

quarterly resource for local church leaders † october/december 2015

ELDER'S DIGEST

UNITED *in*
PRAYER

Revival
and **REFORMATION**
YOU, YOUR FAMILY, YOUR CHURCH, YOUR COMMUNITY

Believe
His **Prophets**

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EDITOR’S NOTES: The articles in this publication have been revised slightly or updated to conform to the intended audience and nature of *Elder’s Digest*.

SUBSCRIPTION AND ADDRESS CHANGES: One-year subscription, US\$18.00. Three-year subscription, US\$47.00. Please subscribe at www.eldersdigest.org or send check to *Elder’s Digest*, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA. Please send address changes to garciamarenkoa@gc.adventist.org.

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SOURCES OF CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH

Conflict is never easy to deal with. I think that when we deal with conflict, we realize that we do have at least some spark of selfishness and pride in us which God needs to remove. For this reason, the first step in conflict resolution is to put aside selfishness and pride.

Selfishness: Musical preferences—what music is played or sung in church—are a huge source of conflict in churches today. However, the real source of musical conflict and war in the church is not the music itself but the attitude behind the demands. Instead of being “filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:18, 19, NASB), people forget the Holy Spirit as they demand that the melody satisfy the emotional desires of their own hearts. The focus of the music actually turns inward for personal pleasure and satisfaction instead of outward and upward for God’s pleasure and satisfaction.


Underlying this conflict is the fact that too many Christians equate worship with how they feel and, because music so powerfully stirs our emotions, the end result is that people judge the worship service on how the music affected them. But worship is not only about how you feel or what you receive; true worship must be done in spirit and truth (John 4:24), which means it is about willfully giving God the honor and praise He is due. True worship includes Bible readings, prayer, an offering, and a sermon, as well as music. Perhaps our personal and corporate worship would improve if we

would remember that God looks at our hearts and knows whether we are focused on worshiping Him or disgruntled because our personal preferences are not being met.

Pride: Pride is the opposite of humility, which is necessary for unity in the church. Humility regards other people as more important than self and seeks out the best interests of others, even when it requires personal sacrifice. That is exactly what Jesus did for us when He became a man and died in our place. He placed our interests above His own. Pride regards other people as less important than self and seeks to fulfill personal interests at the expense of others. That is the way of the world.

At least to some degree, pride plays a role in most conflicts. Pride demands its own way in issues of personal preference because pride believes its preferences are superior to those of others; therefore, it demands that people change to meet its desires. Pride is arrogant, so it is also damaging to the normal structure of relationships in any group, including the church.

If you are experiencing conflict, be humble and seek to work it out. In Matthew 5:23, 24, Jesus tells us that we need to reconcile with our brothers before we can properly worship God. We are to strive to be at peace with all men as far as it depends on us (Rom. 12:18). Jesus told us to love our enemies (Matt. 6:44); no matter how badly they have treated us, we are still to try to resolve conflicts with them following His advice. If we cannot work it out ourselves, then we should get help from someone who is godly and not involved in the conflict. When we see others in conflict, we should seek to help—or get help—instead of ignoring it.

The cause of Jesus Christ is damaged by unresolved conflicts. We need to make sure that we are part of the solution, not part of the problem. In that way, we may bring glory to our Savior’s name. 



JONAS ARRAIS | General Conference Associate Ministerial Secretary

UNLEASHING GOD'S POWER!

Revival
and REFORMATION
YOU, YOUR FAMILY, YOUR CHURCH, YOUR COMMUNITY



A small church in a farming town had been without a pastor for more than six months. It had been decreasing in size for years, so God led the head elder to unite with church members several times a week in prayer. They prayed, and prayed, and kept praying for people to come to their church. People did start coming, and members continued to pray until their attendance had more than doubled! Their dying school became their next united prayer object. God soon had doubled its enrollment plus the members were now seeing personal answers to prayer and were filled with rejoicing!

Imagine, millions of Seventh-day Adventists around the world, all praying together in one accord for the same thing! What would happen? If millions unitedly persevered in prayer, much like the disciples did in the upper room just before Pentecost and through the book of Acts, what could God do!

God has promised to pour out His Spirit upon us, if we just ask, and press together as a people in one accord in prayer. You can be part of a similar dynamic, worldwide prayer movement with that same purpose! *United in Prayer*, as this Revival and Reformation initiative is called, is a global

church community of Seventh-day Adventists members praying together. "We want to encourage members to join together in prayer," says Jerry Page, General Conference Ministerial Association Secretary, "whether through your own personal time with God, personal prayer groups, or in a broader sense as a church through prayer partners, prayer chains, united prayer phone lines, 777 on the hour, texting groups, or any other way that God leads." Participants of *United in Prayer* will also share and receive testimonies, prayer requests, practical helps, and inspirational messages.

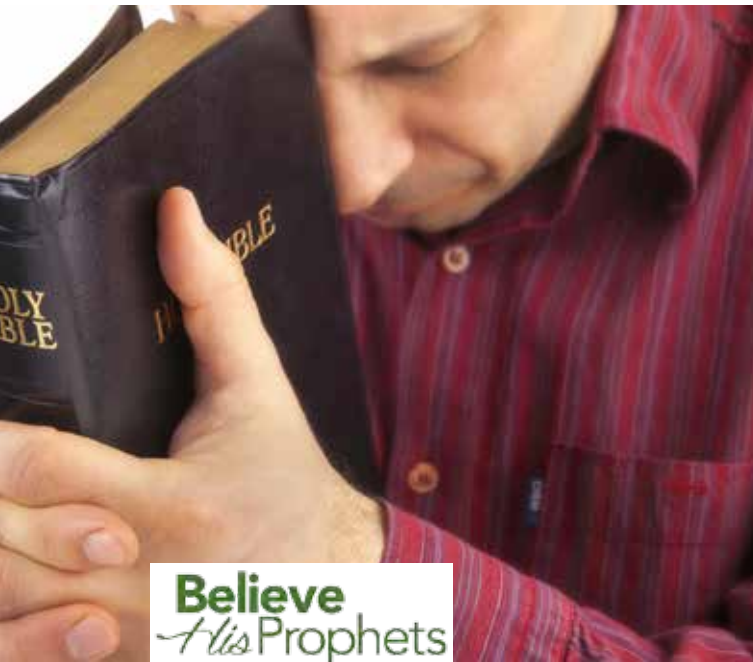
In Matthew 18:19 and 20, God invites us to come together and ask great things of Him: ". . . If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (AKJV).

WHY PRAY UNITEDLY?

Ellen White tells us that "The promise [in Matthew] is made on condition that the united prayers of the church are offered, and in answer to these prayers there may be expected a power greater than that which comes in answer

“THE PURPOSE OF UNITED PRAYER IS TO PRAY TOGETHER FOR WHAT IS ON GOD’S HEART FOR THIS LOST WORLD,”

Janet Page



to private prayer. The power given will be proportionate to the unity of the members and their love for God and for one another (9MR 303.3)—MR No. 748 *The Power of United Prayer*.

A young woman’s husband left her for another woman. Her father kept persistently asking everyone to pray for the husband—his son-in-law—to come back to the wife and family. The father would meet in various prayer groups and would have them pray. The wife and children kept uniting in prayer for their father to return. For seven years they persevered in prayer. Then one happy day the husband returned home, and the marriage was restored!

“The purpose of united prayer is to pray together for what is on God’s heart for this lost world,” says Janet Page, General Conference Prayer Coordinator. “It brings us into unity, unleashes His power, and energizes our own spiritual life. I love it! Praying together with others has totally changed my life!”

BELIEVE HIS PROPHETS

Prayer and Bible study go hand in hand to bring revival. One can hardly have a strong prayer life without also going

deeper into God’s Word. The companion to the *United in Prayer* global prayer initiative is the global study program called *Believe His Prophets*. *Believe His Prophets*, the sequel to *Revived by His Word*, is a five-year program of reading through the entire Bible, a chapter a day, with an accompanying blog, and interactive comments. It also includes weekly readings from seven Ellen G. White books, including *Steps to Christ*, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, *Prophets and Kings*, *The Desire of Ages*, *The Acts of the Apostles*, and *The Great Controversy*.

“God’s Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path,” says Derek Morris, editor of *Ministry* magazine and coordinator of the program. “So our goal is to encourage church members to spend time with God in prayer and reading the Bible every day.”

“I used to be violent and always aggressive,” writes one participant, “but now, because of God’s Word and His love, I’m now peaceful, loving and kind.”

“My work mates are seeing changes in my habits,” writes another, “I use to swear a lot at work, but now these habits are dying out. Thanks, *Revived by His Word!*”

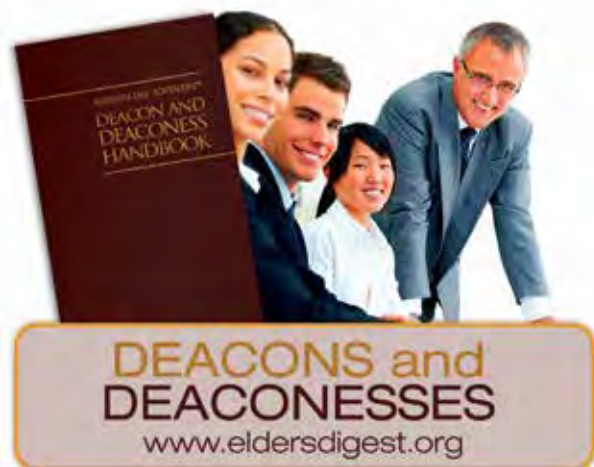
Shah writes, “I am no longer complaining about leaders in my local church, but I pray for them!”

The name *Believe His Prophets* was taken from the counsel in 2 Chronicles 20:20, which says, “Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be established; believe his prophets, and you will succeed” (ESV). “Thousands have been blessed by God as a result of *Revived by His Word*,” Morris concludes, “and we believe thousands more will gain an even deeper understanding of God’s will for their lives through *Believe His Prophets*.”

To be part of these two worldwide movements and receive the daily chapter and regular prayer mailings, go to www.RevivalandReformation.org.

ED

Jackie Ordelheide Smith is Ministerial communication manager at the General Conference world headquarters.



NURTURE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

Seventh-day Adventists place a high value on children.

