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"Let us Make God Known in Europe"

25 August 2012, Rogaška Slatina, Slovenia [Victor Hulbert, tedNEWS] Five days, countless sermons, workshops and conversations. Has it made a difference? Are European pastors now more prepared for "Making God known?"

They were certainly positive about the five days of meetings, praising both the organisation and the varied content of the event. In the extreme heat of the week they were also grateful for the 13,000 litres of water consumed in just the marquee, the kind service of the staff in ten hotels across the complex, and the commitment of the TED staff who went out of their way to be both welcoming and professional. The greatest thanks went to God and was expressed through the rapturous signing of the hymn, "To God be the Glory," with the voice of Wintley Phipps bringing 1,200 ministers and their spouses to their feet.

In a moving symbol of change, and to the music of 'Falling in Love with Jesus', around twenty sad faced ministers carried placards onto the platform with signs of loss, loneliness and sadness. Frowns then switched to smiles as the placards were turned into ones of hope, joy and faith.

"Let's make God known" in credible ways, Bertil Wiklander challenged at the start of his address. He fully recognized that this would not be easy. The apostle Paul, he reminded ministers, described making God known as a fight – though in Ephesians 6 the armour of God is provided for the battle.

Referring to the Gospel Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, Dr Wiklander noted this was also all about 'Making God known'. It is part of the identity of being a Seventh-day Adventist. Even in Revelation 14, what Adventists love to call the 'three angels message', in verse 12 he noted that the 'faith of Jesus' includes trust, hope, faithfulness, obedience and loyalty.

Dr Wiklander then quickly surveyed the Book of Revelation, emphasizing that faithfulness can be challenging, dangerous and even fatal. However success comes by keeping focused upon the central character of the book, Jesus Christ. "Christ as the Lamb that was slaughtered is the key," he emphasized.

"The three angel’s message is not some strange, weird, futurist thing from North America," Dr Wiklander stated, rather, "It is a message with Christ at the centre." "Can we do that in Europe? In secular, godless Europe?" he asked. He clearly believes that the answer is 'yes', noting that in the midst of all our sophistication in Europe, in what we feel is "the best of all worlds", Europeans still fear death. "Never doubt that people want what we have because we know that God has defeated death in Jesus Christ."

Paraphrasing Matthew 25 he concluded by stating that "I was hungry [for God] and you fed me … i was in prison [where my only exit was eternal death and eternal silence] but you can to visit me [bringing me a way out]." The conclusion and commitment from all present, a resounding 'Let's make God known'.

To see more photos from the EPC, please click here.
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"Is there Bread in the House of Bread?"

Presented by Artur Stele
25 August 2012, Rogaška Slatina, Slovenia [Julian Hibbert, tedNEWS] A really good-sized crowd turned out to listen to Artur Stele, a General Conference vice-president, in spite of soaring Slovenian temperatures and a failing air-conditioning system in the auditorium.

“What an awesome task we have, to make God known in post-modern, secular Europe,” were Artur Stele’s opening comments. According to him, “we now live at a time when the only respected authority is the individual’s personal desires.” He sees this time in history as similar to that recorded in Judges: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.” Judges 21:25, NIV

But there is more to the book than we are used to, and two of its major themes are mercy and the guidance of God.

Stele then dug into Ruth, asking his audience to bear this in mind as he did: “The providences of God are like Hebrew words – they can only be understood properly when you read them backwards.”

Firstly, he showed that Naomi’s husband, Elimelech, has significance in the narrative. His name means “God is my treasure” and this at a time when Israel had no earthly monarch and men did as they pleased. It was clear that some of His people still upheld His sovereignty. Secondly, he showed that Elimelech and his family were from Bethlehem, which means ‘house of bread’: “They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.” Ruth 1:2, NIV

The irony of this is that we here find God’s people forced to leave their home – the “house of bread” – to seek bread among foreigners! The irony deepens when one remembers that God’s people were seriously snubbed by the Moabites during their migration to Canaan: “No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation. For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt...” Deuteronomy 23:3-4, NIV

Bread was not the only thing that was scarce in Israel in those days of the Judges. In 1 Samuel 3:1 we learn that in “those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.” So there was a famine of the “bread of life” as well.

Stele then drew the times of the judges into a direct comparison with ours, based on the reality that both Israel then, and modern Europe today, display the spirit of post-modernism. Could the reason why this spirit flourished be that ‘the word of the Lord was rare’ in those days? Similarly, could that be the reason that post-modernism flourishes here today? Could it be that there is no “bread of life” in the “house of bread”? Is it possible that because people are not getting what they need from us in church, they are seeking it on the internet and elsewhere?

Stele then told about something he had heard during Moldova’s 110th anniversary of Adventism – in the biggest hall in the country – filled with our members and government officials from everywhere. One of those senior officials congratulated them for preaching faithfully for 110 years – then told them the story of a ten-year old boy who wrote a letter to God. He told God how poor his family was, and then asked Him to send him 100 lays (local currency) so he could help his mother care for them. He addressed the letter “To God” and when it arrived at the post office they didn’t know what to do with it. Someone suggested that they send it to the parliament to deal with, after all, they were the land’s highest authority.
After much discussion the parliament decided to send him 10 lays. After the passing of some time, another letter “To God” arrived from the young man and was referred again to the august body. This time the boy expressed gratefulness for the 10 lays, but added the suggestion that if God sent a 100 lays directly it would be better than sending it through the parliament – because they kept 90 lays and only gave him 10!

Stele then asked these questions to drive his point home: “Are we not also like them? Are we only delivering a small percentage of what the world should hear from God?”

Going back to the text, Dr. Stele referred to the return of Naomi to Bethlehem: “When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.” Ruth 1:6, NIV Interestingly, the ‘food’ being referred to here is a translation of the word “bread” in the original. Naomi can now return to the ‘house of bread’ because there is “bread” in that house again!

So as soon as there is ‘bread’ in God’s house again, it will attract His people to Him. To reach Europe we need to provide that ‘bread of life’– it is the only thing that will draw the people of this continent away from their post-modern values.

Recent research has shown some unexpected things about the “reasons why people stay in church”. It was expected that things like music and fellowship would rank at the top of the list. But the survey revealed that the top reason for people to remain in church was “biblical preaching”! People are hungry for the “bread of life”, both inside and outside the church.

When Stele took the audience back to the text he quoted this: “When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, ‘How did it go, my daughter?’ Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her and added, ‘He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, “Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.”’” These are the last reported words of Naomi. It is interesting to note that she starts off empty handed in Ruth 1:21 but that her hands are full and overflowing at the end.

Not only did God satisfy Naomi’s hunger, but he also blessed her descendants as well – David was anointed in Bethlehem (the “house of bread”) and Jesus was born in the “house of bread” as well. He later claimed to be “the bread of life”, who would eventually resurrect her husband and her sons.

At the beginning of the book of Ruth two young women are called to make decisions – Ruth makes the right one, remains in the story and writes herself into the lineage of Christ – Orpha makes the wrong one and her name is not mentioned again.

At the end of the book two men are each faced with a decision. Boaz make the right one, accepts God’s challenge and writes himself into salvation history – the other man, known only as “so-and-so”, makes the wrong decision and remains unnamed forever.

So, as Dr. Stele sees it, our challenge is to make God known in Europe and to find an answer to the values of the post-modern mindset that originated here and has been adopted around the world.

The choice is ours, but if we make the wrong choice we will disappear from history like Orpha and “so-and-so”!

“Is there bread in the ‘house of bread’?” [tedNEWS]
“Experiencing God’s Love”

25 August 2012, Rogaška Slatina, Slovenia [John Surridge, TedNEWS] In contrast to the busyess of the discussion groups, dramatic performers and assorted platform party members who occupied the stage area for most of the morning, during the sermon time Pastor Wintley Phipps stood on his own.

It takes an unusual talent to fill a stage, particularly as large as the one at the EPC in Rogaska, but Pastor Phipps did. The incredible voice helped of course. His performance of “I believe” was outstanding: technically, musically and dramatically, but mainly because he really meant what he was saying. At the conclusion of his song there was not the slightest doubt that Wintley Phipps did, indeed, believe.

“The whole world needs to experience God’s love through his people,” Pastor Phipps began. “The Lord has put before me a message, that God will help us to clear out any rubbish from our lives and anything else that is preventing others from experiencing the Love of God through us.”

This was the theme of Pastor Phipp’s message, and it was delivered gently, at least at first.

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This was the theme of Pastor Phipp’s message, and it was delivered gently, at least at first. “The message I have to give may not apply in this cultural setting,” he said. But even at this stage his congregation had a suspicion that it would.

