Weekly News From Around the Columbia Union Conference

January 15, 2014

Miracle Meadows Principal Shares Journey to Forgiveness

When the West African state of Liberia degenerated into chaos, occasioned by a long-running civil conflict from 1989 to 2003, I, together with all other Liberians, was awakened to a rude and shocking reality. I grew up knowing a Liberia that was stable, peaceful and loving, but the mask fell off when my country ignited into a devilish inferno for more than a decade. The loving and caring character of the people suddenly evaporated.

On more than one occasion, I came close to being killed by rebel fighters, however, no other incident throughout Liberia's nightmare shook me as much as the day a rebel combatant of about 14 years old held me at gunpoint. In full view
of my terrified family, including my young son, he threatened to shoot me if I as much as took a single step or moved any part of my body. With his submachine gun cocked and finger ready to pull the trigger, he bellowed at me, "Open your mouth!" When I complied, he shoved the nozzle down my throat and threatened to blow off my head! As he became increasingly erratic, I heard a commanding voice shout, "Soldier, as you were!"—Story by Patrick Johnson

Is God Making a Comeback?

About a year ago, a Pew Research Center report revealed that a rapidly growing number of Americans don’t identify with any religion, jumping to 20 percent of the public and one-third of adults younger than 30. But, a quick scan of the country’s cultural landscape suggests Americans do have a keen interest in—if not a passion for—God and spiritual things. From books to television to the digital realm, religious subjects and themes surround us. Some books like Zealot, God is Not Great and The God Delusion question its relevance, while many other sources offer a more positive viewpoint.

Programs with religious themes have popped up all over cable television in the past few years, including The American Bible Challenge on the Game Show Network and The Bible miniseries, which debuted on the History Channel in March 2013 with 13.1 million viewers—reportedly the biggest audience for a cable broadcast at that point of the year. The show became the top-selling miniseries of all time after its home-video release, and an NBC sequel is in the works. Why is this happening? —Story by Arin Gencer

Join Our January 21 #Relevantreligion Twitter Chat

How should our church reach out to the growing number of Americans not interested in religion? Join the Columbia Union Visitor’s #relevantreligion Twitter chat on January 21 at 12 p.m. EST as we discuss this phenomena. We’ll chat with Dave Gemmell, associate director of the North American Division’s Ministerial Department, and Raj Attiken, retired Ohio Conference president, about why this is happening and what we can do to reach this group. (Can’t tweet at that time?
Potomac Conference Leaders Consider Moving Headquarters

For the past several months, prayer warriors throughout the Potomac Conference have been seeking God’s wisdom and guidance on whether they should move their headquarters, currently located in Staunton, Va., to Northern Virginia. The current headquarters is located within one hour of 12 churches and 2,900 members. A move to Northern Virginia would put their administrative offices within one hour of 102 churches and 25,000 members.

This past fall, the issue was brought to the Potomac Conference Executive Committee, where it was unanimously voted to move forward with the first step. In hopes that the move will be cash-neutral, the administrative committee has placed the current building on the market while they search for a potential location closer to Washington, D.C.—Story by Potomac Conference Staff

Ohio Ghanaian Church Ministers Locally and Abroad
As Ohio Conference’s Columbus Ghanaian church members minister locally (they recently baptized 13), they are also ministering in the northern part of Ghana. The church most recently sponsored an evangelism meeting in an area of Ghana where most follow Islam and traditional religions. “The Lord blessed [our] evangelism meetings with 54 baptisms, mostly Muslims, during a two-week evangelistic campaign where I was the speaker,” shared Isaac Boateng, senior pastor of the church. They have also started a church building project for the new converts.

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**Pine Forge Students Give the Gift of Life**

A total of 27 students at Pine Forge Academy in Pine Forge, Pa., recently responded to a call to give the gift of life by donating blood. According to the Miller Keystone Blood Center’s calculation, the amount of blood donated has the potential of saving more than 48 lives. Students were visibly moved after a representative of Miller Keystone shared a video of a blood recipient meeting with some of the donors who literally saved her during a life-threatening surgery. Pictured is Armondi Stokes-Hicks, president of the United Student Movement.
New Jersey Conference Church Moves to a New Building

At the end of last year, New Jersey Conference’s El Faro Spanish church met for the first time in the building that became their new church home. The new building is located at 220 Walker Street in Cliffside Park. It cost $2 million, and came fully equipped with furniture, computers, sound systems, an organ and piano. It seats 250 individuals and has parking. El Faro sold their Hoboken church building for $2 million and thus had the funds to purchase this newer building that is only about 5 years old. Pictured above center is Ana who was a girl when the church was founded in 1952 as the first Hispanic church in New Jersey. Below is a photo of the church.—Story by Jim Greene