In the light of the Bible they are seen as precious gifts from God entrusted to the care of parents, family, community of faith and society-at-large. Children possess enormous potential for making positive contributions to the Church and to society. Attention to their care, protection and development is extremely important. The Seventh-day Adventist Church reaffirms and extends its longstanding efforts to nurture and safeguard children and youth from persons—known and unknown—whose actions perpetrate any form of abuse and violence against them and/or sexually exploit them. Jesus modeled the kind of respect, nurture, and protection children should be able to expect from adults entrusted with their care.

Some of His strongest words of reproof were directed toward those who would harm them. Because of the trusting nature and dependence of children upon older and wiser adults and the life-changing consequences when this trust is breached, children require vigilant protection.

REDEMPITIVE CORRECTION

The Seventh-day Adventist Church places a priority on church-based parent education that helps parents develop the skills necessary for a redemptive approach to correction. Many children experience harsh punishment in the name of a biblical approach to discipline. Correction characterized by severe, punitive, dictatorial control often leads to resentment and rebellion. Such harsh discipline is also associated with heightened risk for physical and psychological harm to children as well as increased likelihood the youth will resort to coercion and violence in resolving their differences with others. By contrast, examples from Scripture as well as a large body of research confirm the effectiveness of more gentle forms of discipline that allow children to learn through reasoning and experiencing the consequences of their choices.

Such milder measures have been demonstrated to increase the likelihood children will make life-affirming choices and espouse parental values as they mature.

MAKING CHURCH A SAFE PLACE FOR CHILDREN

The Church also takes seriously its responsibility to minimize the risk for child sexual abuse and violence against children in the congregational setting. First and foremost, church leaders and members must themselves live by a strict code of ethics that precludes even the appearance of evil as regards the exploitation of minors for the gratification of adult desires. Other practical measures toward making church a safe place for children include attention to the safety of the church facility and its surroundings and the careful supervision and monitor-



ing of children and their environment during all church-related activities. Education regarding what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate interaction between adults and children, the warning signs of abuse and violence, and the specific steps to be followed should inappropriate behavior be reported or suspected are vitally important. Pastors and church leaders who are visible and approachable play an important role in prevention as well as in responding well to the needs of children whose safety may have been jeopardized. Regular updates are needed regarding their moral and legal responsibility to report child abuse to appropriate civil authorities. The designation of trained personnel and specific protocols at wider levels of Church organization will help to ensure appropriate action and follow-through when abuse is reported within the church setting.

Because of the complex nature of the problem of child sexual abuse and violence against children, intervention and treatment of perpetrators requires resources beyond the scope of ministry provided by the local church. However, the presence of a known perpetrator in a congregation calls for the highest levels of vigilance. While perpetrators should be held fully responsible for their own behavior, the supervision of persons with a history of inappropriate behavior is necessary to ensure that such persons maintain appropriate distance and refrain from all contact with children during church-related activities. Provision for alternative opportunities for

perpetrators to grow spiritually in settings where children are not present greatly enhances child protection.

FOSTERING EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL HEALING

Children who have been personally victimized or who have witnessed disturbing events need the care of adults who treat them with sensitivity and understanding. Practical support that helps children and families maintain stability in the midst of turmoil empowers victims and their families and promotes healing. The Church's commitment to breaking the silence frequently associated with child sexual abuse and violence, its efforts toward advocacy and justice for all victims, and deliberate action to safeguard children from all forms of abuse and violence will contribute much toward the emotional and spiritual recovery of all concerned. The Church regards the nurture and protection of children as a sacred trust. ED

This statement has been informed by the principles expressed in the following biblical passages: Lev. 18:6; 2 Sam. 13:1-11; 1 Kings 17:17-23; Ps. 9:9, 12, 16-18; 11:5-7; 22:24; 34:18; 127:3-5; 128:3-4; Prov. 31:8-9; Is. 1:16-17; Jer. 22:3; Matt. 18:1-6; 21:9, 15-16; Mark 9:37; 10:13-16; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21; 1 Tim. 5:8; Heb. 13:3.

This statement was approved and voted by the Executive Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists on June 23, 2010, and released at the General Conference Session in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, June 24-July 3, 2010.

iFOLLOW BIBLE STUDY GUIDES

iFollow is a series of six-week Bible studies created by the North American Division. Each study guide features suggested scripture readings, fundamental belief applications, questions for discussion, and additional study resources. iFollow is ideal for midweek meetings, small groups, and Sabbath School classes.

Do Justice, Love Mercy
This Bible study guide will lead you through Scripture to discover the different meanings and applications of God's version of justice.
By Seth Pierce
Catalog #417851

A Hole in the Soul
Learn how Solomon demonstrates the peace and joy of having a real relationship with Jesus, who wants nothing more than to transform our lives.
By Omar Miranda
Catalog #417849

The Unbelievable Beatitudes
This Bible study provides an in-depth perspective on the process of growth we experience as Christians while maintaining a relationship with a loving, all powerful Savior.
By Lori Peckham
Catalog #417845

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THE POWER OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP

“You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord (Isa. 43:10). In this chapter of the Bible, we see the Almighty God looking for support, solidarity, and help to execute His mission through His team on Planet Earth. Who are the members of His team? Who are those He calls His friends? Who are those included in the fine work to testify on His behalf? “You are my witnesses,” repeats the Lord for the second and third times in verse 12 and in chapter 44:8. He is not looking for lawyers, but witnesses. He is not looking for judges, but witnesses. He is relying on sinners who have been saved by His grace, who already have experienced His love, favor, and mercy, so He can proclaim to others His everlasting plan of salvation through them. Yes, He is looking for witnesses. He is looking for you and me.

In one of my last visits to El Salvador, I had the privilege of meeting a young man named Leonel Arteaga. Leonel was a faithful Seventh-day Adventist employee in the San Salvador City Hall. While working there as a young professional, he was informed that, eight years earlier, the local conference Youth Ministries Department had asked the city of San Salvador for permission to erect and unveil a monument of the Ten Commandments in the Central Square. But the request was tabled and forgotten by the authorities. Leonel, who was a well-respected employee in his office and a good witness for the Lord Jesus, decided to request a personal interview with the mayor of the city, who graciously received him in the highest office of that government building. After introducing the main reason for his interview, Leonel gave





the mayor a copy of the original request and presented the project on behalf of the Adventist youth in El Salvador. To make a long story short, when I was youth ministries director of the Inter-American Division, I had the privilege of unveiling an impressive monument of the Law of God, which had been erected 10 days prior to the arrival and public homily of Pope John Paul II in the same Central Square of that capital city. Since then, millions have received the impact of Leonel's leadership by reading the Ten Commandments posted there—something Leonel never imagined!

I interviewed Leonel Arteaga during the Second Pathfinder Camporee of the El Salvador Union Conference in the city of San Miguel, where I was invited to serve as guest speaker and chaplain in the same territory where I served as the director of youth ministries many years ago.

As we talked about Leonel's life and ministry, I was delighted to learn that he served as youth evangelist, an elder, accepted the call to be a pastor, went to the Central American Adventist University in Costa Rica to pursue his theology studies, married, became a pastor, was ordained to the gospel ministry, and now serves as president of the Central El Salvador Conference, which is growing at a strong pace. In my files, I now keep a copy of the permission granted by the authorities of the City Council, duly signed and sealed, that Leonel gave to me and to the leaders of the original El Salvador Conference, which has since been re-structured into five conferences with a strong Union Conference of a fast-growing church—presently with more than 200,000 members! In the photo above, Leonel is shown at left with some of the conference youth ministries directors—Pastor Luis Aguillon (third from left), director of the event, followed by the chaplain, and Pastor Abel Pacheco (right), president of the Union. He is portrayed during the impressive Investiture Service of more than 3,700 Pathfinders and Master Guides, where more than 4,000 individuals completed the Prayer Honor in that historic event celebrated from April 1-5,

2015, in San Miguel City. God has preserved Leonel's testimony in a marvelous way, even to the point that the monument of the Law of God was declared and listed as part of the National Heritage of El Salvador.

Leonel's witness reminds me of an inspired quotation that I joyfully ponder with our fellow ministers, elders, deacons, and deaconesses around the world: "In the closing scenes of this earth's history many . . . children and youth will astonish people by their witness to the truth which will be borne in simplicity, yet with spirit and power."¹

¹ Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, 166.

Alfredo Garcia-Marenko has served as elder, pastor, administrator, departmental director, and editor, and is an international speaker with wide experience in youth leadership and family life. He is editorial assistant for the *Elder's Digest* magazine in the General Conference Ministerial Association. Alfredo was trained as an associate trainer for the Million Leaders Mandate of John C. Maxwell and EQUIP®.



SEVEN SUGGESTIONS FOR THE SOUND-SYSTEM SPECIALIST

The audiovisual (AV) specialist in the local church could be considered the “forgotten person.” Working behind the scenes, he or she is usually ignored except when the audio cuts out or loud feedback “squeals” are heard.

While a smaller church would be happy to find anyone with normal hearing to serve as an AV specialist, larger congregations can be more selective in fulfilling such a critical and demanding position. In addition to nominal technical skills, this person must possess certain personal traits. Can

this person be content to work in the background with little attention or praise? Is he or she punctual? Can this person be depended on to open and test each microphone (mic) and piece of equipment in the system before the church is half-full? Will he or she take the time to attend rehearsals of special events that may require changes in mic locations, for instance? Will he or she graciously accept the criticism (due or undue) that inevitably accompanies any important position?

Following are seven suggestions to pass on to your AV specialist:

1

Avoid word clipping. When several microphones are being used on the rostrum, constantly opening and closing each one often results in missing the first few words of the prayer or the opening sentence of the sermon. Under normal circumstances, no harm results by leaving frequently-used mics “open.”

2

Prevent microphone feedback. Failing to prevent microphone feedback is the most common “atrociousness” of public-address (PA) operators. Feedback occurs when the microphone picks up the amplified sound from a loudspeaker behind it and then sends the sound back to the same speaker, causing an endless-loop squeal. Therefore, a mic should not be directly in front of a loudspeaker. The setting at which feedback frequently occurs should be clearly marked on the mixer *gain* slider.

3

Adjust mic levels. For each new person who speaks, the AV specialist must be alert to quickly adjust the loudness of the mic, since the new presenter will have a softer or louder voice than the preceding one. Presenters also vary in the distance their mouths are from the mic. Once the norm for a given speaker is established, the operator should not continually compensate for the speaker’s volume and inflection variations, for without them, a good speaker’s delivery would sound monotonous.