Retelling the story of the prodigal son in his own words Pastor Phipps spoke of how the younger son had been born to wealth and privilege; how he must have felt shackled by the expectations and rules of his family. How he eventually grew weary of father’s advice, and how he resented him meddling in his own, personal, affairs.”

“What is it about hard-headed children,” Pastor Phipps asked, “who think that the longer you live the less you know about life?”

“Get the accountants together,” said the younger son. “Have the estate appraised. Sell the land and give me my share of the cash. Let me live my life as I want to.”

“By this stage the father knew that his son was out of control,” said Pastor Phipps, “but because of his respect for his son’s independence he chose to allow him to go his own way.”

For a few moments Pastor Phipps expanded on the concept of “a far country”. “Wherever you go without the father on your mind, you are living in a far country,” he said. “Out of the control of the father the son’s life ran out of control.”

Briefly skipping through the years of “wild living” Pastor Phipps praised God that he himself was fortunate enough to have been able to give God his young, strong years, though he cautioned, “they don’t last long!”

“I have a theory about why we lose our eyesight,” he continued, somewhat at a tangent, “it’s so that as our eyes get dim, especially in our marriages, we still look good to each other!”

The eyes of the son were now sunken. He was destitute and his cheeks were hollow. He came to his senses and realised, “In my father’s house even the poor eat better than I do.” In that moment he gathered what was left of his self-respect and said, “I will arise, I have sinned, I am not worthy. Make me as one of your hired servants.”

The father saw him in the distance, of course, a gaunt, haggard figure. But he ran and kissed him. The son who was dead is now alive. What was lost is now found. Rejoice and be merry.

Pastor Phipps had a question for his listeners: “Why did Jesus speak this powerful message in a parable?” he asked. “It’s because in the parable we have the gospel in miniature. It is told in such a
way that even a child can understand it. Jesus used this parable to deal with a major impediment which was keeping the world from experiencing His love: the distortion and the misrepresentation of the character of His Father.

"The most effective weapon of the devil throughout history," said Pastor Phipps, "is the misrepresentation of the character of God. It is impossible for the world to love God if they don't know His true character."

Right from the start the devil has sought to portray God as one who is demanding and severe, tyrannical, cruel, mean-spirited. Even in the Garden of Eden his subversive message was, "I know God. He has serious defects of character... He cannot be believed."

"This is at the heart of the Great Controversy," said Pastor Phipps, "and the primary mission of Jesus was to mount a vigorous defence of the true character of His Father."

"But," said Pastor Phipps, "down through history too many who carry the banner of the cross have participated in the misrepresentation and distortion of the loving character of God."

Christians? Yes. The Roman Catholic church, sure. The Protestant church as well.

Pastor Phipps then told of how he had been travelling in a car with Dr. John Stott, one-time chaplain to the Queen. "When I get to heaven," Dr. Stott told him, "one of the things I want to ask God about is why the areas of the world where Evangelical Christianity has been the most successful, have also been the breeding ground for intolerance and racism." Examples from Northern Ireland, South Africa, and the Bible belt of the USA, underlined the truth of this statement.

But Pastor Phipps was not finished. "If the truth be known," he said, "God also has a quarrel with us."

Seventh-day Adventists? Unfortunately, yes.

"God has called us to live so that the world can experience His love through us," said Pastor Phipps. "For years I have been quietly dismayed that we are just not making enough nice people. We bury too many mean people. We bury too many unkind people. We bury too many angry people. We bury too many ruthless people, and we bury too many unpleasant people... Friendliness is not a cultural thing," he pleaded, "it is a way for the world to experience the love of God through us."

The marquee was silent as Pastor Phipps continued...

"Misrepresentation can be seen, "not only in the pews, but also in the ministries of us," Pastor Phipps admitted. "In bathroom conversations friends told me that they would have words strong enough to tell you how I detest the politicizing of God's church. I find it disgusting, repulsive, that we are not able to play politics in God's church without the guile of protecting the church, we as leaders misrepresent the loving character of God."

Using the words of actor Richard Harris in his poem "There Are Too Many Saviours On My Cross", originally written in response to the violence in Northern Ireland, Pastor Phipps read, "You children, lying in cries on Derry streets, pushing your innocence into the full-flushed face of Christian guns, battling the blame on each other. Do not grow tongues in your dying dumb wounds speaking My name. I am not your prize in your death, you have exorcised Me in your game of politics." [Editor's note: a full version of this poem can be found at: www.sdanet.org/steve/best/Too_Many_Saviours]

Sadly Pastor Phipps told the story of how he had been called to the General Conference in 1995 and how, after travelling to Rio de Janeiro for a meeting, a church leader had cornered him in an elevator and said, "I am going to do everything in my power to get you out of your position."

Pastor Phipps admitted that others had supported him. "In bathroom conversations friends told me that they would have stood up for me ... but their courage never left the toilet."

He went on to speak of the backbiting and mean-spiritedness he had experienced from colleagues in ministry, but also of the comfort he had gained from a parable told by an old Jamaican pastor: "An army private on watch duty had fallen asleep when a general came by and found him sleeping. He shook him awake and the terrified private found himself staring directly into the face of the general! Don't worry, said the general. Just be thankful it wasn't the corporal!"

But humour did not diminish the force of what Pastor Phipps was saying. "I realised that I had given these small-minded psychopathic minions too much importance in my life."

"The current rate of growth in TED is about two members per church per year," said Pastor Phipps. "In the North American Division it's not much better, perhaps three or four members per church per year. Australia is about the same. In the western world we are not winning or keeping our native born indigenous members, at least not in any significant numbers."

"We have to recognise that there are some things that we need to repent of. We have too narrowly defined what sin is to God. Sin is not just transgression of the law. Which commandment covers nasty comments and mean looks? We have focused too much on the Ten Commandments and not enough on the loving character of God that they reveal. The commandments were given to help us grow and reveal the loving character of God. Unfriendliness is a sin because it is destructive..."
of relationships that God wants you to honour. Unless our characters become more like the character of God, the world will not experience the love of God through us. For every Bible study we give on doctrine we should give four or five on becoming more like Jesus.”

Appropriately Pastor Phipps concluded his sermon with an altar call. “I want you to commit yourself to growing every day so that you more fully develop, resemble, and reveal the character of God – in your own lives and in the lives of your members.”

Tens, then hundreds, went forward as the whole assembly made a joint commitment: to truly experience God’s love in their lives and reflect that love more fully day by day. [tedNEWS]

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The scene was set by the third and concluding installment of a drama portraying the parable of the prodigal son. Performed by Dejan Stojkovic, Sam Neves and Gert Tapp, the drama illustrated the contrast between the prayers of the older and the younger brothers, but with a twist. This was no black and white, simplistic retelling of the well-known story. In fact both sons came in for condemnation. To the younger son the father said, “I’m here to answer your needs, but you’re trying to do it yourself. I’ll take care of your needs. I’ve forgiven you, and I’ve forgotten your bad deeds, but you need to let go. If you dwell on the past you’ll just end up being embarrassed and ashamed. That’s not my purpose for you.”

To the older son he said, “You need to be quite and listen. Get your phone, look at the invitations I’ve sent you. You were too busy… Scroll down further, look, I wanted to be with you, watching your son play football, but you were too busy… Your brother needed you. He didn’t need to be judged; he needed you, to take care of him. Be quiet, be still. You talk far too much. That is the problem with all my children. That’s why I created you perfectly – with one mouth and two ears! But you don’t listen. You never slow down, and all this busyness, it distracts you all. It is so hard for me to be with you so that you can be still and know that I am God.”

The parable ended with both sons removing their black t-shirts labeled “lost/prodigal”, to reveal white t-shirts underneath saying, “changed”.

The message? The parable Jesus told applies to all. Younger sons, older sons. Those in the world and those in the church. Members and, yes, pastors too.

To see more photos of the drama, please click here.

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Lost in Our Own Ministry?

25 August 2012, Rogaška Slatina, Slovenia [Kirsten Oster Lindquist, tedNEWS] Saturday morning started with powerful praise and worship. The pastors, their spouses and lots of local visitors packed the tent to exalt God. Pastor David Shalom opened the Sabbath morning programme, by praying in Hebrew.

Then another segment of the previous night’s drama of the prodigal “sons” raised some interesting and entertaining points. This time the drama centred around the attitude of the “holier” son who was busy with his pastoral duties in a rather “unholy” way!

This was then followed by a panel discussion led by Pastor David Neal in which the pastors were challenging to contemplate various issues facing pastors today. Some of the issues that were discussed were “loneliness in ministry”, “being burnt out”, and “distractions” in ministry that keep pastors busy with the wrong things.