La Iglesia Hispana de El Faro compra un nuevo edificio
Al final del año, la Iglesia Hispana de El Faro se reunió en su nuevo edificio de iglesia. El nuevo edificio está en el 220 Walker Street en Cliffside Park. El costo fue $2 millones y incluye muebles, computadoras, sistema de sonido, órgano y piano. Tiene espacio para 250 personas y estacionamiento. El Faro vendió su edificio de iglesia en Hoboken por $2 millones y con eso, tuvieron los fondos para comprar este nuevo edificio que solo tiene 5 años de estar construido. El Faro, que antes era la Iglesia Hispana de Hoboken, fue fundada en 1952 y es la primera iglesia Hispana de New Jersey.—Historia por Jim Greene

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**Book Release: Transformation**

Jim Ayer says he is no longer an alcoholic, thief and drug dealer all because God changed him. In his new book, *Transformation*, Ayer shares his own intensely personal journey of transformation. He also offers a study guide and DVD following the same theme. This member of Chesapeake Conference’s Triadelphia church in Clarksville, Md., said he felt compelled to spread the word that “our loving Lord is well able to change us into royalty and prepare us to become co-regents with Him forever” to those who struggle against the devil each day.

Q: In your opinion, what is the key to spiritual transformation?

A: It’s all about getting to know Jesus as your very best Friend and understanding what surrender and commitment really looks like. The deeper the friendship, the greater the change of character, resulting in greater happiness, peace and joy.

*The books and DVDs are available at your local Adventist book store and at various online outlets.— Interview by Visitor Staff*
After 22 Months in Jail, Adventist Pastor Goes Free in West Africa

On Sunday a court in Lomé, Togo, acquitted Seventh-day Adventist pastor Antonio Monteiro (pictured) and sentenced Adventist church member Bruno Amah to life in prison, a lawyer for the Adventist world church said.

The decision by the Lomé Court of Appeals comes nearly 22 months after the two men and others were detained in March 2012 on charges of conspiracy to commit murder. In a case that has captured the attention of the global denomination, the two men, as well as three others, were detained nearly two years ago without trial and solely on the accusation of one man who was described as a “pathological liar” in a court-ordered psychiatric exam. That man, Kpatcha Simliya, who was also detained, was also convicted in the ruling and sentenced to life in prison. —Story by ANN Staff

Allegheny East Member Joins Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries
Washington Johnson II, former editor of *Message* magazine and a member of Allegheny East Conference’s Breath of Life church in Fort Washington, Md., recently joined the North American Division Department of Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries (ACM-NAD) as an assistant director.

“The broad experience in chaplaincy and pastoral ministry that Chaplain Johnson brings with him will be a strong asset to the department,” says Gary Counsell, ACM director. “Chaplain Johnson’s primary responsibilities will be to interact with current and prospective chaplains, union and conference Adventist church leaders, and military service personnel. His territory includes the Columbia, Atlantic, and Lake unions, as well as the eastern portion of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Canada.”—Story by Deena Bartel-Wagner

READ MORE ON THE NAD WEBSITE

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**Is Ryan Bell Right or Wrong? Pastors Weigh In**

*Former Southeastern California Conference pastor Ryan Bell has recently gained national media attention for trying to live as an atheist in 2014. ([Read more about the experiment here](#)). Below is one pastor’s response:*

"Questioning what you believe about God—or even whether you believe in God—is a bit like handling weapons-grade uranium: It can light up your world (think nuclear reactor) or lay waste to it (think mushroom cloud). The key is the attitude someone has in asking their questions, and whether or not that someone has the dogged tenacity to dig—I mean deeply, doggedly, decisively dig—for real answers. Atheism ultimately fails because it’s too simple; it’s an insufficiently rigorous response to life’s deepest questions. But too often, some who ask questions of and about God end up as atheists—not because (as Nietzsche might suggest) God died, but because their work ethic did."—Shane Anderson, pastor of Potomac Conference’s New Market (Va.) church

READ MORE QUOTES HERE
UPCOMING EVENTS

MARYLAND

January 25: Barry Black, U.S. Senate chaplain, will speak during divine service as they kick off Miracle Temple’s monthlong, life-transforming series “Breaking the Chains of Slavery.” The series will be held every Sabbath at the Baltimore church during divine service. For more information, visit miracletemple.net.