Mixer board meters can be useful, but they cannot assess the subtleties of real-life situations. They cannot, for example, advise the AV specialist to increase the level for a large crowd and lower the volume for a smaller one. Even the difference of a few people can affect the acoustic balance. The operator’s ears should never be covered with headphones while he or she is determining the correct audio level.

4

Adjust mic heights. The AV specialist should delegate someone to sit in the front row and, if necessary, quickly adjust the height of the mic stand or the pulpit mic to accommodate the height of each new person on the podium. Of course, the volume should be cut while the stand or gooseneck is being adjusted.

5


Use rechargeable batteries. Nothing is more frustrating than having a wireless mic lose power halfway through a sermon. Some operators think they can judge when it is about time to replace a battery. To avoid having to discard a half-used battery every week to guard against failure, it is more economical to use rechargeable batteries. After the last Sabbath service, the batteries can be left to charge until the following Sabbath, thus ensuring no battery-power failures.

6

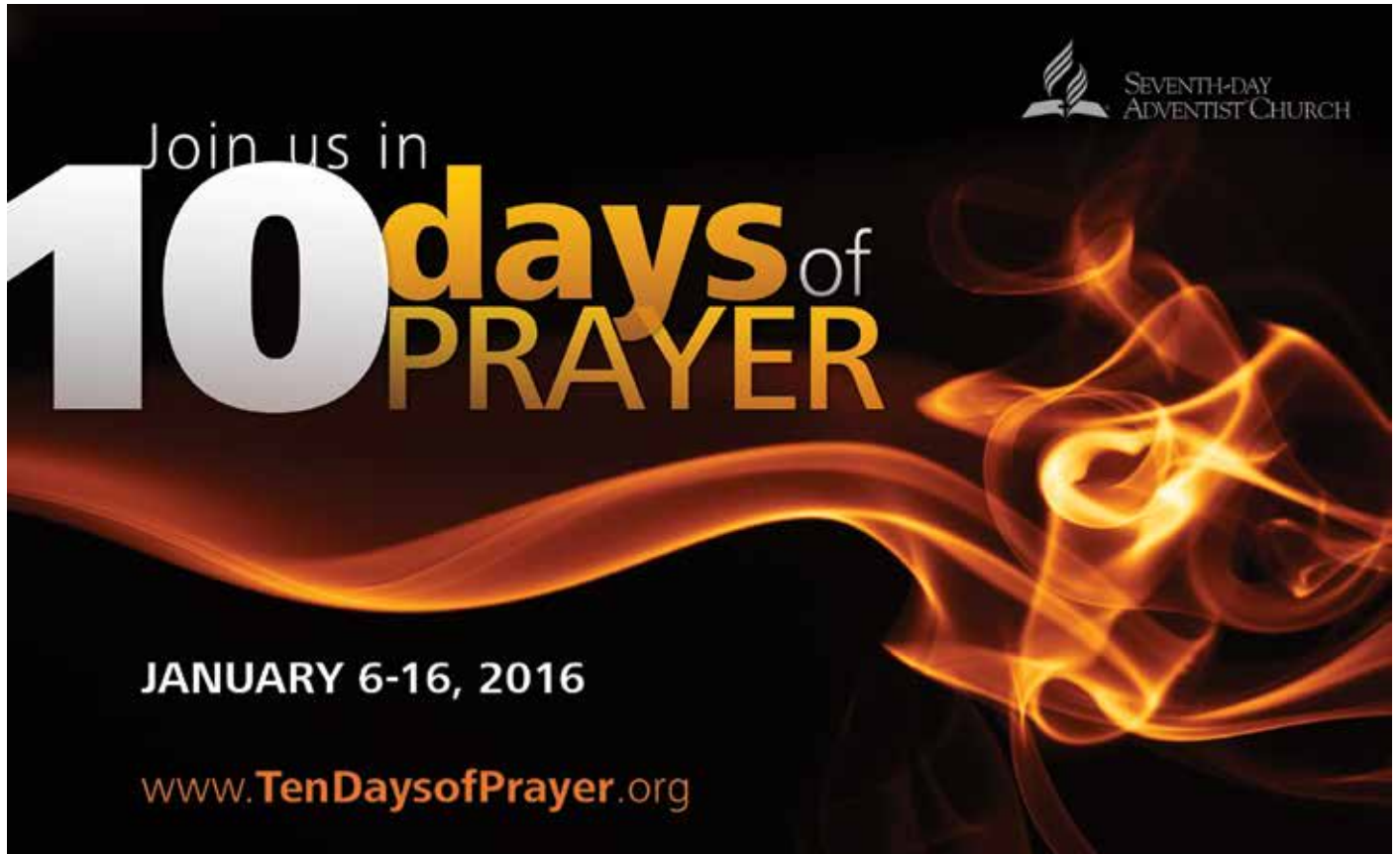
Avoid operator manipulation. The location of the PA system is crucial. If the audio mixer board's location seems too remote or is not near the rear-center of the church, making real-time audio monitoring difficult, the AV specialist should delegate two or three deacons to sit in separate locations and signal when the volume is optimum. Allowing just anyone in the congregation to ask the operator to raise or lower the volume will result in the same dissatisfaction as allowing everyone access to the church thermostat.

7

Beware of ungrounded microphones. A pastor friend of mine was electrocuted in the baptistry after touching a wired but ungrounded mic. Although wired mics are rarely used in the baptistry these days, if one exists, it should be removed and replaced with a wireless one. No danger exists with any type of wireless mic, whether in the water or not.

AV specialists are a vital link to a smooth, seamless church service. Pastors and church leaders should praise them periodically in public and in private, especially when they have handled special or demanding services well. 

Alton D. Johnson is a retired pastor, chaplain, and chief audio technician in Calimesa, California, USA. This article first appeared in the April 2015 issue of *Ministry: International Journal for Pastors*. It has been lightly edited for *Elder's Digest*. Used by permission.




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10 days of PRAYER

JANUARY 6-16, 2016

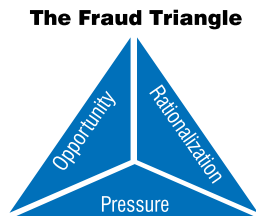
www.TenDaysofPrayer.org

 SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

The poster features a dark background with vibrant, flowing orange and yellow light patterns on the right side. The text is prominently displayed in white and gold colors.

DON'T GREASE THE SLOPE: PREVENTING FRAUD AT YOUR CHURCH

The Center for the Study of Global Christianity projects the global Christian church will lose \$50 billion through ecclesiastical crime—church fraud—in 2015, five billion more than they project Christians will give toward foreign missions.¹



Sadly, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not immune. Fraud can and does happen in our churches.

According to the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners, three elements must exist for a fraud to take place.

1. PRESSURE

Pressure can be a personal or a perceived need, but the motivation is always the same. Money is needed. Pressure-causing events can include:

- A medical emergency leaves a family with a mountain of debt.
- A gambling addiction gets out of control.
- A lost job leaves one desperate for funds.
- A church needs “help” to get a higher return on their assets.

As church members, we must be observant to notice when a fellow member may be experiencing financial distress. If we learn of a situation, it is our responsibility to inform the pastor or head elder of our concern with that particular member handling church resources during their time of financial anxiety.

2. RATIONALIZATION

Rationalizing that something wrong is now okay can take a lot of time and a variety of circumstances, but the heart being deceitful above all things (Jer. 17:9) makes it easy for someone to deceive themselves with a “rational lie” such as:

- I’m entitled to this money because of all the work I’ve done.
- I’m just borrowing the money until my next paycheck.
- It’s okay because other people do it.
- Money will help more people if used my way.

Rationalization is the hardest to observe because it transpires in a person’s mind. Be attentive to trends in comments or attitude that suggest an internal change in thought process. If trends persist, question them and reaffirm the values you both should hold.

3. OPPORTUNITY

An opportunity is available because of weaknesses in an organization’s internal controls. Internal controls are processes in place to detect and prevent fraud. Common weaknesses in these controls might exist because of tradition or because effort has not been given to protect the resources entrusted. Ask these questions:

- Do we have enough people involved in the process?
- When was the last time we evaluated established controls for weaknesses?

- Are we placing too much trust in one person’s good character?

A church’s best chance at lowering their risk of fraud is by removing opportunities for fraud to take place. An opportunity may be discovered when a mistake slips through the church’s controls. This discovery is acted on when financial pressure is felt and justification found. Periodically meeting and reassessing your financial controls can lessen these opportunities.

INTERNAL CONTROLS TO PREVENT FRAUD AT YOUR CHURCH

Good financial controls provide protection. If a false accusation is charged against a person, the only security they have is the controls that are in place. You want internal controls that protect resources while not overburdening the individuals doing the work.

Segregation of Duties – It is ideal to separate bookkeeping and depositing responsibilities.

Handling of Cash – Loose cash should always be counted by two individuals at the same time. This should not be done alone or taken home. Cash is the most susceptible resource to fraud. Encourage members to donate online or by check using tithe envelopes.

Approvals – Establish processes for those who sign checks, approve large payments, and reconcile statements. This should be multiple people, not just one person.

Conflict of Interest – Conflicting interests may cloud or corrupt a member’s judgment. Be aware of a member’s potential benefit from offering a “good deal” or providing the church services.

Regular Financial Audits – To help prevent fraud, the local conference is responsible to provide periodic audits of local church financial records. If your church has not been audited in the last two years, contact your local conference treasurer to have an audit scheduled.

From the church employee at the General Conference to the local deacon that collects the offering on Sabbath, we are all responsible for the safekeeping of our church’s financial resources. When a gift is placed in the offering plate, the giver is extending trust to our stewardship system and the multiple people who ensure their money reaches its requested destination. Review the internal control systems at your church so this trust is not broken.



Additional Resources:

moneywise.adventist.org | www.nonprofitrisk.org | www.AdventistRisk.org

¹ *Christianity 2015: Religious Diversity and Personal Contact*, a report from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, accessed June 8, 2015. <http://www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/documents/11BMR2015.pdf>

Andrew Moll is financial analyst for Adventist Risk Management, Inc.

PROPER USE OF THE VOICE

Right Voice Culture No Idle Tale—The human agent must take himself in hand. God has given him physical and spiritual powers, and these need to be constantly cultivated and improved. In a great measure, physical weariness may be avoided by speaking slowly, calmly, unexcitedly.

In speaking, many have made a constant tax upon their vocal organs. The lungs have been injured, and premature death has ended their work. Nature will not always endure the abuse placed upon her laws. They are ignored by many, but eventually she will make her protest, and punish the transgressor. If these workers would but learn that God does not require this overtaxation, and that in overstraining the delicate vital organs and shortening the period of their usefulness, they are dishonoring Him, they would not cultivate habits which are injurious.