David Neal asked the panel to comment on how pastors can struggle with authenticity and honesty in ministry, with their own pastoral identity, and whether we are in ministry to be served or to serve?

“It’s important,” said Pastor Karin Wieczorek “that we enter ministry to serve, not because of the attraction of power...” The question about the challenges of large versus small congregations, and those which are perceived as glamorous church positions, was answered by Andrew Leyland, who said: “For me, as an intern, its not so much the size or location of the church that matters, but whether there is a vision behind my deployment there – or am I merely filling a gap after everyone else has said, ‘No!’”

Karen Holford answered this by questioning whether our way of measuring success in ministry, according to church size and baptism figures, is not more worldly than Godly. “Could it be,” continued Karen, “that success in ministry is more about the quality of our relationships with spouses and congregations – that its more about meeting each others needs and strengthening the quality of our relationships, both with each other and with God?”

David Neal brought the topic of burnout into the discussion and asked the panel how this had manifested itself in their various ministries. The participants commented on how it was time out, away from work, and spending time alone with God that refreshed them to continue. But they also stressed that it was necessary to know your own “signs” of tiredness so you can stop before it is too late!

Addressing the theme of “making God known in Europe today”, Andrew Leyland frankly asked whether “evangelism is just another tick box on our to do list?” Recognizing that evangelism and outreach is challenging, it was suggested that ministry always entails courage. Sometimes, however, “we are afraid to try something because we fear negative reactions from members, colleagues or our employers.” Karin Wieczorek suggested that “we have to overcome that fear” because “we as pastors need to step out and reach lost people.” Karen Holford agreed with her that “we need to be radical, we need to do something different to reach those who are called to serve.”

The discussion opened awareness to the fact that pastors do struggle with these issues and that they have a right to talk openly and frankly about them in order to encourage each other. [tedNEWS]

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"Welcome Back Home, You are Forgiven"

Presented by Mark Finley
24 August 2012, Rogaška Slatina, Slovenia [Victor Hulbert tedNEWS] Friday night is always very special at an event like this. 1,200 ministers and their spouses, 22 countries, many languages, but all in communion together. This was worship at its best. Multi-media, music and the spoken word skillfully crafted together.

A male trio rendition of ‘How Deep the Father’s love for us’ helped set the mood as the congregation meditated on ‘Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection’. There was nevertheless humour. The drama team modernized the story of the prodigal son with two sons graduating from Newbold College but going in different directions. Facebook rapidly traced the journey and decline of the younger son until a text message from dad invited him back. The surprise twist in the skit was when Pastor Mark Finley came to the park bench, comforted the lost son, then, moving into sermon mode, shared the meaning of the Biblical narrative in Luke chapter 15.

In story telling mode, Finley shared how great the love of the Father was for the son who always had a special place in His heart – as equally He has a special place in His heart for each one of us. He then showed how communion brings us together in the same reconciliation as that which took place between the Father and his prodigal son. Using an example from Leviticus 5 and then of a young, argumentative teacher, he said: “Our confession enables us to receive the love in the Father heart. Not to make him love us more.”

“There is something about confession that lifts a burden, that opens us to God’s grace.” The prodigal son found that. In our modern lives, even brought up within the church, we may face the same issues. Challenging our lives, our motives, our thoughts, Finley asked the ministers whether there is anything in their lives that needed confession. It was a private yet public confession.

Encouraged to write ‘that thing’ on a piece of paper, as the ministerial family came forward to participate in communion they had the opportunity to crush that piece of paper and leave it at the foot of the cross.

Introduced with a moving solo, this actual moment of communion was a ‘still, small voice’ experience. To the words of “All to Jesus I surrender” participants took the bread and the wine, filed back to their seats and pondered on confession, forgiveness and the love of a Heavenly Father.

"Welcome Back Home, You are Forgiven" | TED Adventist http://www.ted-adventist.org/news/welcome-back-home-you-are-forgiven

Why was this so special for ministers? It was a chance for them to be ministered to rather than to minister; to receive, rather than to lead in communion. For Jurrien den Hollander, to be with such a large crowd was a hint of the Apostle Paul’s promise, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human mind has conceived the things God has prepared for those who love him.”

Jurrien, from Holland, added, “We are group people, we are social people. We are always on the watch to see how others behave. But communion puts us together on a higher plane. We no longer look at each other, we look at the cross.”

Scottish Mission President, Pastor Bernie Holford enthused, “The way our leadership modeled how to do church was inspiring to me.” That was also true for Guisele Berkel-Larmonie: “Tonight was not about us being ministers, but about being sinners in need of grace. Tonight we were not pastors, simply children of God.” [tedNEWS]
Holiday from Stress?

24 August 2012, Rogaška Slatina, Slovenia [Julian Hibbert, tedNEWS] Friends and church members back home tease us that ministers are on holiday here in Slovenia, yet the overall results from the health tests run during the conference indicate that a holiday is just what they need. According to Elsie Staple, Health Ministries Director for the South England Conference, at least eight percent of pastors tested are suffering with raised blood pressure and other signs of stress, and a number have been referred to their doctors when they get back home.

Elsie is part of a dedicated team of health professionals from a number of countries who, under the umbrella of ADRA-TED, have been running health checks and providing practical advice, recipes for healthy eating and suggested exercise routines during the conference.

Does it work? "Absolutely!" states Victor Hibbert, Communication & Media Director for the British Union Conference. He had a health check at SEC Camp Meeting back in June that indicated a very high cholesterol level. Millie Williams, one of the nurses, gave him practical advice on diet, drinking more water, and increasing his exercise level. You should have seen the smile on his face when he was re-tested on Wednesday morning and discovered that his cholesterol level had almost halved. He cannot praise the programme enough. While busy at the meetings he is also making sure he takes time to walk in the surrounding hills each day. "Mark Finley's sermon encouraged us to walk in the hills and listen to the 'still small voice'," Pastor Hibbert states. "I'm doing that and improving my health. It's great!"

While designed for ministers, local residents from Rogaška Slatina have also taken the opportunity for testing. ADRA Slovenia director, Olga Popov, met two ladies who were selling jars of locally produced honey. She invited them into the exhibition tent where they did a brisk trade. They then asked about the Health Expo, and with Olga as translator, delightedly completed the course and engaged in deep conversations about health and then faith.

While ministers and their spouses have enjoyed and been blessed by the many lectures, devotionals and workshops, the health aspect of this break has also been important. Time to walk and enjoy the stunning countryside, to relax in a swimming pool or sauna, or just to sit in the shade and chill with friends, old and new – all of this has helped to bring down the stress levels and revive our clergy for the joys of service. [tedNEWS]

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“The Message and Ministry of Reconciliation”

Presented by Lowell Cooper

24 August 2012, Rogaška Slatina, Slovenia [Kirsten Oster Lundqvist, tedNEWS] “It is a refreshing experience to be here” was the opening line of today’s worship by Lowell Cooper. If he was referring the weather it was still cool, before temperature levels reached 34°C. Inside the tent the day had begun with prayer by Mariusz Adamczyk in polish, who thanked the Lord for salvation assurance, and asked for the day to be blessed so that we could concentrate.

Geert Tap and the worship team again led the congregation in meaningful, inspirational praise and worship. This drew not only the congregation closer to God, but some passersby as well. Several pastors feel that there could be more of this praise and worship, and among them was Pastor Rosemary Lethbridge, who observed that the team balanced their range of styles and song choices in a skilful manner.

Lowell Cooper spoke on reconciliation as ‘message and mission’, focusing on 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 that includes these words: “God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” In this passage Cooper said we find the grand central theme of scripture, the message, mission and method of reconciliation by God.

According to Cooper, the God who is revealed in scripture is personal, purposeful and goal-oriented. We see Him engaged in mission. “And we do well to remember that the mission is not ours,” continued Cooper, “but Gods.” “Mission was not made for the church, the church was made for mission!” Reconciliation is the mission of God. He was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.

The text, Cooper pointed out, “does not say reconciling the church, nor the nation of Israel, it says reconciling the world to God. We must not think that God is only interested in his covenant people,” continued Cooper, “Gods mission is to restore all that is true in this world, and that should be our mission too”.

Cooper then continued to talk about the importance of being grace-oriented. The message of reconciliation is that Gods grace has released us from the burden of our past. The grace that releases us is not finished with us, it not only lifts us out of sin’s filth – it also recruits us to be ministers of this grace ourselves. Our relationships are changed, and it binds us with stronger ties than guilt and duty, for we are bound to the Giver of grace and called to make Him known.