February 12-16: The Global Adventist Internet Network (GAiN) Conference invites all interested in communication, evangelism and technology to a conference focused on finding new ways to fulfill the Gospel Commission. Information on the conference can be found at http://gain.adventist.org.

OHIO

February 1: Ohio Conference’s Youth Winter Retreat is a free spiritual retreat designed specifically for high school students! This is a time of worship, Bible study, prayer and intentional focus on our relationship with Jesus! Allan Walshe, the chair of the Department of Discipleship at Andrews University (Mich.) will speak. Click here to register and receive a free lunch.

February 21-23: During the GODEncounters weekend in Oregonia, Sam Leonor, chaplain at La Sierra University in California, will speak. Attendees will focus on prayer, music, fellowship and small group discussions. Click here to get more details and check out pictures!

WASHINGTON, D.C.

January 19: All are invited to the Symphony of Brotherhood program the National Cathedral where attendees will listen to excerpts from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., sermon, walk where he walked and visit the place where he and his companions on the civil rights journey are remembered in stone within the cathedral. In between there will be songs, prayers and reflections in quiet on his legacy. Attendance is free with a donation of a canned food. Email espencer@cathedral.org by Thursday the January 16 to register. The program will be held 1-4 p.m.

FLORIDA

January 20: The North American Division’s online registration for the health summit in Florida ends January 20! This summit of courses is designed for health leaders and individuals wanting to share evidence-based wholistic health programs, which will enable them to effectively present the life-changing elements for abundant living. If you want your congregation’s health ministry to be relevant and able to address current health issues, you will want to attend. This event presents many exciting opportunities for networking, enrichment and spiritual growth. Watch live streaming of the evening community outreach by John Bradshaw, It Is Written speaker/director, starting on January 26 at 7:30 p.m. EST at www.ChooseFullLife.org. Registration information can also be found on that site.

WORLDWIDE

January 8-18: The 10 Days of Prayer initiative (formerly called Operation Global Rain) was adopted by the world church in 2010. All around the world, Adventist churches are experiencing the renewal of the Holy Spirit by following the disciples’ example and participating in 10 Days of Prayer. This year, the
The Hope Channel will also host special programming in conjunction with the program. Small group leader’s guides and daily theme sheets are available online at tendaysofprayer.org.

OVERSEAS

February 13-19: Young adults invited to participate in the North American Division’s Ignition Mission Trip to Haiti. The trip will take young people to a Restore a Child orphanage. Young adults can also continue on to the Ignition Convention in Miami that starts on February 19. For more information on joining the trip, contact Gael Murray at Gael.Murray@nad.adventist.org.
Patrick Johnson formerly served in the West African Union Mission of Seventh-day Adventists and today serves as principal of the Miracle Meadows School in Salem, W.Va.

January 14, 2014 · by Taashi Rowe · in Mountain View

Story by Patrick Johnson

When the West African state of Liberia degenerated into chaos, occasioned by a long-running civil conflict from 1989 to 2003, I, together with all other Liberians, was awakened to a rude and shocking reality. I grew up knowing a Liberia that was stable, peaceful and loving but the mask fell off when my country ignited into the devilish inferno for more than a decade. The loving and caring character of the people suddenly evaporated.

On more than one occasion, I came close to being killed by rebel fighters, however, no other incident throughout Liberia’s nightmare shook me as much as the day a rebel combatant of about 14 years old held me at gunpoint. In full view of my terrified family, including my young son, he threatened to shoot me if I as much as took a single step or moved any part of my body. With his submachine gun cocked and finger ready to pull the trigger, he bellowed at me, “Open your mouth!” When I complied, he shoved the nozzle down my throat and threatened to blow off my head! As he became increasingly erratic, I heard a commanding voice shout, “Soldier, as you were!”

My life was saved that day, but during the war, my dear mother was killed in cold-blood and I lost five siblings. And, it was not just my family that suffered at the hands of the combatants. During the war, warlords and commanders drugged then brainwashed combatants into raping women and children and torturing and killing thousands of all ages. My unpleasant experiences filled me with anger and hate toward all combatants of the war. The Lord, however, was about to teach me that His ways were not my ways.

When the war ended, I responded to an ad for the position of education coordinator at the National Ex-Combatants Commission and Secretariat. The Liberian government created the agency to provide assistance and opportunities for the rehabilitation, reintegration and resettlement of more than 30,000 former combatants, most of whom were young people, including children younger than 10 years old.

