always have great

hopes for our history students. I want each of you to create a future for yourself that will be personally rewarding and of service to your community. Discouragements will come, for sure, but you can find resilience in the knowledge that you have aptitudes and acquired skills that will carry you through.

I'm not one who believes that God has only one plan for each person's life. I believe He can bless your endeavors in a number of areas you might attempt (and don't be afraid to try different things in your life).

You won't be surprised to hear me advise you to continue to read. That's the mark of a history student. It's one path to understanding the human experience. Travel. Make friends. Locate an Adventist church to which you can contribute.

Most important, nurture your relationship with God. This can be done multiple ways, but there must always be intentionality in the endeavor. The peace of mind I enjoyed during my illness came only through an utter confidence in God's leading and salvific ends. This is a great gift that I wish for every one of you.

Your friend,

Ben McArthur



DARYLL WARD is professor of theology and ethics at Kettering College in Kettering, Ohio where he has taught since 2002. He received his PhD from the University of Chicago in systematic theology. His scholarly interests focus on questions concerning natural causality and divine action as well as the logic of analogical predication. He is the immediate past president of the Society of Adventist Philosophers.



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# Prayer *during the Pandemic*

NANCY LECOURT

When the lights go off  
The internet blinks out  
The computer screens  
Give one last, lonely zap!

When the dishwasher, the TV, and the radio  
Fall silent  
And the phones, cell and land,  
Cease their calling

When the gas runs out  
The cars and trucks and buses and vans and jets  
Become campsites  
In the forest

When humans huddle together in small bands  
Around those who can  
Make fire  
Grow food  
Tell stories

(If I am still alive)

May I be blessed to know  
An aging man with a long curly ponytail  
Who plays  
The vibraphone.

Four mallets at a time,  
The clear, full tones  
Will rise in the dark night air  
Like sparks from a camp-  
fire

As they did last night  
In a concert hall  
Full of empty seats.

Civilization itself  
Played its heart out  
Embers burning bright.

NANCY LECOURT is a retired English teacher and administrator living near the PUC Demonstration and Experimental Forest in Angwin, California.