The excuse is made, "It is my habit; it is my way, and I cannot overcome it." Will my brethren take heed how they use the organs of speech in the ministration of the Word? They are to follow God's way, and not their own will. Christ has given them no such example in His manner of teaching. His followers are to make strenuous efforts to overcome their habits of long, loud speaking. This greatly injures the melody of the human voice.

God means that those who minister in word and doctrine shall be educators in the correct manner of teaching. They must stand before the people as God's representatives, showing that they appreciate the precious gifts given them of God. They are to use, but not abuse, their organs. They are not to make the blind, foolish excuse, "This is my habit;

I cannot overcome these defects." They will not continue to abuse the powers given them of God for the highest cultivation, and by their imperfect habits, detract from the good they might do. The Lord will help all who will determine to overcome these wrong traits when presenting His message to the world.

This matter has been treated too much like an idle tale. It is a most solemn consideration, and should deepen the sense of responsibility upon every man who is a mouthpiece for God, holding forth the word of life to the people. The ministers of God should study to show themselves approved of God in the presentation of sacred truth, workmen that need not to be ashamed.

The truth spoken, whether spoken in a manner to please or displease, will judge the hearer in the great day of final reckoning. It is a savor of life unto life or of death unto death. Under any circumstances the speaker will be criticized by those who turn their ears away from the truth, but every effort should be made to reach the people. The minister is the teacher of sacred, solemn truth, and he should seek for perfection in character, in address, giving as little cause as possible for criticism. Man is honored in being a laborer together with God, and he must work in Christ's lines, receiving the truth in its purity from the Word of God, and presenting it in a manner that will commend it to the hearer. ED

This article is excerpted from the book *The Voice in Speech and Song*, pp. 201, 202 by Ellen G. White.

The advertisement features a group of five smiling people (three women and two men) in professional attire. To their right, the text reads "It's our Passion!" in a handwritten style. Below this, the title "ELDER'S DIGEST" is prominently displayed in large, bold, red letters. Underneath the title, it says "General Conference Ministerial Association". A row of seven magazine covers is shown below the title, each with a different cover image. At the bottom of the advertisement, the website address "www.eldersdigest.org" is printed.

EFFECTIVE CHURCH STAFF MEETINGS

Pastors often say to me, “I hate meetings.” When I ask why, they say, “They’re painful,” “They’re a waste of time,” “They’re too long,” or “We rarely accomplish anything.” Maybe you have felt the same way.

I have both sat in meetings and led meetings for a long time. When I first started leading meetings, I quickly discovered that the meeting was not the problem; I was the problem, along with how I led the meeting. So I adapted! When I became the senior pastor of a multi-church, I quickly realized the value and importance of productive staff meetings. Over the years, I learned that church personnel—full-time, part-time, or volunteer—were the ones most scarred by bad staff meetings, and I vowed to change this.

So, what have I learned? Here are the five Ws I try to apply:

WHO?

Who should be included in regular staff meetings? I suggest you include all pastoral staff members. This includes all full-time conference-paid pastors, part-time church-paid pastors, and volunteer pastors. I think it is also important to include the church secretary/administrative assistant. You might consider ending the meeting in an “Executive Session” (just the pastoral staff) in which you can address any sensitive and confidential issues. As for other auxiliary staff, such as worship leaders, the treasurer, or the custodian/groundskeeper, they can be invited to attend part of the staff meeting, or you can meet with them as needed.

WHAT?

What kind of things should go on the agenda? First, have an agenda prepared ahead of time. This helps develop a culture of planning and thinking ahead. Each staff member should submit his/her items ahead of the meeting. This gives you an opportunity to have pre-conversations as needed and will help you to determine if the item is ready for the agenda. This also helps you plan the length of the meeting.

Begin the meeting with prayer. Prayer sets the tone for the meeting and prioritizes it as a high value for your staff. Pray for the church, its members, and the staff. Every meeting should include vision casting. Effective church staff meetings are rooted in the mission of the church. The leader must define reality—“where we are”—and then talk about where the church is going and how to get from “here” to “there.” This is critical to movement.

Next, listen to reports from staff members. These reports are not just important information—they are critical for the progress of the church and for accountability.

Then you can cover issues like calendars, schedules, upcoming programs and events, etc.

Once a month, I also spend some time on leadership training. Leaders must grow in order to maximize the gifts God has given them. I find that doing leadership training stretches me and helps my staff to grow.

WHEN?

When should staff meetings be held? How long should staff meetings run?

Effective meetings can make a huge difference in the leadership and life of the church. Staff meetings should be regularly scheduled, weekly if possible. This allows a culture of caring, communication, and accountability to develop.

The meetings should have a fixed and predetermined length. Nothing discourages staff members more than when a meeting goes longer than planned. Efficient staff members will already have plans for after the meeting. Don’t impose upon that time. People tend to become restless if they don’t know when a meeting will end. Meetings should start and finish on time. I’ve found that most agendas can be covered in 60-90 minutes.

WHERE?

Each church facility will dictate the best location; it might be the pastor’s office or a committee room. I suggest that once a quarter, you meet off-site. This is an excellent time for leadership development. I also like to have an annual staff retreat.

WHY?

I find that regular meetings together help the staff to develop strong bonds as we move together to accomplish the mission God has given us. I also believe that staff meetings serve as an excellent mechanism for communication and accountability. They can also serve as encouragement as you are reminded that you are not alone in this endeavor.

I hope these suggestions will help you to have productive and enjoyable staff meetings which honor God and those who serve Him.



Ron Aguilera is executive secretary for the Illinois Conference. This article first appeared in *Best Practices*, May 2015. It has been lightly edited for *Elder’s Digest*. Reprinted by permission.

LESSONS FROM THE CHURCH AT SARDIS

Revelation 3:1-6

What exactly are the signs of a dying church? Is it declining attendance? That's probably the simplest answer to the question, but I think the deeper question goes to issues of spiritual vitality.

What about a church that is so comfortable in its current situation that there is no place for new people? What about a church that has completely lost its vision to reach people for Christ? If a church has no zeal for the lost, can it truly be called a "living" church of Jesus Christ? What about a church whose best days happened a generation ago and that continues to live off the reputation of its past glories?

A church that seems dead may have signs of life within it; far more ominously, a church may seem full of life but actually be at the point of spiritual death.

I. A DISAPPROVING INDICTMENT

Such was the critical problem of the church at Sardis (Rev. 3:1-6). When Jesus comes to this church, He makes a quick and disquieting diagnosis (verse 1).

This may be the most damning indictment our Lord could give to any local church. And it is a comment only He could make. The church seemed alive and well. It had a good reputation in the community. It was evidently not on the brink of closing its doors. Christians in other towns spoke well of the church at Sardis.

What Jesus does not mention is certainly notable:

- The church does not seem to be suffering persecution.
- It does not seem to be seriously infected with false doctrine.
- There is no hint of sexual immorality in the church.
- The church is not warned about losing its first love.

In some respects, Sardis is the most difficult church to dissect because we don't really know what was wrong there. When Jesus speaks to the other churches, He spells out the problem so that there can be no confusion. But here we are told simply that at Sardis, things looked good on the outside but were dying on the inside.

II. A SHOCKING EVALUATION

Although apparently active on the outside,

on the inside the church at Sardis had become a "spiritual graveyard."

All of this should be a solemn warning to us because this church evidently looked very good from the outside. How does a situation develop where a church with a good reputation turns out to be spiritually dead? We can list a few indicators:

1. When the past becomes more important than the present.
2. When keeping a good reputation matters more than being a bold witness for Christ.
3. When religious ritual becomes an end in itself.
4. When tradition stifles every attempt at innovation.
5. When church activity substitutes for a growing walk with God.
6. When talking about Christ matters more than knowing Christ.
7. When appearance matters more than reality.

III. A HOPEFUL REMINDER

What can be done about a dead or dying church? We get some good news in our text from the Lord Himself (Rev. 3:4).

God has people in the most unlikely places. Even in a church like Sardis, there were those who loved and served the Lord with pure hearts. It reminds me of the time when, in his despair, Elijah felt like he was the only faithful servant of God in the whole land of Israel. God called him to action by telling him that there were yet 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:14-18). God is not limited by our small vision. This gives us hope for even the most miserable church situations.

IV. A DIVINE ULTIMATUM

What, then, is the hope for a spiritually-dead congregation?

1. *The church must wake up.* "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God" (Rev. 3:2). Because it was located on a plateau, Sardis seemed secure from invasion. But twice in its history, invading armies had scaled the heights during the night and captured the city. So Christ's admonition to "wake up" had special meaning to the church in Sardis. No doubt the congregation had become spiritually lazy.

2. *The church must return to Christ before it is too late.* "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you" (verse 3). To repent means literally to change the mind. In this case, it involves turning back to the Lord with a whole heart. I daresay that nothing is more difficult than for a comfortable church to repent.

V. A SOLEMN WARNING

If we do not take these words seriously, there is an implied threat: Jesus will come like a "thief in the night." Like a thief who comes when you least expect him, Jesus warns the congregation to wake up or, when He comes, the results will not be happy for the church.

Jesus is coming! Are you ready?

VI. A BRACING PROMISE

Note the three-fold promise to the overcomers at Sardis:

1. They will be dressed in the white robes of victory (verses 4, 5).
2. They will have their names reserved in heaven (verse 5).
3. They will be personally recognized by our Lord (verse 5).

CONCLUSION

Where did the church at Sardis go wrong? It was a church of the living dead. The church was a bastion of dead orthodoxy and a beehive of religious mediocrity. Its spiritual condition was made worse by the fact that, on the surface, it seemed to be spiritually alive.

Far worse than persecution from without is rotting from within. The church was lethargic because the people were lethargic. That can happen to any of us at any time.

God still loved the church at Sardis. If Jesus hadn't cared, He wouldn't have written this letter. So, if we are spiritually asleep, we can say, "Lord, start with me. Do your work in me. Wake me up! Stir me up to love You and to serve You so that the world will know I belong to You."

May God wake us up and deliver us from the Church of the Living Dead so that we become once again the Church of the Living Christ.

EQ

General Conference Ministerial Association

LESSONS FROM THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA

Revelation 3:7-13

What sort of church does Jesus prefer?