When I set out to apply for the position, I did so only because it fit in with what I had already been doing as a schoolteacher. I thought I would be dealing with just a tiny fraction of former combatants. Imagine my surprise when I was offered the executive deputy director position, which made me responsible for helping 30,000 unruly and very unpredictable people who had caused so much harm and suffering. They needed trauma counseling, education, vocational training, healthcare and shelter. Added to that, they needed help in having
society accept and take them back, because they were widely hated, even by their own parents and kinfolk, for the evils they had done.

Indeed, I recoiled at the thought. Was God serious? Moreover, I would have to love them to take care of them. How did He then expect me to love them when I was literally hate and anger personified? These were the same people who had hurt me, my family and the entire country.

I worked with the National Ex-Combatants Commission and Secretariat from 2000 to 2004. During this time, I experienced the transforming power of forgiveness that comes only through God’s Holy Spirit. The ex-combatants returned my labor of love. Some supplied my family with their cultivated produce, and they frequently invited me to visit in their homes. They were very protective and showed concern for my family’s personal safety. Once, when factional fighting broke out again, they commandeered a truck and drove to my home to take us and our belongings to safety. We had already left before they arrived, but they kept guard at the house to deter criminals until we returned after the crisis. Not a pin was missing!

It is never easy to forgive those who hurt you, but it is possible. In allowing the Lord to help me love these “unlovable” ex-combatants and letting Him use me to bless them, I ended up becoming the one most blessed. Gloom was dispelled from my spirit and replaced with the agreeable glow of Christ’s love and forgiveness.

_Miracle Meadows is a boarding school operated as a supporting ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and is designed to meet the needs of elementary through secondary school students with at-risk behaviors._
Despite Negative Press and a Drop in the Polls, is God Making a Comeback?

December 19, 2013 · by Michelle Bernard · in Uncategorized

by Arin Gencer

About a year ago, a Pew Research Center report revealed that a rapidly growing number of Americans didn’t identify with any religion, jumping to 20 percent of the public and one-third of adults younger than 30. But, a quick scan of the country’s cultural landscape suggests Americans do have a keen interest in—if not a passion for—God and spiritual things. From books to television to the digital realm, religious subjects and themes surround us. Some books like Zealot, God is Not Great and The God Delusion question its relevance, while many other sources offer a more positive viewpoint.

A glance at the New York Times best-seller list shows Bill O’Reilly’s Killing Jesus held the top spot for more than a month in 2013. Proof of Heaven, a neurosurgeon’s account of his otherworldly experience while lying in a coma, resided on the list for a year and, along with the devotional Jesus Calling, was among the top overall sellers of the first quarter of 2013, according to Publisher’s Weekly.

Programs with religious themes have popped up all over cable television in the past few years, including The American Bible Challenge on the Game Show Network and The Bible miniseries, which debuted on the History Channel in March 2013 with 13.1 million viewers —reportedly the biggest audience for a cable broadcast at that point of the year. The show became the top-selling miniseries of all time after its home-video release, and an NBC sequel is in the works.

Online, the 2012 YouTube sensation “Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus” has had more than 26 million views and led to a corresponding book, Jesus > Religion, released last October. GodTube, the Christian answer to YouTube, continues to see tens of thousands of hits, while monthly Google searches for “God,” “Jesus” and “Christianity” surge. And, the Bible app YouVersion has millions of users across the country.

“There’s been a growing gulf between formal religion and what people might call spirituality—it’s very much an individual thing,” says William Johnsson, who leads interfaith relations for the North American Division (NAD) and teaches world religions at Loma Linda University (Calif.). “In fact, spirituality is being manifested in all sorts of ways. …There is a big tendency toward individuals seeking after God, or seeking in small groups rather than churches.”

Seeking Answers and Authenticity

For Raj Attiken, retired Ohio Conference president, and others, the reasons behind the popularity of God and religious subjects, even as fewer affiliate with a particular religion, vary. Our interconnected world has become smaller, exposing people to forms of spirituality beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition dominating Western culture, Attiken says, which may drive some to seek God (or a god).

The trend may also reflect a realization that science, technology, reason and experience don’t satisfy, and that there must be something more, he says—as well as people’s attempts to make sense of national and global calamities and crises in recent years.

Generational differences, from the baby boomers to the Millennials, are driving this shift as well, says Dave Gemmell, associate director of the NAD Ministerial Department. “Every new generation has to express faith in their own unique setting,” he says. “Millennials, by and large, have not accepted the cultural setting of boomers … and don’t attend traditional church.”

But, this doesn’t mean they have no interest in God. “There is among our [Seventh-day] Adventist young people a searching for authentic Christianity—to not be satisfied with traditional answers, but to really study the Bible and go deep,” Johnsson says.