Addressing the theme of making God known in Europe, Cooper pointed out that “as Adventists, we are called to make God known, not draw attention to our lifestyle or doctrines. People who are looking at behaviour are not looking at God. To make God known and glorify Him we must live in such a way that reveals Him – that is the mission of believers.”

“People in Europe today are interested in spirituality,” encouraged Cooper, “the world does not reject Jesus, but it fails to see in Christians something that is better”. At the same time “we must be careful,” stated Cooper, “that revival and reformation is not about returning to a former version of Adventism. Reformation and revival should not be form-driven. It destroys itself by becoming inward looking. Rather, revival and reformation should be about a new level of reflecting Jesus to the world. Nothing less will work.”

Tor Tjersansen from Norway closed the worship with prayer for reconciliation amidst the brokenness and hurt around us; in the political landscape of Syria; and between countries and nations that don’t get along. He prayed that we would reflect on the pain that drives people away because of hate and bitterness. He prayed for healing, forgiveness and grace. Then he prayed for the cause of women’s ordination as his intercession drew to a close. [tedNEWS]
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Pastor Oberg came to address the EPC as a fellow pastor. "It doesn't matter how big or small your congregation is," she said, "because all of our church members have the same needs." She continued that perhaps, one day, she should write a book called "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly". Drawing on a few of her more unusual experiences in ministry she spoke of the good days, when people come to her requesting baptism; bad days when members come with a long list of criticisms; and weird days – like when a woman came to her with a vision from the Holy Spirit, and delivered the church from an evil spirit! Relating the story to her husband she said, "I've just met a woman I don't know, who cured us of an evil spirit I didn't know we had!"

Affirmative mumblings from the audience suggested that many such strange experiences could be gleaned from the fields of the Trans-European Division.

Speaking of fields, Pastor Oberg's address was based on Matthew 13:24-30, where Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the planted weeds. The story is familiar to all but it soon became clear that Pastor Oberg was not going to be content with a straight exposition of the text. This was certainly included but the overriding message she had to give was actually about the way we interpret the scriptures.

"Interpretations of Jesus words can become fratricidal weapons," she said. For example, think about the things we say Jesus doesn't like: Children who run in the sanctuary, teenagers with spiky hair, youth with tattoos, those who have pre-marital sex, those who are attracted to people of the same gender...

Referring back to the text in Matthew, Pastor Oberg outlined a brief history of its interpretation: the almost allegorical words of Matthew which immediately follow Jesus' own words; the preferences of the Donatists and Augustinians; the harsh and even harsher words of the Reformers, some of which led to burnings at the stake!

"It is not Jesus," said Pastor Oberg, "it is interpretations on Jesus that seem to do the damage."

In a humorous aside she related an account of the time when she was studying the text using an online research tool. As she was reading the words about the weeds being burned up, the sophisticated, context sensitive, advertising engine flashed up an advert at the side of the screen: for weedkiller!

"The parable clearly says leave the weeds alone," she said. "Good people belong to God, bad people belong to the devil." We overcomplicate it when we add our own interpretation.

As an illustration of just how we can manipulate texts through our own interpretation, Pastor Oberg presented a two and a half minute video of how the text could possibly be seen. With dark, stormy images, and a heavy, minor-key soundtrack, the satanic weeds were pictured infiltrating the otherwise healthy field. The concluding words: "Harvest Time is Coming!"

"In the context of 2012," said Pastor Oberg, "we must ask, what does this message sound like to the world today?" The issue is not just one of biblical interpretation; it's about the picture of God that we present to the world.

Graphically illustrating our damaged and fractured world, through images of violence, protests and riots, Pastor Oberg pointed out that many of these events were driven...
by religious conviction and ideology. “It’s not Jesus’ words that are doing this,” she said, “it’s people’s interpretations, and interpretations of those interpretations.”

In the United States some 20% of people who call themselves Christians don’t live inside the Christian community. The question we need to ask is, “Do people walk away because of our interpretations?”

With an illustration from her own life Pastor Oberg told of an occasion when she had returned home, carrying the frustrations and burdens of a hard day at the office. After a while she realized that her teenage daughter had disappeared. Why? “It’s easier for me to be somewhere else while you work it out,” she had said.

So it is for the world. While we are trying to sort out what Jesus likes, the world prefers to be somewhere else.

Returning to the exposition, Pastor Oberg said, “We need to hear Matthew’s voice as Matthew’s voice. We have to understand that he has a leaning towards the apocalyptic. He has seen the destruction of the temple. He has seen his people dispersed. He is shouting the message, ‘This evil will end one day! If it takes a fire God will bring a fire!’”

“But this is not the only interpretation in this parable,” Pastor Oberg continued. “Matthew is inviting us to bring our own interpretation to the text. Matthew has moved on and God has moved on. We need radically new interpretations in the world in which we live.” We need to ask ourselves, “When does the Jesus we present to the world not look like the God of love that we know from the scripture?” We need to ask ourselves, “When has my need to be right impacted my interpretation of Jesus in a negative way in this world.”

In another personal aside Pastor Oberg related that she was actually adopted, and still doesn’t know who her birth parents were. As a baby she was left outside an Adventist hospital in Portland, Oregon, presumably because her mother believed that the church would take good care of her. She has since grown up an Adventist and remains an Adventist through and through. But, she said, “Sometimes it’s time to call question on our interpretation and ask, is it us? Is it our interpretation that keeps people in the world rather than in the church with us? Adventist Christians have always believed that truth is on the move. It is authentically Adventist to ask these questions.”

Returning to the parable Pastor Oberg presented her own, alternative, view. “I suggest that in this parable we are not talking about the church or church membership, discipline, doctrine, or orthodoxy. We’re talking about life in the world, and the struggle to live a God-focused life in a world of evil… The wheat and weeds can be thought of as something other than people: they can be our actions, our choices, our realities… God will not be removing the bad today or any time soon. Live with it. We’re not asked to solve the problem. In fact, if we try we will only make it worse.”

In her concluding comments Pastor Oberg quoted the words of Ellen White in Christ’s Object Lessons. “People long to do something to cleanse the church… But it is the spirit of Satan not the Spirit of Christ, that inspires such acts.”

Appealing to the pastors present she continued, “This is God’s work and sometimes we need to get out of the way so that God’s good creation can hear Him calling them home. The Good News is so good as it stands that sometimes it is at risk by how we describe it. God is the one at risk today. Are we telling the truth about God?” [tedNEWS]

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"The True Purpose of the Church"

Presented by Wintley Phipps

24 August 2012, Rožaška Slatina, Slovenia [John Surridge, tedNEWS] The voice of renowned singer, Wintley Phipps, who also serves as the pastor and director of “Dream Academy”, was first heard by the pastors at the EPC when he performed the song “His Eye is On the Sparrow” on Thursday. In Friday’s first plenary session however, he spoke.

Not that he didn’t sing as well – that would have been to cheat the 1,000 plus assembly out of an experience they had all been eagerly anticipating. His performance of “Amazing Grace” did not disappoint. The change in key that lead into that line “When we’ve been there 10,000 years” was literally spine tingling.

Elder Phipps first came to Europe in 1975, though he noted that much had changed since then. In October 1992 he had the privilege of singing at the Olympic Stadium in Moscow – backed by a choir of 5,000! He has other connections with Europe: his backing music was backed by a choir of 5,000! He has other connections with Europe: his backing music was

Moving on to his main message Elder Phipps fired a warning shot: “I can speak openly and honestly because I know that my ticket home is secure.” He also cautioned that there was a possibility that he might end up preaching as he does in his home church. Nervous technicians and podcast editors were, however, quickly placated by his subsequent qualification: “… but for a message to be immortal, it does not have to be eternal.”

Elder Phipps began by recognizing the challenge that we face. “To make God known in Europe,” he said, “we are called to make God known to minds that are steeped in Western culture.”

Our situation, though, is not that different from the situation that Paul found himself in, in the Greco-Roman culture of the first century, and Phipps then told his story. Paul, a Jew, but schooled in Grecian thought; a Roman citizen by rights and privileged; truly multi-cultural and cosmopolitan; was recruited as a bounty-hunter for the Pharisees. The story starts with him tracking a band of Christians, but, said Elder Phipps, “the hunter was being hunted. He was being hunted by none other than Jesus Himself.”

In Elder Phipps’ view the dramatic transition in Paul’s life came, not so much through the experience on the Damascus road when Jesus said, “Saul, why are you persecuting me,” but through his subsequent quiet time in Arabia.