When Jesus looks at a church, He's not studying outward things. He's looking for the deeper signs of growing faith, fervent love, and abiding hope. He wants His churches to be motivated by love, founded on truth, strong under pressure, and unashamed of His name.

Of the seven churches, only Smyrna and Philadelphia received no words of condemnation. And it is not coincidental that both churches faced strong opposition because of their bold witness. Hard times generally make for strong churches, especially when the hard times come because the church refuses to compromise the gospel.

Revelation 3:7-13 records the letter to the church at Philadelphia, a city about 35 miles southeast of Sardis. The church in that city was the youngest and smallest of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3. Though the faithful congregation was small in size, our Lord had opened a huge door for them.

Here is a church of which Christ heartily approves. As we study this letter, let's think about our own churches and consider how we measure up to God's ideal.

I. CONSIDER OUR OPPORTUNITY (VERSES 7, 8)

A. *Christ Himself opens the doors.* When God opens a door, no one can shut it. And when He closes a door, no one can open it. God rarely shows us the big picture in advance. The "open door" is usually a door pushed slightly open. We still have to summon the courage to go through the door and see what's on the other side.

Jesus Himself, the One who is holy and true, the One who has all authority, opens doors for His people. It's His job to open doors. He's very good at it, and He doesn't need our help. Our job is to go through the doors He opens, one step at a time, one foot in front of the other, going wherever He may lead us.

B. *Christ honors faith, not strength.* Jesus said to the church at Philadelphia, "I know that you have little strength" (verse 8). Little strength and great opportunity often go hand-in-hand. Sometimes small churches think there is little they can do for the Lord, but it's all a matter of perspective. The church at Philadelphia had little strength. We can assume that they didn't have much money or many influen-

tial people. But they had great faith.

What is it that God honors? Faith. What is He looking for? Faith. What does He reward? Faith, simple faith.

Notice the two wonderful things Jesus says about this church: "You have kept my word" and "You have not denied my name." The first involves holding fast to the words of Jesus. The second means you aren't embarrassed by the first. Some people feel slightly ashamed of their faith.

II. CONSIDER OUR OPPOSITION (VERSES 9, 10)

Satan hates gospel preaching, and he hates gospel preachers. Sometimes we hear people talk about "easy places" to preach, but there are no "easy places."

Let a man decide he is going to stand for Jesus, let him tell the community the whole counsel of God, let him firmly but kindly declare the saving gospel of Jesus, and he will have enemies soon enough. And not all of them will be outside the church.

I think the believers at Philadelphia cared enough about the truth that they had made some powerful enemies in the community. That was a mark of their faithfulness to Christ.

A. *We will be vindicated* (verse 9). The "synagogue of Satan" refers to those Jews in Philadelphia who persecuted the early believers. Seeing Jesus as a threat to their way of life, they hated Him and those who followed Him. But, Jesus says, they are liars. And that's not all. The day will come when these hostile enemies will bow down and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Some commentators see this as a promise of vast gospel advance as the church preaches to the unreached people groups of the world. One day those who have no sympathy for Christ or for Christians will see how wrong they were.

B. *We will be protected* (verse 10). Sometimes the best you can do is to "endure patiently." Spiritual warfare isn't all roses and rainbows. Sometimes it means not giving up when you feel like throwing in the towel. Our Lord makes a precious promise to these suffering saints. He looks ahead to the "time of trial" that will engulf the whole world before Christ comes to establish His kingdom on the earth.

In the last days, things will be difficult indeed. Scripture often speaks of the time of

trouble that will shake the earth and prepare the world for the coming of the Lord. Because God's people have been faithful, Jesus will keep them in that time of trial.

III. CONSIDER OUR OBLIGATION (VERSE 11)

You can't read this passage without getting a sense that the early believers expected Christ to come at any moment. He even said, "I am coming soon." This text calls us to do two things while we look for the coming of Christ.

A. *We are to wait for His return* (verse 11). Jesus said, "I am coming soon." How many of us believe that? We are to live as if Jesus will come at any moment and work as though our time is short.


B. *We are to overcome by faith* (verses 12, 13). The challenge to overcome is one we face every day. We are called to be "overcomers" every single day because we have a lot to overcome: temptations, frustrations, difficult situations, unexpected setbacks, internal discouragement, chronic pain, and personal failures.

We will be named and claimed. The power to name is the power of ownership. Those whom God has redeemed will be named and claimed by Him. All the old names—doctor, lawyer, professor, politician—won't matter anymore. In that great day, the blood of Jesus will wash away all the "tags" by which we know each other. Our "good" names won't matter, and our "bad" names won't be remembered. We will all stand on the same ground—saved, redeemed, renewed, and renamed by our Lord.

CONCLUSION

If you want eternal security, you can find it only in Jesus Christ. One day we will have new names, and we will live in a city that cannot be shaken.

Faithfulness to Christ and to His truth is everything, especially in the days when iniquity shall abound, and the love of many shall wax cold. Fear not! The reward is glorious! The honor is beyond all earthly honors! The contempt and enmity are but for a day; the dignity and the blessedness are forever and ever!

Indeed it is so. May God help us to be faithful to Him who has done so much for us! 

General Conference Ministerial Association

LESSONS FROM THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA

Revelation 3:14-22

Of the seven churches, none received a more scathing condemnation than Laodicea. Outwardly, the church in Laodicea appeared strong and prosperous. Clearly the people who worshiped there considered themselves happy and blessed. They lived in a town others envied. It seems that some of the church members were from the wealthy families in Laodicea. Unlike Smyrna, there seems to have been no persecution, and, unlike Pergamum, no false doctrine. We find nothing corresponding to the gross immorality of Jezebel and her corrupt legions in Thyatira. Laodicea was a comfortable place to live and go to church. That combination made Jesus sick to His stomach.

I. HIS IDENTITY

A. *His Word is true* (verse 14a). "Amen" is usually the final word of a prayer. It means much more than "I'm finished" or "Let's eat." "Amen" is a sign of agreement. Jesus is the final Amen to all that God has said. Because He is the "faithful and true witness," we can trust Him completely. Jesus and Jesus alone is the last Word in your life and mine. What He says is true. It is true all the time.

For the church at Laodicea, it means that when Christ issues His scathing denunciation, the church members can't escape it by saying, "That's just His opinion." No, that's the Word of the Son of God who is faithful and true in all that He says. My words don't carry that weight because I cannot claim to speak infallible truth. But when Jesus speaks, the church must listen because He speaks only the truth.

B. *His Word is authoritative* (verse 14b). This phrase means that all creation comes from God's hand. He was there in the beginning; before there was a beginning, He was there. The whole universe owes its existence to His mighty power.

Do you enjoy breathing? I hope so! You breathe because Jesus gives you life and breath. We owe everything to Him. When He speaks, His word is true and absolutely authoritative.

II. HIS INDICTMENT

A. *You are indifferent* (verses 15, 16). I puzzled over the meaning of these words because I wondered why Jesus said, "I wish you were either hot or cold." Then a thought came to me that made it plain. What's another way to

describe "lukewarm" water? Room temperature. What do you need to do to make water room temperature? Nothing. Leave water alone and it will become room temperature. Suppose you want hot water. You've got to *do* something to make it hot. Suppose you want cold water. You've got to *do* something to make it cold. Under normal circumstances, water will never become cold or hot by itself.

So here is the indictment: The Laodiceans were not guilty of some intentional sin, such as committing immorality, sleeping around, promoting false doctrine, or welcoming false prophets. To be guilty of those things, they would have had to *do* something. They would have had to make some sort of decision to move in that direction.

A lukewarm Christian is nothing more than a "room temperature" Christian who has become just like his or her environment.

Why does Christ hate lukewarmness so much? Mostly because a person in this condition doesn't even know it. A person slips into a state of such total indifference that he or she doesn't care about his or her own spiritual condition. Nothing matters. After all, "room temperature" is comfortable by definition. It feels right. A lukewarm person is the same as everyone else around him or her.

If you never tell anyone about your faith, you are unlikely to be bothered. You're not too hot and not too cold. And Jesus will spit you out of His mouth!

B. *You are arrogant* (verse 17). Here Christ reveals that the heart of the problem is in the heart. And until the heart is changed, nothing can change. Note that little phrase "You say." I am rich! I am clothed! I can see! Arrogance had blinded the Laodiceans to their true spiritual condition. Money has a way of doing that to all of us. Money is almost hypnotic. We can't take our eyes off it. Money is not the problem; it's the love of money that gets us into trouble. And the worst of it was, the Laodiceans thought they were doing just fine.

In our day, they would have a big church with a nice building, a fine parking lot, a large staff, a huge budget, many programs, and a good reputation in the community. There's nothing wrong with any of those things, but this passage should remind us that a "successful" church is not always a church of which God approves.

III. HIS INVITATION

A. *Wake up!* (verses 18, 19). Laodicea was known as a city of banking, eye salve, and beautiful wool garments. Jesus touched the very points of their civic pride to reveal their spiritual poverty.

I am struck by the personal nature of Christ's appeal. If someone said to me, "You make me want to vomit," I would hardly expect that same person to say, "I love you more than you know." But when you love someone, you can hate what is destroying him or her and love this person all the more. Parents do this all the time.

B. *Open up!* (verse 20). "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (verse 20).


Here the appeal becomes extremely personal. It's as if Jesus turns from the church as a whole and focuses on just one person. Jesus is knocking, always knocking. I find great encouragement in this thought. He wants to come in. He waits to come in. Not only does He wait to come in, He wants to dine with you. There is no better picture of the Christian life than this. We can have Jesus as our dinner companion every single day! We never have to dine alone. Jesus wants to share a meal with us.

Isn't it amazing that the worst church gets the best invitation? Isn't that just like Jesus? After exposing their indifference, He offers them Himself.

CONCLUSION

Then comes the grand conclusion of this letter (verses 21, 22). Sometime we argue about whether or not to use Revelation 3:20 when we lead people to Christ. I love the picture of Christ coming again and again to the human heart. He comes, He knocks, He calls for us, and then He waits for our response.

The door must be opened from within. He waits for you to open the door. Do not let your sin and failure keep you away from Jesus. Christ came for sinners, and it is sinners who need a Savior.

I urge you to heed the voice of Jesus, open the door, and say, "Lord Jesus, you are welcome in my life today." 