Yet relativism, the notion that there is no such thing as truth, also plays into whether people identify with a certain religion, says Stewart Pepper, an evangelist and the pastor of Mountain View Conference’s Charleston (W.Va.) church. “If there’s no such thing as right and
wrong, if the truth is what you make it, why would I identify with a denomination that spouts truths?” Pepper says. “People without a clear sense of truth tend to lack commitment.”

**Meeting People Where They Are**

In a world where organized religion holds less sway, Adventists must find fresh ways—and patience—to make connections. Those ways may involve less focus on selling our faith and more on creating “the conditions and environment in which a person meets and falls in love with Jesus,” says Attiken, who recently authored Refreshed, a monograph about making the Ohio Conference more Christocentric. The conference, for example, emphasizes that “the church must turn its face outside its own walls and immerse itself in the community,” he says. “Jesus immersed himself into the brokenness and into the filth and messiness of our humanity.”

Just paying attention to the people around us can allow God to open our eyes to their need and, in His time, show us opportunities to share Jesus, says Season Cromwell, evangelism director at Chesapeake Conference’s New Hope church in Fulton, Md. “Jesus doesn’t need to be sold. All we have to be is honest and love somebody and show them the truth,” she says. “It’s not about my success in being able to convert someone. It’s about Jesus.”

Cromwell launched a class at New Hope last fall that is specifically designed to offer a place for people to just ask questions about God and Christianity. A lot of times, people “want to see if that’s what they want,” she says. “They don’t want to be indoctrinated; they want to check it out. This is an opportunity to do that.”

Pastor Pepper has found getting people to believe the Adventist message isn’t the real difficulty so much as getting commitments beyond that point. People are drawn by relationships, by being able to connect and identify with others. We need to engage people outside of evangelistic meetings and Bible studies, he suggests. “If you want to make your church outreach more effective, you have to have a social life,” he says. “Don’t bring them to a party to tell them about the Sabbath. Just tell them, ‘We’re going to have fun tonight.’”

The world may be turning away from organized religion, but a thirst for the divine clearly remains. “We have much to offer the world,” Johnsson says of the Adventist Church. “But, what it comes down to is this: living close to the Lord, letting the Holy Spirit simply use us.”

*by Arin Gencer*

**More on this topic:**

The Future of the Potomac Conference Office Building

As far back as 1973-74, conference officials have been trying to determine whether it makes sense to move the conference office closer to the Washington D.C. area. One such study, the Hewitt Study, was completed in '73-'74 and clearly shows the advantages to be gained. Although there has been much discussion through the years, no actions have been taken.

For the past several months, prayer warriors throughout the Potomac Conference (PC) have been praying about this issue, seeking God’s wisdom and guidance. This past fall, the issue was brought to the PC Executive Committee (EC), where it was unanimously voted to move forward to see if a move like this is warranted and within the realm of possibility. In addition, it was determined that a move like this would need to be cash neutral – thus, the first step in the process would necessitate the selling of our current location.

The EC believes this move allows us, as a conference, to be more effective in fulfilling our Mission, Vision and Values and to be better stewards of the resources at hand. As all the alternatives have been considered, some facts began to create greater clarity – for instance:

- There are currently 12 churches within one hour of the current office – there would be 102 churches within one hour of possible sites in Northern VA.
- There are currently 2,900 members within one hour of the current office – there would be over 25,000 members within one hour of possible sites in Northern VA.
- Closer proximity to the Greater Washington D.C. area would allow for less travel time for the office team, plus most committee members of the different constituent-based boards.
- In recruiting new employees, more opportunities may be available for spouses to find employment.
- More opportunities to utilize the great diversity of the PC.

Our greatest desire, however, is to be within His Will. Thus, our prayer continues to be for God to open and shut doors, as He deems best.

Based on the EC vote, the Administrative Committee within the PC has taken several steps to identify potential future sites (near the West side of Washington D.C.) for the PC office, as well as place the office on the market for possible sale to see if there is any interest.
The Adcom team acknowledges and is sensitive to the questions and concerns that come with a change like this and will be open to feedback. For the most current and accurate information and developments, the Adcom team will keep employees and constituents updated via the conference website.

We ask for your continued prayers as we move forward, and as always, we thank you for your time and interest in this matter. May God continue to bless as we move our mission and vision forward in 2014.