Yes, Paul was shunned and persecuted once he turned his back on his former way of life, but Jesus used the persecution to refine Paul’s character. “Jesus feels the pain we suffer when we are persecuted,” said Elder Phipps, quoting Ellen White’s comment that “the blow that is aimed at us, first falls on Christ.”

It was through the experience of persecution, and through the subsequent quiet time in Arabia, that Paul saw the mistakes of his own life and was able to deal with them. “In the same way,” said Elder Phipps, “God places our flaws before us so that we can pray over them.” In fact, he went on, “Often the best gifts that we have are given in compensation for what we have been through.”

Lest anyone think that he was being self-righteous, Elder Phipps used an illustration from his own life to demonstrate this principle. He told of how many years ago, when he was first married, his wife noticed – and gently related to him – that he was treating her pretty girlfriends better than the ones who weren’t so pretty. “You need to treat them all the same,” he said.
she said. It was a lesson he learned then and there, and a principle he has carried with him through life.

But the main question, briefly left hanging, was, what happened to Paul in Arabia? Elder Phipps found an answer in Galatians 1:15,16 where Paul says, “God called me by his grace to reveal his Son in me.”

“This is the summation of our calling,” said Elder Phipps. “We are called by God’s grace to reveal His Son in us... This is God’s purpose.”

For the remainder of his time on the platform Elder Phipps hammered home this message. It was a no-compromise, no holds barred appeal to the assembled pastors. “This is the nucleus of Paul’s theology. This is what was taught to Paul by Jesus in Arabia. This is the true purpose of the church.”

Summed up in one word: “Christ-likeness”. This, said Elder Phipps, became the true purpose of Paul and it is the true purpose of the church today.

Pre-empting many unspoken questions Elder Phipps admitted that, regarding his theology Paul had his critics then and he has his critics now. "Some people think that Paul distorts the teachings of Jesus," he said, "but I think that Paul left us a theological heritage that we have lost sight of: that revealing Christ to the world around us, in us, is the true purpose of the church."

"Revival and Reformation without Christ-likeness is pointless," he continued. "Nothing we communicate to the world is more important than Christ-likeness... This should not be seen as an impossible burden, a standard we can never attain... Transformation of character is important, and it is possible."

"Growing Christlike people who live so that God can reveal his son in them – this is the true purpose of the church, and every other purpose must serve that purpose," said Elder Phipps. "Nothing is more important in the Christian life than the pursuit of Christ-likeness..."

This was Paul’s epiphany in Arabia but the question is, do we as a people reveal the character of Christ today?

A challenge: “Everything that we have achieved as a church - if it does not equate to Christ-likeness, then we will have very little success in making God known in Europe.”

Repeated with humour, a degree of irony, and to much applause, “We will be like bald men trying to sell hair-growing cream!”

"I believe this ought to be the marketing brand of the Seventh-day Adventist church," said Elder Phipps, "that we grow people who look more like Jesus so that we can invite the world to embrace our faith... Any other goals, though noble, can become a distraction. I want to move the church to this understanding of its true purpose."

In his closing prayer Elder Phipps asked God to give the assembled ministers courage to face up the realities in their own lives, and make the changes necessary to enable them to develop Christ-likeness, both in their own lives and their churches.

During the ensuing break, above the hubbub of thirty or so competing languages, a word could be heard repeated over and over. Christ-likeness. Christ-likeness? Is it really the ONE thing that God wants to see in His church in the twenty-first century? Perhaps it is. [tedNEWS]

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Unusual Visitor at EPC

24 August 2012, Rogaška Slatina, Slovenia [Julian Hibbert, tedNEWS] One of the unusual visitors attending the EPC is Michał Rakowski – he is neither a pastor nor a pastor’s spouse, nor part of the support team. What is he then? Michał is a twenty-one year old “preacher’s kid”.

When this sociology student from Krakow, Poland, read about the EPC on ted-adventist.org and saw the interesting programme planned for it, he asked his father to sign him up “and pay for the conference, please” – even though the closing date for registration had passed. Fortunately, his father, Marek Rakowski (Polish Union Conference Secretary and Communication Director) was willing to do just that.

Michał says he “knew, that it was going to be great – a blessed time. And I wasn’t wrong.” He has found the EPC programme full of “great lecturers, preachers, testimonies and music.”

As far as he is concerned: “God is blessing me so much, that every workshop I choose is magnificent! I attended ‘Social Media Revival’ on Tuesday – evangelistic work in social media is what I’m keen on. Yesterday Paul Thompkin’s workshop on ‘What to do, if young people turn from God’ was especially important for me, as I am a Youth Leader in Krakow. Janet Page’s ‘Ignite Your Prayer Experience’ workshops were also just what I needed”.

Michał, who has some journalistic experience, not only listens, but he also shares: “Everyday I prepare a report from EPC for our official church website back in Poland”.

Well, if this “unusual visitor’s” comments tell us nothing else – they certainly suggest that the EPC programme content has been highly stimulating and relevant! [tedNEWS]

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**EPC Comment Board**

24 August 2012, Rogaška Slatina, Slovenia [Julian Hibbert, tedNEWS]

**Thomas Müller, president, Danish Union:** "Dennis Meier gave a refreshing presentation on the practical side of pastoring. At a pastor’s conference there should be a lot of visioning and challenging to push us forward, but Meier – through his own struggles in ministry – actually pushed us forward by mentioning his own failures. For let’s face it: very few pastors in Europe experience huge numerical success. Meier said: ‘Stop mourning about what you don’t have and start using what you have.’ Meier challenged us to focus on what we have, what God has given us.

“Lowell Cooper had an inspiring session on the Code of Conduct for leaders. There was one sentence in particular that stuck in my memory: ‘Humility is like underwear – it is not intended for public display.’ I believe that many of us who lead have much to learn from this statement – not just displaying humility but truly making it a part of our character”.

**Pastor Geir Fossum, Norway:** “In the morning I learned about seeing people and cherishing disturbance. In the evening I got to practice it. It felt good!”

**Pastor Glenn Tore Storvollen, Norway:** “It was an inspiration to hear how Rosemary Lethbridge turned a small church into a thriving, vibrant and relevant community church, serving their local community.”

**Pastor Marek Rakowski, Polish Union Conference, Executive Secretary:** “What is great about EPC for Polish pastors? The fact that we are able to see the diversity of our church – so many cultures! This is a great lesson in tolerance, with the added blessing of new, fresh ideas and inspiration. What is more, if anyone came here to learn, workshops have really helped us”

**Norbert Solski, Global Mission Pioneer, Poland:** “Even though Poland is very Catholic country, the message for post-moderns is appropriate for them – simply because they often attend Sundays services, but do not believe in basic Christian beliefs! Some EPC programmes are not the answers to my needs, but others, especially about God’s character, have inspired me!”

**Pastor Zenon Korostenski, Krakow, Poland:** “My journey from Krakow to Rogaska took nearly 102 hours! Twice my car broke down – in Poland and the Czech Republic – and then later caught fire. But I finally got here and I am very excited about that.”

**Pastor Karl J. Bergland, Norway:** “This morning Lowell Cooper, speaking on reconciliation, presented the thought ‘God has not a mission for His church, but a church for His mission.’ A timely reminder of our message and reason for existence as a church.”

**Pastor Marianne Kolkmann, Norway:** “I was blessed during Chris Oberg’s sermon today. It challenged me to think through how I communicate what Jesus has said, and it made me think about how I interpret the Bible. Is the message I am sharing, something that will be understood in the context of today?”

**Igor Mitrović, Adra director, Belgrade, Serbia:** “Chris Oberg made me think deeply: is it possible that our interpretation of Jesus keeps seekers in the world from joining the movement?”

**Pastor David Šili, Belgrade, Serbia:** “Janet Page opened the curtain on the real life of pastors’ wives, and without ‘makeup’ showed us her internal struggle, and emphasized the power of prayer through which God revived her and breathed into her a new energy for ministry.” [tedNEWS]

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Abide with Me

01 August 2012 Washington State, USA [Wayne Blakely/Record] In addressing the United Nations prayer breakfast, Ravi Zacharias, the Christian apologist, asked the question: “How do you reach a generation that listens with its eyes and thinks with its feelings?” It’s a profound question that should not simply be addressed to leaders outside the Church, but to each of us in the Church. As earth’s history is rapidly approaching its conclusion, many of us have come to accept “feelings” as our guide to “truth”. And in no area is this more true than in the field of human sexuality.

Since the sexual revolution broke out in the West, society has been pressured over and over again to abandon sexual standards based on Christian ideals. First we were told that sex outside of marriage was not only morally acceptable, but a healthy part of human development. Then we were told that the idea of a lifetime commitment in marriage was an oppressive anachronism. It was a short line from there to adopt the posture that human life so inconveniently created outside of stable relationships was expendable. And then came the gay rights movement with the message that homosexual sex is not only natural, but morally good.