General Conference Ministerial Association

GOD AND MY RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Bible teaches that God is all light and glory. He is perfect in righteousness and purity. He is absolutely holy and without sin. The Bible says of God, “God is light; in Him there is no darkness [no sin] at all” (1 John 1:5). Because we are sinful human beings, it is almost impossible for us to understand or even conceive of the holiness of God.

The prophet Isaiah once had a vision in which he saw the Lord God on His throne, and around the throne were heavenly beings praising God (Isa. 6:3). Isaiah was so amazed by what he saw of the glory and holiness of God that he cried out (verse 5).

What caused Isaiah to respond in this way? It was his sense of sinfulness. Isaiah realized that he did not have the righteousness he needed to be in the presence of the holy and glorious God.

I. THE RIGHTEOUSNESS ACCEPTABLE TO GOD

To enjoy fellowship with God, we must know not only that we have been forgiven of every sin but that we are clothed with a righteousness that is acceptable to God.

There is a difference between forgiveness and righteousness. Forgiveness is like taking a bath; righteousness is like putting on clothes. We take a bath so that we might be cleansed from all impurities. We put on clothes so that we might be properly dressed to appear before people. What does it mean?

Ellen G. White says, “When we submit ourselves to Christ, the heart is united with His heart, the will is merged in His will, the mind becomes one with His mind, the thoughts are brought into captivity to Him; we live His life. This is what it means to be clothed with the garment of His righteousness.”¹

When we pray to God or enjoy fellowship with Him, we are, in a sense, coming into His presence. And when we think about coming into the presence of the holy God, we realize that we must be clothed in a special way. We must be clothed with a righteousness that is acceptable to Him.

II. CAN WE PRODUCE A PERFECT RIGHTEOUSNESS?

Can we produce a righteousness that is acceptable to God? No, we cannot. No matter

how hard we try, we cannot obey the commandments of God perfectly (Rom. 3:10, 12, 23). Even our “righteousnesses”—the best things we do—cannot make us acceptable to God. The Bible says, “We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6, KJV).

What we can never do ourselves, God has done for us. He provides a perfect righteousness for His people. The prophet Isaiah rejoiced when he thought about the righteousness which God provides for His people (Isa. 61:10).

III. HOW DOES GOD MAKE US RIGHTEOUS?

God makes us righteous by putting us in Christ. The Bible says, “It is because of Him [God] that you are in Christ Jesus . . .” (1 Cor. 1:30).

The words “in Christ” express the glorious position God has given to His believers. How did we get “in Christ”? God put us there! We could not put ourselves in Christ, but God has done this for us.

When God looks at us, He does not see us as we are; He sees only Christ. Because we are in Christ, we have a perfect righteousness before God. Christ is our righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). Our works do not earn this perfect righteousness, and we cannot produce it ourselves. It is given to us as a free gift when we receive Christ as our Savior (Rom. 5:17).

The apostle Paul was a very religious man. He tried hard to produce his own righteousness. But Paul concluded that he could never make himself acceptable to God by his own works. What did Paul do? He put his faith in Jesus Christ and received God’s gift of perfect righteousness (Phil. 3:8, 9).

IV. OUR CONDUCT AND OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

As Christians, we should understand the difference between our righteousness before God and our daily conduct here on earth.

Our righteousness before God is the way God sees us in Christ. We are made “the righteousness of God” in Christ. This righteousness is perfect. It never changes. When did you receive this perfect righteousness? You received it the moment you received Christ as your Savior.

Our conduct is the way we live on earth. It is very changeable, and it is never perfect. Our conduct may change many times in a single day. Perhaps yesterday we had a good day. We read the Bible, spent time with God in prayer, and did not lose our temper. Consequently, we felt quite good about ourselves, and we felt that God was likewise pleased with us. We felt good about coming to God in prayer and fellowship.

Today, however, is a different story. We did not take time to pray and read the Bible. We lost our temper. We are quite disappointed with ourselves, and we feel that God is likewise disappointed with us. Consequently, we do not feel that we can come into God’s presence with boldness.


What are we doing? We are looking at our conduct as the basis of our acceptance with God. This is a mistake. Our acceptance with God is based on the fact that we are in Christ.

V. JESUS CHRIST IS OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

In His Word, God commands us to “rejoice in the Lord always.” No matter what our circumstances are, we can always rejoice in the Lord Jesus—who He is and what He has done for us. We can rejoice especially in the fact that He is our righteousness (Jer. 23:6). Our righteousness before God is not something we are or something we have done. Our righteousness is the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:30). To whom does this verse belong? It belongs to every believer who is in Christ.

CONCLUSION

We must begin to see ourselves as God sees us—perfectly righteous in Christ. This perfect righteousness is God’s gift to us because we are in Christ. You are not the person you used to be (2 Cor. 5:17).

No truth in the Bible is more important for us as Christians than knowing that we are in Christ and that He is our righteousness. This is something God did for us when we took Christ as our Savior. 

¹ Ellen G. White, *Maranatha*, 78.

TRUTH THAT IS NOT AFRAID OF INNOVATION

Truth and Innovation are not enemies. I would even venture to say that Truth and Innovation must be best friends, more so for people who are passionate about reaching, retaining, and reclaiming our fields with a lifestyle and a message of compassion, hope, and wholeness. I say this for the following reasons:

God, the source of all truth, is an innovative God. He created our universe, our world, and us, though there was a possibility for failure. He could have chosen not to innovate, but His creative spirit, combined with His love, allowed Him to make something new and beautiful. As sons and daughters of God, we have been given the ability and the intelligence to be creative.

Jesus, the truth in person, is innovative. During His earthly ministry, Jesus continuously did things that His contemporaries in ministry had not done before. He fed people after the sermon, touched lepers, talked to children, used parables when preaching, ate with sinners, and defended a woman who was about to be stoned for adultery. It seems that every time He did something new and creative, He did it to bless someone in need. Jesus was innovative for the sake of the very people He wanted to save, not for innovation's sake.

Innovativeness is in the DNA of Adventism. As we look at the history of our church, we realize that our predecessors were willing to do things that were new and different. These innovations helped to make a movement out of Adventism, kept it alive, and made it a global movement. If our church founders had been afraid of doing things that were a little different (and at times a *lot* different), had they not been innovative and received God's blessing, perhaps we would not be where we are today.

Think about people like James White and the creation of our church's first papers and magazines: *Adventist Review*, *Youth's Instructor*, and *Signs of the Times*; John Nevins Andrews and his sacrificial travels to Europe; Anna Knight, the first Black woman of any denomination to serve as a missionary to India; John Harvey Kellogg's creativeness in the health field, which initially brought notoriety to Adventists; and the many declarations of Ellen G. White about coming up with new methods and ideas. I have to accept that no matter how I feel about change and new things, an innovative spirit in the DNA of our church has existed since our very humble beginnings.

In 1902, Ellen G. White said, "New methods must be introduced. God's people must awake to the necessities of the time in which they are living. God has men [and women] whom He will call into His service,—men who will not carry forward the work in the lifeless way in which it has been carried forward in the past. . . . In our large cities the message is to go forth as a lamp that burneth. God will raise up laborers for this work, and His angels will go before them. Let no one hinder these men of God's appointment. Forbid them not. God has given them their work. Let the message be given with so much power that the hearers shall be convinced."¹

The same Holy Spirit that led our predecessors is still alive and willing to guide us as we reach, retain, and reclaim our world. As we do so together, remember:

- Creative and innovative people have always had a place in God's work, even "in the beginning . . ."
- One single method will not work for everybody everywhere; fishermen can testify to this.
- Innovation is God's answer to the needs of the people He wants to save through us.
- Don't give up quickly. Some methods may not produce fruit for a long time.
- Effectiveness is best measured over a period of time.
- When offering opinions about innovation or innovators, make sure you are fully informed.
- The fact that someone does not agree with an idea does not mean that God cannot bless it. God blesses anything He wants to bless, regardless of human opinion—mine or yours.
- Being an innovator may hurt at times, yet you should not hinder what God has called you to do; if it is for an awesome cause, people will be blessed and the church will grow.
- Don't hesitate to utilize different methods and tools for the sake of those you would like to see saved.

Oh, and one last thing: "By our fruits we will be known . . ."



¹ Ellen G. White, *The Review and Herald*, September 30, 1902.

This article was first published in *Best Practices*, February 18, 2015. It has been lightly edited for *Elder's Digest*. Used by permission.

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STRATEGIES FOR DIFFICULT DISAGREEMENTS

“I do some of my worst sinning when I am right,” a pastor friend once shared. I, too, have a list of such experiences.

Some years ago, I worked with someone who had influence and responsibility in our conference. Even though we worked well in many situations, he and I disagreed quite often. Let’s just say we were on different sides of the fence—not in our fundamental beliefs and dedication to God’s work but over methods and priority needs. Sometimes our disagreements became passionate, even somewhat argumentative. Though I prayed and prayed about this and read Scripture and inspired writings, I was very convinced I was right about some principles of how the work should be done. I believed the inspired writings were on my side. Unfortunately, my friend felt the same way about his views!

As challenges to the ministry continued to mount, we established a select committee to work on improving all aspects of the ministry. More tension surfaced between this director and me. At times, we handled our disagreements well and sometimes apologized if we got too forceful. But the people around us struggled with our disagreements and the tension they caused. Two years later, some areas were still not resolved between us.

We were seeing answers to prayer in our ministry, and yet we hadn’t seen the breakthroughs for which we had hoped. In fact, we were at a logjam just at the time a meeting was scheduled to make final decisions. We all knew it would be a difficult meeting with lots of disagreement.

I woke up early that morning, dedicating my time to the Lord. As I worshiped, God began to bring conviction to my heart regarding this friend. As the Lord so often does, He set a mirror in front of me that allowed me to see my wrong spirit and un-Christlike behavior. I confessed my sin and asked for real repentance.

Then God gave direction. “Oh no,” I thought, “not that!” Would I have to publicly ask for forgiveness from my friend in front of the whole committee? I hate that! But God continued to convict me of my need to be reconciled with this brother.

At breakfast, I told my wife, Janet, what the Lord had impressed me to do. She got this look on her face like, “Oh, wow! He did it again!” Then she told me the Lord had awak-

ened her about 2:00 that morning. When God disturbs her sleep, she asks what she should pray about. This morning, she was impressed to pray for reconciliation between this man and me. This strong confirmation from Janet sent me straight to the committee with a clear mission.