The Potomac Conference Administrative (Adcom) Team

Bill Miller, President
Jorge Ramirez, VP for Administration
John Cress, VP for Pastoral Ministries
Keith Hallam, VP for Education
Karen Cress, Assistant to the president for Strategic Initiatives
Dan Jensen, Assistant to the president for Communication

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Book Release: Transformation

Jim Ayer says he is no longer an alcoholic, thief and drug dealer all because God changed him. In his new book, *Transformation*, Ayer shares his own intensely personal journey of transformation. He also offers a study guide and DVD following the same theme. This member of Chesapeake Conference’s Triadelphia church in Clarksville, Md., said he felt compelled to spread the word that “our loving Lord is well able to change us into royalty and prepare us to become co-regents with Him forever” to those who struggle each day against the devil.

Q: How did your personal experiences impact the book?

A: *Transformation* is an outgrowth of my own personal journey—stumbling, falling and falling again. But once I discovered that my relationship with God, His love, power and desire to change me is completely anchored in His abilities alone to accomplish all He asks me to become, I began to experience exciting growth in my life.

Q: If people had only one choice, which of these three offerings should they pick?

A: The book, guide and DVD series each stand alone as to content. Each looks at the “diamond of transformation” from a different facet, one building upon the other. If people can pick only one, My choice would be the 12-week study guide because it leads you into the daily journey of experiencing all the blessings God has in store for you. The DVD complements, and adds to, the experience.

Q: Tell us about the DVDs.

A: *Remodeling Your Life* unfolds over 12 episodes on three DVDs. We shot the series in 100-plus locations in California, Nevada, Massachusetts and Washington, D.C. We tried to create a very engaging dynamic, getting rid of the preacher standing on a stage with a suit and tie!

Q: In your opinion, what is the key to spiritual transformation?

A: It’s all about getting to know Jesus as your very best Friend and understanding what surrender and commitment really looks like. The deeper the friendship, the greater the change of character resulting in greater happiness, peace and joy.

The books and DVDs are available at your local Adventist book store and at various online outlets.
Split decision in Togo’s trial of Adventist pastor, others detained

The Lomé Court of Appeals this morning issued a ruling on five men who were arbitrarily detained for nearly 22 months on charges of conspiracy to commit murder. They were held solely on the accusation of one man who was a “pathological liar” according to a court-ordered psychiatric exam.

Monteiro, Moumouni acquitted; others sentenced to more prison, some for life

January 12, 2014 | Silver Spring, Maryland, United States | ANN staff

In a split decision, a verdict was handed down today by a court in Lomé, Togo, that acquits Seventh-day Adventist pastor Antonio Monteiro and sentences Adventist Church member Bruno Amah to life in prison, a lawyer for the Adventist world church said. The decision by the Lomé Court of Appeals comes nearly 22 months after the two men and others were detained in March of 2012 on charges of conspiracy to commit murder.

In a case that has captured the attention of the global denomination, the two men, as well as three others, were detained nearly two years ago without trial and solely on the accusation of one man who was described as a “pathological liar” in a court-ordered psychiatric exam. That man, Kpatcha Simliya, who was also detained, was also convicted in this morning's ruling and sentenced to life in prison.

Todd McFarland, an associate general counsel for the Adventist world church headquarters, who was with the defense team at this weekend’s trial, said the ruling also included two other men—Beteynam Raphael Kpiki Sama, who was convicted and sentenced to 25 years in prison and fined 10 million CFA francs (US$20,800), and Idrissou Moumouni, who was acquitted.

The nearly two-year saga has been followed by millions of Seventh-day Adventists, who have held international prayer vigils, launched social media campaigns, sponsored letter-writing initiatives to government officials and diplomats, held press conferences and led a signature drive for a petition calling for the men’s release.

"We have mixed feelings about the decision of the court," said John Graz, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Adventist world church. "The acquittal of Pastor Monteiro is good news and we are happy for him and his family. We are surprised and very sad about the condemnation of Amah."

Monteiro, a native of the island nation of Cape Verde, had been serving as a missionary in Togo since 2009 as the Family Ministries director at the denomination’s Sahel Union Mission in Lomé.

The arrests and detentions unfolded following a string of homicides in September of 2011.

Depending on different newspaper and police accounts, more than a dozen bodies of women between the ages of 12 and 36 had been found in the northern Lomé suburb of Agoué. The bodies had stab wounds and some sexual organs had been removed. Blood and animal parts are often used in ceremonies of Voodoo, which is widely practiced in Togo.

When no arrests were made, the public demanded justice for the killings, church leaders said.

Simliya was later shown on television surrounded by police guards, telling the story of the series of murders he said that he organized and naming accomplices who collected blood and organs. But much of the story proved unlikely, including the number of victims and the methods used, according to Simliya’s medical examiner.
“Any informed and reasonable man would have doubts regarding his incredible outpouring or the feasibility of his crimes or supposed crimes,” a September 9, 2012, court-ordered psychiatric exam stated, which was viewed by ANN.