I, like many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, believed the new message of sexual liberation. After 40 years living an active gay lifestyle, however, I have come to a very different conclusion. I’ve seen friends die, I’ve heard the heart cries of people caught in complete hopelessness that comes with a cold permissiveness, and I’ve heard over and over again the love of my Father calling me back to a life of obedience. Today I know that the opposite of “homosexuality” is not heterosexuality as many are inclined to believe—rather it is holiness. It is the holy and wholly encompassing love of God that can fill the gaping chasm in our lives and give us the healing we all so desperately need from the sin that plagues all of us.

The narrative formed by gay rights activists, however, is finding an echo among those in the Church who believe by ignoring or excusing sinful behaviour, they are extending love. They are not. It is true that God loves us just the way we are, regardless of our sin, and every person—homosexual, heterosexual or asexual—can be deeply thankful for that. But it is not true that God leaves us desperately mired in behaviour that destroys us physically, emotionally and spiritually. Jesus desires something more from all who have been born with a sinful nature. He wants us to develop an intimate relationship with Him and invite the Holy Spirit to bring about change in our lives. But the change He promises us is not about making a gay person straight, any more than it is about making heterosexuals who struggle with lust into asexual beings who have no desire at all. No, it is more complex than that, but no less remarkable.

When I immersed myself in getting to know Christ and submitted my will to Him, many amazing changes began to take place. He took over and revealed His perfect plan—a plan completely consistent with His revealed word, not a plan based on subjective feelings and emotive appeals that is at jarring odds with His revelation. He promises that as we place our trust and abide in Him, we become more like Him. The more we love Him, the more we are drawn to His holiness.

For decades many same-sex attracted people have experienced silence on the topic of homosexuality by the Church. In that silence, many have left the Church without knowing what God desires of them. Some have come to question whether or not God even loves them, accepts them, whether they are so broken they cannot be saved. Some have been treated like lepers—shunned, scorned and neglected as if their sexual temptations are somehow more sinful than everyone else’s. Others believe that God loves them, but begin to wrap God around self and live according to subjective truths rather than responding to God’s love with a desire to obey Him.

But praise God, there are those who have been reached through divine intervention and are claiming His victory and healing today. I am such an individual, “as were some of you”. Today, God has a ministry through me. He preserved me, and precious others, for such a time as this.

Often, it is not until we are cornered in the dark, that we are able to hear that still small voice. Humility, while frequently painful, can reveal light that seems to have been hidden by deception. When I was finally humbled before God, I recognised the voice of the Holy Spirit. My heart broke before God and I fell to my knees weeping and seeking His forgiveness. Where much is forgiven, there is much love, and today I love my Lord with my entire heart, soul and strength.

The clarity of what God revealed became awe-inspiring. Not just regarding homosexual behaviour, but with regard to all
sin and His request of us to lay it at His feet, seek and live in His righteousness. It's a lot more difficult than it sounds. But it is rewarding beyond any earthly pleasure. Temptation remains my reminder of how much I need Jesus and how I immediately must call upon Him to be in charge of my mind and my decision-making. But temptation is not sin—sin occurs when we give in to temptation rather than trusting in our all-powerful Saviour.

We are living in a world in which evil often appears to triumph and in which accepting God’s standards often makes us a laughing stock, or worse, actively hated. I know that by writing this piece, I will be mocked, my character will be attacked, and I will receive yet another wave of hate mail. It is the least I can do for a Saviour who suffered much more on my account.

Today, gay rights supporters often label anyone standing for a life of obedience to God a “bigot” or “homophobe”. They are the kinds of pejorative labels designed to marginalise and silence God’s call for obedience. I don’t believe that homophobia is the support of biblical sexual principles, but rather it is the refusal to reach out and share the love and gospel with the LGBT community. What kind of cold indifference would result in people who know God’s truth, who know His last day call to a loving, holy relationship, remaining silent as millions of people reject God and continue in sin? That isn’t love; that is a fear of homosexuality that is so strong, you prefer to see men and women lose their souls for eternity rather than have the strength of character to give an honest witness of grace, love, repentance and salvation.

More than ever before, leaders, pastors and teachers need to be educated by those who have experienced and chosen to live a redeemed life in Jesus. As He directs our hearts under His influence, we can all become the “new creation” as described in 2 Corinthians 5:17. By recognising His glory and authority we can choose to be called out of darkness and live in His marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9).

The Church cannot afford to be afraid of LGBT people—we are, after all, just people. You can’t afford to be indifferent—we need the love and healing of the gospel as much as anyone. You can’t afford to be so prudish you fail to discuss openly the issue of sexual behaviour. Everyone, everywhere is talking about it, and when the Church is silent, when you are silent, it isn’t neutrality or prudence, it’s cowardice and indifference.

That said, this issue does require thought and care. Calling LGBT people horrible names or expecting people to somehow magically transpose their sexual orientation is not the right approach. Shunning or shaming is also very damaging. Accepting, loving, caring, while always honestly representing God’s call to an obedient life for all of us—that is the way Christ treated all sinners, and it is the path we must follow. God is on the move. He is holding back the four winds. He is revealing His truth. He is calling His beloved sinners to come home. I frequently teach in my presentations that we cannot share what we do not have. By engaging in an intimate relationship with Jesus, amazing changes occur. When we are living in a continual walk with Him, those we encounter will see Jesus in us and have a desire for the life He offers all.

Let those who you come in contact with see Jesus in your eyes and through your demonstration of His love. Live the love that draws the sin-sick soul into a relationship with Jesus. Christianity is not about “listening with our eyes, and thinking with our feelings”. But it is also not simply a prayer in the morning, evening and studying the Sabbath School lesson either. Victory and healing of all sin is in the continual, constant abiding in Him that results in a lifetime promise of true freedom, true acceptance and true love.

By Wayne Blakely

Wayne Blakely lives in Washington State, USA, where he works as an account executive. He has written for the Adventist Review and presented in a number of venues on the Christian approach to sexuality. He operates the www.knowhislove.com website.

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Never Give Up

Practical insights regarding reclaiming inactive youth

Stop your crying and wipe away your tears. All that you have done for your children will not go unrewarded; they will return from the enemies land. There is hope for your future; your children will come home. I, the Lord, have spoken. Jeremiah 31: 16-17 (Good News)

The loss of young people through the back door is a real issue for the church today. It is imperative that we take steps to make sure that as many as possible of those growing up in the church will remain to become active members. I also believe there is an overwhelming need to reach out to those who may, for whatever reason, have already become inactive over the years and reclaim them for the church.

In undertaking a doctoral level dissertation I undertook a pilot project at a local church. Although the numbers were limited, the findings were significant. The headline news is that over 90% of inactive youth responding to an initial contact, together with a short questionnaire, clearly still saw themselves as being Christian, and fifty per cent felt that they would one day return to the church of their youth.

So how do we help make this a reality? I think we would all resonate with the following assertion that the effective care of young people today must be seen as a) an immediate priority, b) a strategic priority, and c) a critical issue for all Christian leaders.1 I believe that the church – our church – has a limited window of opportunity which demands that the time for action is now.

Summary of Research Findings

A summary of the survey findings, that I personally conducted, revealed a number of interesting practical insights that can be summarized in the following ten points.

1. It is imperative that those who are inactive are followed up and not left to drift away unnoticed. From my limited sample, females seemed more responsive than males to cold contact, but males will respond once a real and warm link can be established.
2. In their early years, friends remain the top reason why young people enjoy attending church.
3. The early, mid and late teenage years are the focal point when youth make decisions for or against continuing church fellowship. The peak age bracket for becoming inactive, in this study, was between ages fifteen and twenty.
4. There exists a continuing contact system through the family. This usually remains intact even when a young person has left church fellowship.
5. The church is not seen as warm and caring and youth often see church members as being critical and narrow minded. The attitude of older members was expressed as the top area of dislike felt about the church.
6. There exists a disconnect between dedicating young children and baptism. Only a third of the group were baptized. We are clearly not discipling enough of our own young people while they are actively with us in the church.
7. Some young people may be very sporadic in their church attendance but do not consider that they have cut all ties with the church. Church attendance does not seem to be a major priority for some during their early twenties or period of tertiary education.

1. No reference or explanation is given for this number.
8. Virtually half of the group felt they would return to church one day. This provides hope in so many cases that all is certainly not lost.