After prayer and a few words, I jumped into my apology to this man for my selfish spirit and how I too often had treated him. I had tears, of course. He rose up and put his arms around me, and we hugged in a wonderful embrace. Then he shared that the Lord had been convicting him that we both had been through different experiences in life, and that he, too, wanted to work much better with me. Tears all around and Jesus in the room! Then we all had a time of group prayer together. It was beautiful!



We experienced amazing agreement on difficult topics that day and moved ahead in very positive ways. My friend and I were each still convinced of our perspectives but could now work together with our hearts in one accord. That is God's strategy for dealing with each other even when we disagree about what is right and good for His church.

God's strategy is always for each of us to personally come into His presence with open hearts, prepared to hear His Word and ready to confess and make things right as He convicts us. Prayer helps all of us and every situation as God changes our hearts.

I have discovered that while our Lord has strategies to keep us united through major disagreements, Satan also has a set of strategies to divide us. Sometimes he even uses our own passionate concern for truth against false teachings expressed in the wrong spirit.

When Satan sends a false teaching into the midst of God's people, he has several strategies to lead us outside the Lord's will. Here are five of them.

1. *False teaching.* Satan's first strategy is to mislead through people who promote false teaching. It is often a close counterfeit designed with much truth yet includes a devastating error. Our safety is to prayerfully study the inspired writings for ourselves and not trust the opinions of others. "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20, KJV). God has promised that the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth (see John 16:13).

2. *A motivation of fear.* A secondary strategy that accompanies false teaching is one that can lead an even larger group of conscientious believers astray. As "teachers" seek to warn of the false teachings, they lead others to become so afraid of the false that they miss the truths being counterfeited, which are essential to their spiritual growth in the Lord. "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7, NKJV).

3. *Bearing false witness.* In our zeal to expose false teachings, many of us break the ninth commandment (see Ex. 20:16). Many find it easy to pass along the latest rumor that labels someone as a false teacher when we have not followed the counsel of Matthew 18 and gone to the source first.

4. *Playing it safe by not speaking up.* When we encounter a false teaching, one danger is for us to shy away from speaking up about it because of the controversy it may cause and because we do not want to be labeled or attacked. However, it remains our responsibility as Christians, and especially as pastoral leaders, to love our people enough to warn them of the dangers that could ruin their souls.

"Precious truth must be presented in its native force. The deceptive errors that are widespread, and that are leading the world captive, are to be unveiled. Every effort possible is being made to ensnare souls with subtle reasonings, to turn them from the truth to fables, and to prepare them to be deceived by strong delusions."¹

5. *A harmful approach.* "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1, NKJV). Even when we are right about the facts, if we are wrong in spirit, we can cause great harm as we warn others of a false teaching.

Ellen G. White presents a needed balance: "But while these deceived souls turn from the truth to error, do not speak to them one word of censure. Seek to show these poor, deluded souls their danger, and to reveal to them how grievous is their course of action toward Jesus Christ; but let it all be done in pitying tenderness. By a proper manner of labor some of the souls who are ensnared by Satan may be recovered from his power. But do not blame and condemn them. To ridicule the position held by those who are in error, will not open their blind eyes, nor attract them to the truth. When men lose sight of Christ's example, and do not pattern after his manner of teaching, they become self-sufficient, and go forth to meet Satan with his own manner of weapons."²

In the book of Acts, the Lord's people knew the secret. They spent much time in corporate prayer, studied the Word, confessed and repented of all sin, and fellowshiped together in a one-accord spirit while being personally involved in the mission of sharing Jesus. The result? Pentecost and the gospel going to their world in about 25 years! They came through some very difficult issues together while keeping their focus on their main mission: to seek and save the lost. We can do the same if we embrace God's presence and power in our lives!



¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9:242.

² *Ibid.*, 242, 243.

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SERVING THE CHURCH: DEACONS AND DEACONESSES IN THE WORSHIP SERVICE

The role of deacons and deaconesses in the worship service is very important. Deacons are responsible for collecting tithes and offerings. This function should be conducted in an organized and graceful manner. The head deacon is to develop a quarterly duty roster which includes a schedule for the deacons who are to participate in this part of the service. The number of deacons involved in this process will be determined by the size of the congregation and the layout of the sanctuary. Even if the congregation is small, deacons are to attend to this task with dignity. The *Manual for Church Officers* warns, "For the small churches, it may seem to be a simple task. Unfortunately, however, it is often in the small churches that order, system, and finesse are most lacking."¹ Deacons should dress uniformly when serving; for example, they may wear black or navy suits, black shoes, white shirts, and dark ties. Most importantly, however, they are to observe the principle of modesty in dress so as not to draw attention to themselves.

The procedure used for collecting tithes and offerings may vary slightly from church to church, but the typical procedure is as follows:

When the elder calls for the tithes and offerings, the deacons will rise from their seats, walk together, and stand facing the pulpit. The elder will pause to allow them to pick up the offering plates. Then the elder will pray or begin reading Scriptures. The deacons should work in pairs. They will march abreast to their designated areas and pass the plates down the pews. They

should handle the offering plates with care, holding them with both hands.

When the tithes and offerings have been received, the deacons march to the rear of the sanctuary and wait until the elder asks the congregation to stand. Then they march by twos to the front of the pulpit, as the elder concludes the reading of Malachi 3:8-10. After the elder offers the prayer of dedication and the congregation sings the response, the deacons who are assigned to take the offering plates to the treasury room do so. The other deacons march to their seats in an orderly manner. In large churches, it may be necessary for the deacons to rehearse this process at least once a quarter to minimize mistakes.

Deaconesses should also dress uniformly when serving during the worship service. They may wear white outfits, especially during the spring and summer. Some deaconesses wear black or navy suits in the fall and winter. Again, modesty is important.

At least one deaconess should be assigned to the children's room to assist parents with babies and toddlers as needed. She should also assist the usher that is assigned to this room to maintain reverence and order. The deaconesses seated in the front of the sanctuary should assist the person telling the children's story and help to keep the children quiet and orderly. They should pay close attention to special needs that may arise, such as a child with a runny nose, an upset stomach, a coughing or crying spell, spilled milk, etc.

Deaconesses should also make sure that there is fresh water at the pulpit for the speaker. The water should be room temperature because cold water will affect the speaker's vocal cords.

Deacons and deaconesses should seek to maintain reverence in the sanctuary and on the church premises. They should be discreet and tactful when dealing with disturbances.

When the worship service is over, the deacons, deaconesses, and ushers should see to it that hymnals and Bibles are returned to the pew racks, trash is picked up, items left behind are taken to Lost and Found, and the church is securely locked.

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¹ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Manual for Church Officers* (1978), 87.

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CHOICES FOR LIFE:

SAY YES! TO IMMUNIZATIONS

For years people have raised concerns about vaccinations. They have many reasons for their fear. Debates and questions like “Should I get immunized myself?” or “Should I vaccinate my children?” are issues we all have to face at some point.

Over the years, this debate about whether or not Adventists should get immunized has created some heated discussions. Some people believe that vaccines cause autism or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Conspiracy theories are often cited, suggesting that some people in power use or create vaccines to harm the population and keep them sick. Still others argue that there is no need to introduce a “poisonous” substance in the body when one’s own strong immune system is what defeats illness.

Unfortunately, these arguments and assumptions have caused some Seventh-day Adventists to say “No!” to immunizations for themselves or their children. In some places around the world, Adventists in churches, schools, and hospitals contribute to low vaccination rates in their communities, putting at risk the immunity of others. Many cite “religious doctrines” to receive a waiver where vaccines are required. But are these notions accurate?

What we know is that there is no conclusive evidence that any of these assumptions are true. In fact, on the scientific side, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has carefully examined the vaccine/autism links and refutes this claim. After 10 well-conducted studies, they concluded that there is no link between autism and thimerosal-containing vaccines or the measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine in children.¹ The American Academy of Pediatrics and the U.S. Public Health Service have published their own joint statement, which also highlights this.²

The same is true for SIDS. After years of study, researchers concluded that vaccines are not a risk factor for SIDS.³ While it is true that some vaccines may have adverse effects, these are usually rare and minor. In addition, some adverse effects are coincidental and not caused by vaccines. A comprehensive report by the Institutes of Medicine (IOM)⁴ in 2011 stated that despite these adverse effects, the evidence convincingly supports vaccinations.

The benefits of immunizations have been observed over the years. Children and adults have had fewer infections, and certain diseases (measles, polio, and others) have disappeared entirely from certain states and countries. Herd immunity points to the fact that when you get vaccinated, you are also providing immunity for your home, community, and

country. So the fact is that vaccines can save lives—not just yours when you receive them but other people’s lives, too.

But what about religious reasons? There is no doctrine in the Seventh-day Adventist Church that prohibits vaccines. Ellen White herself took the smallpox vaccine when it first became available.⁵ In order to reaffirm this, the Adventist Church has guidelines regarding vaccinations, which state:

“The Seventh-day Adventist Church places strong emphasis on health and well-being. The Adventist health emphasis is based on biblical revelation, the inspired writing of E. G. White (co-founder of the Church), and on peer-reviewed scientific literature. As such, we encourage responsible immunization/vaccination, and have no religious or faith-based reason not to encourage our adherents to responsibly participate in protective and preventive immunization programs. We value the health and safety of the population, which includes the maintenance of ‘herd immunity.’ We are not the conscience of the individual church member, and recognize individual choices. These are exercised by the individual. The choice not to be immunized is not and should not be seen as the doctrine of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.”⁶

As elders and spiritual leaders, we have a responsibility to help educate our members about the vaccination issue. While we respect each person’s choices, it is important that we help disseminate sound and balanced principles that will impact not only his or her health but also the health of others. Ellen White was firm to say, “We must educate, educate, educate. Pleasantly and intelligently.”⁷

Consider saying “Yes!” to immunizations and educating others to do so. This can be an important choice to help people experience a more full and abundant life (John 10:10, NIV).

ED

¹ <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/concerns/autism>

² <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/134/2/325.full.html>

³ <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/Concerns/sids.html>

⁴ <https://www.iom.edu/Reports/2011/Adverse-Effects-of-Vaccines-Evidence-and-Causality.aspx>

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn. 1958, 1980), 2:303.

⁶ <http://www.adventist.org/information/official-statements/guidelines/article/go/0/immunization/>

⁷ Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry*, 262.