Simliya would later recant his accusation, saying he was beaten by police and forced to give names of people he supposedly knew were co-conspirators in a blood trafficking network, according to the psychiatric exam.

Still, his testimony—the only evidence in the case—was enough to bring convictions in today’s ruling. The jury that made the ruling consisted of three judges and six lay persons, McFarland said.

This morning’s decision was handed down at 5 a.m., McFarland said. The trial began Friday, January 10 at 8:45 a.m. and extended until 3:30 a.m. Saturday morning. The court reconvened at 11:45 a.m. on Saturday, and closing arguments ended at 11:30 p.m. that evening.

McFarland said Monteiro and Moumouni, the two acquitted detainees, will be released as early as Monday.
North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists® : 1-9-14 Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries Adds Assistant Director

1-9-14 Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries Adds Assistant Director

William Johnson II

Washington Johnson II has joined the North American Division Department of Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries (ACM-NAD) as an assistant director. “The broad experience in chaplaincy and pastoral ministry that Chaplain Johnson brings with him will be a strong asset to the department,” says Gary Councell, ACM director. “Chaplain Johnson’s primary responsibilities will be to interact with current and prospective chaplains, union and conference Adventist church leaders, and military service personnel. His territory includes the Columbia, Atlantic, and Lake Unions, as well as the eastern portion of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Canada.” Johnson, a United States Navy Reserve Chaplain (Commander), was recently deployed to Djibouti, Africa. During his deployment Johnson served as Deputy Command Chaplain and Senior Protestant Chaplain for approximately 3,500 service personnel at Camp Lemonnier, the only permanent U. S. military base on the African continent.

Johnson formerly served as editor-in-chief of Message Magazine and pastor of multiple congregations in the South Central and Northern California Conferences. He is a graduate of Oakwood University, Andrews University Theological Seminary, and Reformed Theological Seminary, receiving Bachelor of Arts, Master of Divinity, and Doctor of Ministry degrees, respectively. Johnson and his wife, Joyce are parents to Washington III.

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Deena Bartel-Wagner
Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries
Publications Editor/Webmaster
Former Pastor Decides To Spend A Year Without God

by NPR Staff

January 12, 2014 4:00 PM

Listen to the Story

All Things Considered

Minister Ryan Bell has decided to "try on" atheism for a year. The former Seventh-day Adventist pastor was asked to leave his congregation in March.

Natalie Gee

Former Seventh-day Adventist Pastor Ryan Bell made an unusual New Year's resolution: to live for one year without God.

He used to lead a congregation in Southern California, but in March, he was asked to step down after voicing some of the doubts that led to this decision to "try on" atheism.
Just a few days into the new year, after announcing his resolution, Bell was asked to leave the teaching positions he held at the Christian Azusa Pacific University and Fuller Theological Seminary.

Bell spoke with NPR's Arun Rath about his flirtation with atheism and how he arrived at the decision to put his work as a religious leader — and follower — on hold.

**Interview Highlights**

**On the expectations of belief for church leaders**

My entire adult life, I've been a leader in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And I think the expectation of church leaders is that they would have fewer questions and more answers, and that the members or seekers or people that come to the church are the ones with the questions. And I can't remember a time that I wasn't wrestling with my faith. I think faith is one of those things that people wrestle with.

**On experiencing doubt**

When things start to come unwound, sometimes they unwind all the way. And then, you know, perhaps you can wind it up a little bit again later — who knows? But I feel like I lost my church leadership position and then I really didn't have any compulsion to go to church internally, like I just didn't feel like participating in church. I tried a number of times.

And it woke me up to the kinds of things people had been saying to me all these years, like, "I love what you're doing at the church, but church just isn't for me." ...

So I just decided not to fight it. I just decided to say, "Well, let me just give church a rest." And as I did that, I just began to wonder about the very existence of God.

**On how members of his congregation have responded**

Some people have been encouraging, some people have just been silently watching. Some are a little heartbroken. It's almost like people respond as though I've lost a loved one and I'm going through a deep grieving process and doing strange things as a result. Some people have just tried to talk me off the ledge.

Others have said, "I have these same questions. I'm really glad that you're doing this, and I'll be following along. Maybe I'll figure some things out along the way, too."

I'm not saying to my former members, "Follow me out the door." Nothing like that. I don't want them to do that. I want them to be on their own journey authentically.