9. Overwhelmingly the young people surveyed showed that they still felt that Christianity was relevant in their lives.

10. Each young person is unique and has their own story to tell. We must never treat them as merely statistics.2

Key Points

There are a number of key points that can be seen from this and other studies. Here I will highlight just three.

The church needs a clear and effective discipling process for young people. This is as referenced in point 6 above. This year, being the Year of Discipleship, gives a window of opportunity to address this need for the Ambassador age group (16-21) through some pilot programmes in the TED territory. Additionally we will hold the first Youth Matters Symposium with the title "Discipleship that Lasts", aiming towards establishing good discipleship models for Student-age Ministry.

The Church Warmth and Thinking Climates are very important. This is as referenced in point 5 above and is powerfully backed up by the European Valuegenesis Survey. (see graph) It is quite clear that both on the Thinking Climate and the Church Warmth measures decrease with age and that we are currently not meeting the needs of our older youth. The "thinking climate" measures to what extent a church stimulates its members to think, learn and ask questions. The "church warmth" measures how much a church is felt to be friendly, caring and an accepting environment. Both areas are of crucial importance in determining young peoples' commitment to the church.

These areas can, and must, be readily addressed through a concerted relational ministry for young adults at the local church level.

Most definitely there are inactive members (please don’t use the term backsliders!) who will look to return at some point. Point 8 highlights this and the reasons, I believe, are centered in a number of issues involving the positive legacy of past church teaching, warm memories and a search for past identity. As one of the respondents to the pilot survey stated “I still carry and remember a lot of what I was taught every day.” Another reflected about a return one day and stated, “My departure from the church was a gradual one, if there is going to be a return, it’ll also be a gradual one.”

This was also found to be true in another study of returning Adventists who definitely expressed that they still had warm memories from their childhood. “Eight out of ten persons interviewed expressed memories of early Adventism that reminded them of happy times in the church.” 3

Roots and identity are a very powerful combination. The search for identity is not static and just as it is part of finding one’s own identity that pushes young people to challenge their value systems, and sometimes push them away, so too the reverse search for identity may well bring them back one day to their roots. Many young people who question their parents, values and beliefs ultimately accept them as their own.

Conclusion

The desired outcome is that returning “prodigals” will have a chance to return to a church that is ready and waiting to meet them. Such churches may vary in appearance from country to country but it is clear that any church that wishes to effectively nurture returning young people must make this a priority. In so doing they will need to have a well thought-out discipleship process in place, a warm climate that encourages spiritual growth and also an understanding of the need of many young adults to re-connect with their spiritual roots.

The good news is that no matter how long someone has been away returning always remains an option. Never give up, there is hope for the future.


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Research carried out as part of DMin dissertation "Bringing Home Our Adventist Prodigals: A Strategic Plan To Reclaim Youth In The Trans-European Division." (Andrews University 2009)


4 The TED Church of Refuge (COR(e) initiative is dedicated to helping our churches to retain and reclaim young adults.
For further information see www.churchofrefuge.eu

By Paul Tompkins, Youth Ministry Director, Trans-European Division of Seventh-day Adventists

Leadership Development Journal - May 2012
Emotional Intelligence: The Most Important Leadership Quality?

Arriving in a new district or taking up a new position in an organisation is always fraught with anticipation, uncertainty and worry. This was particularly true when my husband took a pastoral position in an area with which he was not familiar. Shortly upon arrival, one well-meaning church member offered him very insightful advice. He said: ‘You cannot tell the people from our region what to do; you can only invite them to follow you.’ What are the leaders’ characteristics that will inspire others to follow?

There is no shortage of literature identifying the most pertinent qualities that every good leader ought to have. We are told that amongst the other traits leaders should possess cognitive strength, analytical reasoning, technical skills, inspirational motivation, vision, integrity, fairness, confidence and emotional intelligence. It is to be expected that a highly intelligent pastor or head of a department who oozes with confidence will generate respect from his congregation or his team. However, there are some indicators to suggest that it is in fact emotional intelligence, or as some termed it emotional literacy, that separates ordinary leaders from those capable of great things. What is more, it has been suggested that an ‘emotionally illiterate life’ that is often accompanied with emotional numbness and inability to respond to the emotional needs of others, is a significant shortcoming of those called to lead others.

Emotional intelligence, a concept that emerged in the 80s, has gradually entered into the vocabulary of psychologists, counsellors, life coaches and other professionals and it seems to be here to stay. However, what is emotional intelligence or emotional literacy? One of many available definitions suggests emotional intelligence to be ‘effective awareness, control and management of our own emotions and awareness and understanding of other people’. This human quality has captured the imagination of researchers resulting in what appears to be a convincing argument for the benefits of emotional sensitivity whilst pointing to the shortcomings in the case of its absence.

The far-reaching consequence of limited, or even non-existent emotional awareness is documented by an evaluation of the leadership qualities of past American presidents. Following the analysis of public communication, organisational capacity, political skill, vision, cognitive style and emotional intelligence of eleven presidents the authors acknowledge that ‘in the world of imagination it is possible to envisage a cognitively and emotionally intelligent chief executive, who happens also to be an inspiring public communicator, a capable White House organiser, and the possessor of exceptional political skill and vision. In the real world, human imperfection is inevitable, but some imperfections are more disabling than others.’ Having identified several presidents who despite some noteworthy historical achievements are responsible for ‘the most unhappy episodes of the twentieth century’ the authors reach a bold conclusion: ‘Beware the presidential contender who lacks emotional intelligence. In its absence all else may turn to ashes’.

This strong statement is not surprising given that an absence of emotional insight appears to have a profound effect not only on the leaders’ ability to understand his or her co-workers, but it is also responsible for the inaccurate appraisal of self. Daniel Goleman identified self-awareness as the first quality possessed by emotionally literate leaders. This includes ‘having a deep understanding of one’s emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs and drives.’ What is it that is making me happy, fulfilled and content? What, when and who brings the worst out in me? These are just some of the questions that need answering in an attempt to become an emotionally aware individual. Those people, the author continues ‘are neither overly critical nor unrealistically hopeful. Rather, they are honest with themselves and others.’

A good starting point in becoming in tune with self and others is a systematic appraisal of ones own strengths and weaknesses. This soul-searching exercise is not about naming what I should or ought to be good at; instead, it seeks to identify the areas in which I do particularly well, the skills I accomplish with ease, and the tasks that capture my imagination. It is about the input that generates positive feedbacks from those I know are honest with me. Having identified all of my strengths, my limitations need careful and sincere consideration. Which aspects of my job make me very anxious or do not result in a positive response from others? What would those closest to me identify as my weaknesses?

Highly intelligent pastor or head of a department who oozes with confidence will generate respect from his congregation or team. However, are some indicators to suggest that it is in fact emotional intelligence, or as some termed it emotional literacy, that separates ordinary leaders from those capable of great things. This human quality has captured the imagination of researchers resulting in what appears to be a convincing argument for the benefits of emotional sensitivity whilst pointing to the shortcomings in the case of its absence.

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Emotional Intelligence: The Most Important Leadership Quality?

An additional benefit of being aware of one's own strengths and weaknesses might result in increased confidence as well as in the readiness to acknowledge one's own limitations. I have recently been asked to teach and work closely with a young, sharp and very intelligent scholar who is leading some 'cutting edge' work in his area of expertise. It would be dishonest of me to omit the fact that I was concerned about being intimidated by him, but quite the opposite happened. In addition to his enthusiasm and his superior handling of knowledge, his readiness to freely identify areas which he apparently 'knew little about', and his modesty about his expertise made him not only approachable but also stimulated learning. This is not surprising because genuine humbleness, not unlike empathy, to be discussed next, is a quality that has enabling properties.

Empathy has been acknowledged as an important dimension of emotional intelligence that, whilst most easily recognisable, is frequently absent from the repertoire of essential leadership skills. And yet, an empathetic leader might be able to prevent the team and individuals from becoming overwhelmed, disillusioned, and even depressed in the course of duty. He or she will not remain silent about the professional challenges or personal hardships his co-workers are going through. Showing genuine interest in his or her workforce will be an integral aspect of the leadership style employed by an emotionally literate leader. Empathy discussed here however is not an 'un-businesslike' sentimental style of leadership, but a leadership capable of taking notice of employees circumstances, feelings and ability 'in the process of making intelligent decisions'. These leaders are in tune with 'the messages beneath the words being spoken'. This will also include unequivocal respect for others as well as commitment to understanding the way culture impacts upon human interactions.

As a social work academic I am frequently involved in attempting to teach students to be both aware of their own feelings as well as being sensitive to the needs of those they will be working with. Positive regard for every individual alongside a related set of traditional values that, amongst others, includes acceptance, a non-judgmental attitude and a respect for people are deeply embedded in the knowledge base and skills passed on to social work students. Despite the noble intentions and genuine motivation of most students, this approach to training often feels as though one is trying to teach budding social workers to create a beautiful master-piece by 'painting by numbers'. As a Christian who teaches at a State University I often question whether it is indeed possible to develop those qualities through education and training alone? Could it be that identified leadership techniques, including the emotional intelligence, might remain just a mechanical exercise without drawing on the power available to those who have a meaningful spiritual life?

There is no doubt that many Adventist leaders are known for their excellent leadership that includes the vast repertoire of skills expected of an effective Christian leader. Equally, as most leaders know, in the 'hustle and bustle' of pursuing the common goal, it is very easy to overlook one's own emotional needs alongside the needs of co-workers. I have attempted to argue that a leadership that is committed to developing the emotional intelligence that includes keen knowledge of self and dedication to the understanding of others has the potential to overcome this omission. I would like to conclude by acknowledging that emotional intelligence that draws from Christ's example and uses his power in achieving this goal will give real meaning to this important leadership skill. After all, He was the ultimate leader who only needed to say: 'Follow me', and the rest is history. [tedNEWS]

7 Ibid.

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Leadership Development Journal - March 2012
Improving and Growing Yourself to Improve, Grow and Serve Your Church Organisation

28 June 2012 Bracknell, UK [Philip R Brown] In The Twelve Absolutes of Leadership Gary Burnison recounts the story of a farmer whose donkey fell into a well. The farmer frantically thought about what he could do as the stricken animal cried out to be rescued. With no obvious solution, the farmer regretfully concluded that because the donkey was old and the well needed to be filled in anyway, he should give up the idea of rescuing the beast. Instead, he should simply fill in the well and hope the poor animal would not suffer too much.

The farmer asked his neighbours for help and they all began to shovel earth into the well. When the donkey realised what was happening, he brayed and struggled. Then, the noise stopped.

The farmer looked down into the well and was astonished at what he saw. The donkey was still alive and was progressing towards the top of the well. By shaking off the dirt instead of letting it cover him, he could step on the accumulating soil as the level rose. When the donkey reached the top, he stepped over the edge and gave the farmer one last look. “Now who’s the jackass?” the donkey remarked, and trotted happily away.

This story offers a key insight for those seeking to be effective Church leaders, who must have and demonstrate learning agility. The latter can be defined as the ability to learn from experience and to apply that learning to new situations. Learning agility is not the same thing as having a high IQ or EQ (emotional intelligence). Rather, a Church leader with learning agility can excel at absorbing information from his or her experiences and applying it to the present – thereby creating an agile Church organisation that also learns, grows and adapts.

Yes, learning as a Church leader is often about adapting, being open-minded, and being willing to find solutions that are not always obvious. As a Church leader you cannot expect to learn from things you are NOT doing! Consequently, there can be times when you should expect to fail. Such situations demand that you choose not to blame yourself but rather to learn. In fact, it has been said that the only real failure is failing to fail. A Church leader who fails to fail from time to time could either be unaware of what is going on or simply be acting too cautiously.

So how do you improve and grow yourself in order to improve and grow your Church organisation? One key requirement is your own preparedness to maintain an open and curious mind. In their book Great Leaders Grow Ken Blanchard and Mark Miller suggest that for a leader growing is like oxygen to a deep-sea diver - without it you die. Unlike the diver, you may not physically die – but if you stop growing, your influence may well erode, and over time, you may even lose the opportunity to lead at all.¹

The failure to grow has sabotaged the career of more Church leaders than just about anything else. Hence, your capacity to grow is crucial in determining your capacity to lead. If you wish to improve or grow your Church organisation, then you too must continue to improve and grow. Blanchard and Miller have utilised the acronym GROW to remind leaders of the key ingredients for fostering their personal and professional growth:
G = Gaining Knowledge – this ingredient includes knowing one’s own strengths and weaknesses; knowing the people one leads on a deep level (personally and professionally); knowing one’s industry extremely well; having a high level of mastery of the principles and practices of leadership; and having a detailed, written personal development plan.

R = Reaching Out to Others – this ingredient includes always looking for ways to invest in the growth of others; having ongoing mentoring relationships with emerging leaders; frequently seeing and seizing teachable moments; frequently sharing with others what one has learned; and developing a high level of mastery in communicating one’s point of view on leadership.

O = Opening Your World – this ingredient includes constantly looking for opportunities to grow at work; seeking new experiences outside the workplace; having a mentor(s) who helps you grow; always looking for additional opportunities to lead; and seeing every day as an opportunity to learn and grow.

W = Walking toward Wisdom – this ingredient includes consistently telling oneself the truth regarding one’s leadership; actively seeking feedback from those you know to be truth tellers; having a group of people you trust to give you counsel on important issues; having mastered the art and discipline of asking profound questions; and being fully committed to a lifelong pursuit of wisdom.2

Blanchard and Miller maintain that a leader’s capacity to GROW determines their capacity to lead! Further, improving yourself as a leader is crucial in seeking to improve and serve your organisation. Interestingly, it appears that in most organisations the best leaders choose to serve others. Servant leaders are normally those whose goals are focused on the greater good. In The Secret: What Great Leaders Know and Do, Blanchard and Miller offer a helpful description of the ways in which a leader can SERVE. They utilise the acronym SERVE to highlight key leader behaviours:

S = Seeing the Future – Servant leaders envision and communicate a compelling picture of the future. Leading always begins with a picture of a preferred future.

E = Engaging and Developing Others – Servant leaders recruit and select the right people for the right job while creating an environment where people wholeheartedly invest themselves in achieving the vision.

R = Reinventing Continuously – Servant leaders possess a never-ending focus on improvement. Progress is impossible without change.

V = Valuing Results and Relationships – Servant leaders generate positive, measurable results, and cultivate great relationships with those they lead. Ultimate success always includes people and performance.

E = Embodying the Values – Servant leaders live in a fashion consistent with their stated values. People learn more from what a leader does than from what a leader says.3

Your willingness to keep learning as a Church leader can make a powerful statement to your entire Church organisation. A Church leader learns more lessons when mistakes are made than when successes come easily. Consequently, as a Church leader you should have a heightened realisation that you are not invincible or irreplaceable. The reality is that one day you will leave your current Church organisation. When you do, will your Church organisation be in a substantially better place than it was before you inherited it?

To improve, grow and serve your Church organisation you need to continue improving and growing yourself. An improving, growing and serving Church leader chooses to empower and inspire people to align with a greater purpose in order to improve and grow their Church organisation. Remember the story of the donkey – the day you (or your Church organisation) stops learning becomes the day you (or your Church organisation) may start dying!

3 Great Leaders Grow, p. 119.
The Art of Leadership – Some Reflections

28 June 2012 St Albans, UK [Bertil Wiklander] A colleague recently reminded me of Peter Drucker’s distinction between management and leadership:

‘Management is doing things right – Leadership is doing the right things.’

It made me think again of the real nature of leadership. What helps us know how to do the right things? See here the fruit of some of my reflections:

Art and Wisdom

Leadership is the practice of an art. It is not an exact science and it is not accomplished simply by implementing rules.

Leadership is based on wisdom acquired by making mistakes and learning the right lessons from them.

Character

Leadership is best learnt and exercised by persons with certain personality traits.

Leadership comes from feeling good about yourself – avoiding self-destruction and not being over-sensitive to criticism, being humble and yet fearless and bold.

Leadership requires being energetic, persistent and self-disciplined and yet constantly encouraging others.

Abilities

Leadership comes from being able to listen to, having empathy with, and reading the minds of other people.

Leadership comes from being able to see the big picture while understanding how its elements relate to the whole.

Leadership is not lost in the detail of things and never micromanages.

Leadership comes from being able to focus on the essence in every given situation – a leader knows the difference between what is important and what is trivial.

Leadership comes from being able to bring a group together that acts toward a common goal.

Leadership comes from being able to communicate well – articulating your thoughts clearly while adapting to different kinds of situations and audiences.

Attitude to My Leadership Role

Leaders understand their central role in the process of inducing others to act toward a common goal – and know how to master this role.

Leadership is about relating so well to others that you are being followed.

Leaders lead by their actions, not their positions.

Leaders influence others by inspiring their trust, acting consistently, and motivating them by words and deeds.

Leaders lead by legitimate authority, setting an example, setting goals, rewarding success and dealing with failure, organisational restructuring, team-building, and communicating a vision.

Leaders act so that the organisation achieves its mission while all feel they were part of it.

By Dr Bertil Wiklander, President of the Trans-European Division