**On the reaction of the atheist community**

Some people are, in a way, gloating. They're like, "Congratulations on coming to the other side" ... But other people are skeptical. There are a lot of atheists who are really not sure what I'm doing. So they say, "You are either an atheist or you're not. You can't be 'a little atheist,' like you're 'a little bit pregnant.' "

In a way, what I hear them saying is, "You're not authentically atheist" ... And my internal reaction to some of that is to say, oh, I was a Christian leader for a long time. I heard that argument on the other side, as well: "You're not properly Christian. You're not a Christian in our way of being a Christian, so you don't really fit here." And my response to that is, I'm used to not fitting places. So that's fine with me.
Is Ryan Bell Right or Wrong? Pastors Weigh In

Interviews by Taashi Rowe

Ryan Bell, a former pastor in the Southeastern California Conference who once pastored in the Pennsylvania Conference, recently gained national media attention for trying to live as an atheist in 2014.

We asked several of our pastors what they thought of the experiment and for tips on what to do when struggling with your faith:

1. Reading the Bible each day leaves you well prepared for tests that might come.

“As a Christian, I like to keep up on what the competition is thinking and doing. I’ve read and/or watched presentations by atheists like Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris, etc. I’ve also had personal, polite, and very lengthy conversations with atheists, and been richer (and at times sadder) for it. But I do not recommend these things for those who don’t know much about the Bible, who don’t like to think deeply, or who can’t stand to live for any length of time with unanswered questions. Atheism, after all, is a very old religion. It does have some elegance, some attractiveness about it. Those with a loose hold on Christ or [who] are poorly anchored in the Bible should stay away from atheist authors, for those authors are quite good at pushing shoddily constructed caricatures of the Christian faith. But I find that reading the Bible regularly and prayerfully going through each day with Christ leaves me well prepared for whatever tests might come. I also read Christian apologists like Ravi Zacharias, William Lane Craig, Timothy Keller, and many others, as well as watch YouTube clips by our own Clifford Goldstein in which the Christian faith is ably defended.”—Shane Anderson, pastor of Potomac Conference’s New Market (Va.) church

2. Honestly Face Your Doubt

“To the potential horror and consternation of my church members and colleagues I find this decision by the pastor refreshing and sobering. Many people spend years living without God and go to church every week. Reflecting on your spiritual journey is something many of us just don’t do for all kind of reasons. We live in a fast-paced world, so now, more than ever, we need to step back and look at what we are doing and why. I personally would not spend a year reading atheist books, or trying to live my life without God. I would not recommend that journey to anyone who has doubts or struggles. I would suggest that a person honestly face their doubts, explore them and take them to a trusted person who can walk with them and guide them. All of us struggle and question at some time. Suppressing our questions leaves us mired in immaturity.”—Steve Murphy, pastor of Potomac Conference’s Wheaton (Md.) church

3. Honest questions are not something you should feel guilty about.

“First, you cannot live ‘as if’ there is no God unless you first believe that there is no God. Being atheist does not mean I act like God does not exist, but rather that I actually believe He does not exist. To act “as if” there is no God when one believes there is a God creates a cognitive disconnect that leaves one feeling unfulfilled because the inner core beliefs are being ignored.

…I don’t know if I’ve ever tested my belief but I’ve certainly questioned several aspects of it at different times. My suggestion would be to
remember that honest questions are not something you should feel guilty about. If you are living your life\ntoeing the church line on every topic all the time, I would suggest you are nothing more than a brain\nwashed robot. Questioning and understanding how our world and our God works is not something to be\nashamed of—that is how intelligent people deal with competing world views and grow into the one they\nbelieve.”—Stewart Pepper, pastor of Mountain View Conference’s Charleston (W.Va.) church

4. Take this journey with others, not alone.

“I believe that seeking answers to tough questions is part of our life journey. When we stop seeking we die, intellectually and socially, and even spiritually. One positive thing Ryan is doing is to take this journey publicly. Which means he is opening himself to listen to various perspectives. Others involved in this journey with him (regardless of where they stand spiritually) can help him keep a balance. The danger comes when we keep our journey to ourselves—not open to share and listen to other voices. When we are the only voice, we can convince ourselves of anything. After having a Christian experience for so many years, I really don’t think that he can eliminate God out of his life in one year. Christianity is more than a belief. It is a culture, life tradition and part of a person’s identity and history. One can never change their personal history, one can only add to it.”—Ann Roda, pastor at Chesapeake Conference’s New Hope church in Fulton, Md.

We also want to hear from you! What do you do when you’re struggling with your faith? Let us know on our Facebook page.

Interested in this topic? Join our January 21 Twitter chat discussing why 20 percent of the public and one-third of adults younger than 30—don’t identify with any religion.