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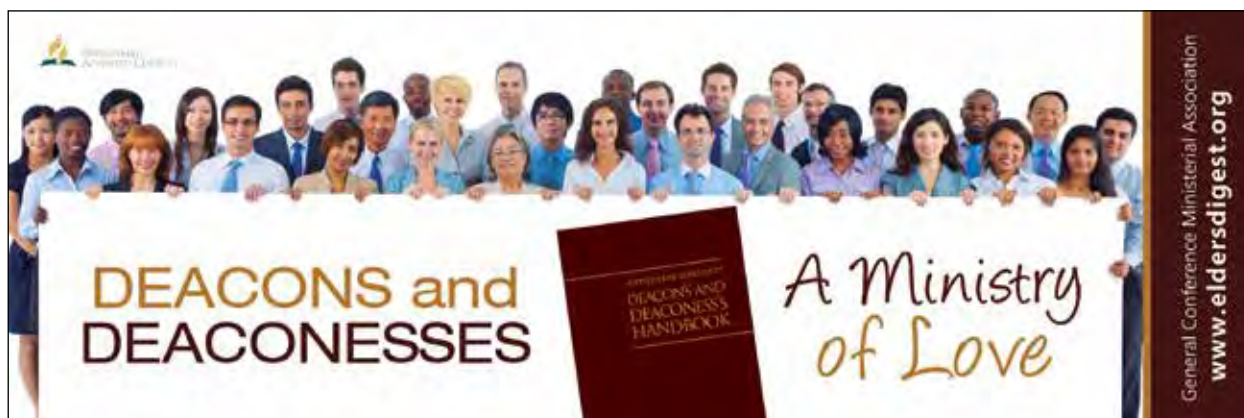
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If you have a question about church policy or procedure, let us know! Every quarter we address these issues in our "Question and Answer" column, and we would love to hear from you! E-mail us at garciamarenkoa@gc.adventist.org.



LESSONS FROM DANIEL 3

IN DANIEL 2 WE ENCOUNTERED A VISUAL IMAGE THAT DESCRIBES THE FUTURE HISTORY OF THE WORLD AS A SEQUENCE OF KINGDOMS. DANIEL 3 ALSO FOCUSES ON AN IMAGE, BUT THIS TIME IT IS NOT AN IMAGE REVEALED BY GOD BUT AN IMAGE ERECTED BY NEBUCHADNEZZAR. THIS IMAGE BRINGS ABOUT A CRISIS.

I. DISCUSSION OF THE CHAPTER

A. The Image and Worship

1. **Verses 1–7**—*What are the differences between the image in Daniel 2 and the image in Daniel 3?*

Daniel 2:

- Shown in a dream.
- Revelation of God.
- Prediction about the future.
- Made of different materials.
- God as highest authority.
- Not related to worship.

Daniel 3:

- Real image.
- Initiative of the king.
- Wishful thinking about the future.
- Made of pure gold.
- The king as highest authority.
- Worship of the image .

Daniel 2 indicates that Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom is the golden head. However, it seems that the king was not content to be the golden head. The entire image had to be made of gold to suggest that his kingdom would be glorious, perpetual, and not followed by an inferior empire. In light of his statement in Daniel 2:47, his action in Daniel 3 must be understood as rebellion against God and hubris.

2. **Verses 2, 3**—The dignitaries of the kingdom are summoned. Daniel and his friends belonged to the government officials (Dan 3:12), but Daniel himself was not present when the events took place. He may have been on some kind of mission for the king.
3. **Verses 4–6**—*What would worship of the image express?*
 - Recognition of the king as supreme lord and submission to him.

- Recognition of the king as a kind of god.
- Denial of the true God.
- Rejection of the first and second commandments of the Decalogue.
- Recognition of the Babylonian gods as superior to other gods and the true God.

4. **Verse 6**—*Why is the death penalty for the case of disobedience to the king's command announced right away?*

- Disobedience is a sign of disloyalty and rebellion and is suppressed immediately in totalitarian regimes.
- Toleration of disobedience would endanger the absolute authority of the king.
- The unity of the empire would be jeopardized.

5. **Verse 7**—The multitudes worship the image. However, truth is not necessarily found with the majority. It requires courage and strength of character to not join the questionable or wrong decisions of the masses and go against the tide.

B. The Accusation

1. **Verses 8–12**—Daniel's friends are accused of disloyalty. There seems to be some sort of jealousy among their accusers and even an indirect criticism of the king's former action to put foreigners, prisoners of war, into governmental positions. The issue is brought directly to the king, and it is before the king that the three friends have to answer and defend themselves.

How are they described by their enemies?

- They are Jews, foreigners of a different religion, and therefore people of suspicion. - In spite of their position (Dan 2:49) they refuse to obey orders and are disloyal. They are also ungrateful to their royal benefactor.

- They are opposed to the king and his gods.

C. Dialogue with Nebuchadnezzar

1. **Verses 13–15**—*How is the King described?*
 - Extreme furiousness.
 - Serious intimidations.
 - Nevertheless willingness to grant a second chance.
 - Pride and a feeling of superiority with regard to the God of the Hebrews.
 - Challenging the true God.
 - Disbelief that God would be able to save the three friends. It seems that in his opinion his gods are more powerful than Yahweh.
 - Lust for power: immediate death penalty for alleged rebellion.
2. **Verses 16–18**—*What about Daniel's friends impresses us?*
 - Calmness and equanimity.
 - Courage and boldness.
 - Faithfulness to their God.
 - Readiness to die for their convictions.
 - Faith in the omnipotence of God.
 - Submission to God's will, no matter what it may mean.
 - Their understanding of God does not claim that believers are exempt of evil and challenges, or that God is obligated to save them from all danger. They do not believe they should let go of God in case He does not intervene. They do not believe in a kind of contract between God and them in the sense of "What you will do to me, I will do to you," or "I am giving so that you will give." Rather they have a personal relationship of trust and love with the Lord.

D. Execution of the Verdict

1. **Verses 19–22**—In his wrath the king orders the execution of his verdict. In this process his best warriors die. His order to heat the furnace seven times hotter may have been given to prevent the God of the Hebrews from saving His people. The furnace may have been one of the many kilns used in Babylon.

E. The Phenomenon in the Fiery Furnace

1. **Verses 23–25**—A phenomenon happens: although the soldiers outside the furnace are burnt, the three men inside the furnace do not die but freely walk around in the fire, and a fourth person joins them. His appearance is described as a son of the gods or the Son of God (vs. 28, 29 suggest the second option). God intervenes and saves His faithful servants. Early church fathers already understood this fourth person as Jesus Christ. The king is stunned.


F. Nebuchadnezzar's Reaction

1. **Verses 26–30**—*What are the consequences of this miracle?*
 - The three men are released from their "prison."
 - The king no longer finds fault with their refusal to worship the image.
 - He appreciates the faithfulness of the three men, including their unwillingness to compromise.
 - Recognizing God as the only true God who can save in such a marvelous way, he issues a command against blasphemy. His knowledge of God increases.
 - The three men are promoted.

II. APPLICATION

- As it was in the past, so it still is today: The Son of God saves us (v. 25). He makes us His children, if we allow Him.
- Because we are saved and belong to God as Daniel's three friends did, we are faithful (vs. 17, 18). We are obedient in great and small matters. This may not always be easy, but Jesus will help us and will allow us to experience His interventions. Obedience and faithfulness are a sign of love (John 14:15, 21; 15:10).
- Daniel 3 forms the background of Rev 13:11–18. In the last days of world history, this obedience and faithfulness will be needed again. The issue will also be worship: worship of the dragon, the sea beast, or the image of the beast (Rev 13:4, 8, 15) versus worship of God (Rev 14:7). The faithful people of God will be dedicated to Jesus and keep God's commandments, especially the Ten Commandments (Rev 14:12). We want to be part of the faithful people.
- Following Jesus does not exclude suffering and, in some cases, even death (Dan 3:18). We should not have illusions. While Christian faith offers us a new and better quality of life, it is not an insurance against distress and suffering in this world.
- However, there will be final salvation. We are waiting for God's kingdom to come. There will be the resurrection of the dead and eternal life without suffering and death (Rev 21:3, 4). Daniel also knew about this kingdom of God (Dan 2:44). We are looking forward to it.

CONCLUSION

There is salvation. There is hope beyond death (see Dan 12:13). Even if the entire world is ruined and destroyed, this is not the end. There is hope beyond the "end." 

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SEX ON SABBATH

During a classroom discussion about the sanctity of the Sabbath, a participant raised an issue: “I am struggling with a sin,” he confessed. “I am tempted to have sex with my wife on Sabbath.”

The topic is not uncommon, and it raises a diversity of opinions,¹ although little about the subject has been published.² What does the Bible say on the subject? We shall consider the question by reviewing (1) the leading argument used against sex on Sabbath; (2) the biblical view of sexuality; (3) perversion of the biblical view; and (4) concluding observations.

LEADING ARGUMENT

The leading argument against engaging in sex on Sabbath is based on Isaiah 58:13: “If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day” (KJV). Since sex is pleasurable, scriptural injunction against engaging in intercourse on Sabbath is seen as obvious.³

The context of Isaiah 58 refers to Sabbath on the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement was a day devoted to self-examination, judgment, and cleansing. Every individual was supposed to participate so that he or she would not be “cut off” (Lev. 23:29). There is no textual evidence to indicate that sex was forbidden on the Sabbath or the Day of Atonement. Rene Gehring argues that in the Hebrew Bible, sexual intercourse within marriage was not ritually defiling at all.⁴ He considers it a fallacy to use related passages like Exodus 19 to suggest that sex within marriage was forbidden. Even if sex within marriage did cause “ritual defilement,” Roy Gane makes the point that such “ritual defilement” only applied when the Shekinah glory was in the temple.⁵ Thus, within an Old Testament context, sexual pleasure is positive.

This leads back to a study of the word “pleasure” as found in Isaiah 58:13; it is the same Hebrew word found in verse 3 that warns against exploitation. The word is also translated in the NIPS Jewish Bible as “business pleasure” (or one’s own “business interests”). Isaiah 58:13 refers to the Sabbath as a “delight” (NIV). The word “delight” in Hebrew is *oneg*, meaning “exquisite delight.” Used elsewhere, the word as a noun only applies with regard to kings and queens in their royal palaces (Isa. 13:22).

Thus, the implication of Isaiah 58:13 is that God wants us to lay aside our own agendas and replace them with something far more exquisite. God calls us to live lives of selfless pleasure focused on our relationship with God.⁶ The notion that the Sabbath forbids joyous pleasure during the Sabbath hours is basically a misreading of the original text. As Nancy Van Pelt observes, “If this text actually meant to forbid sex

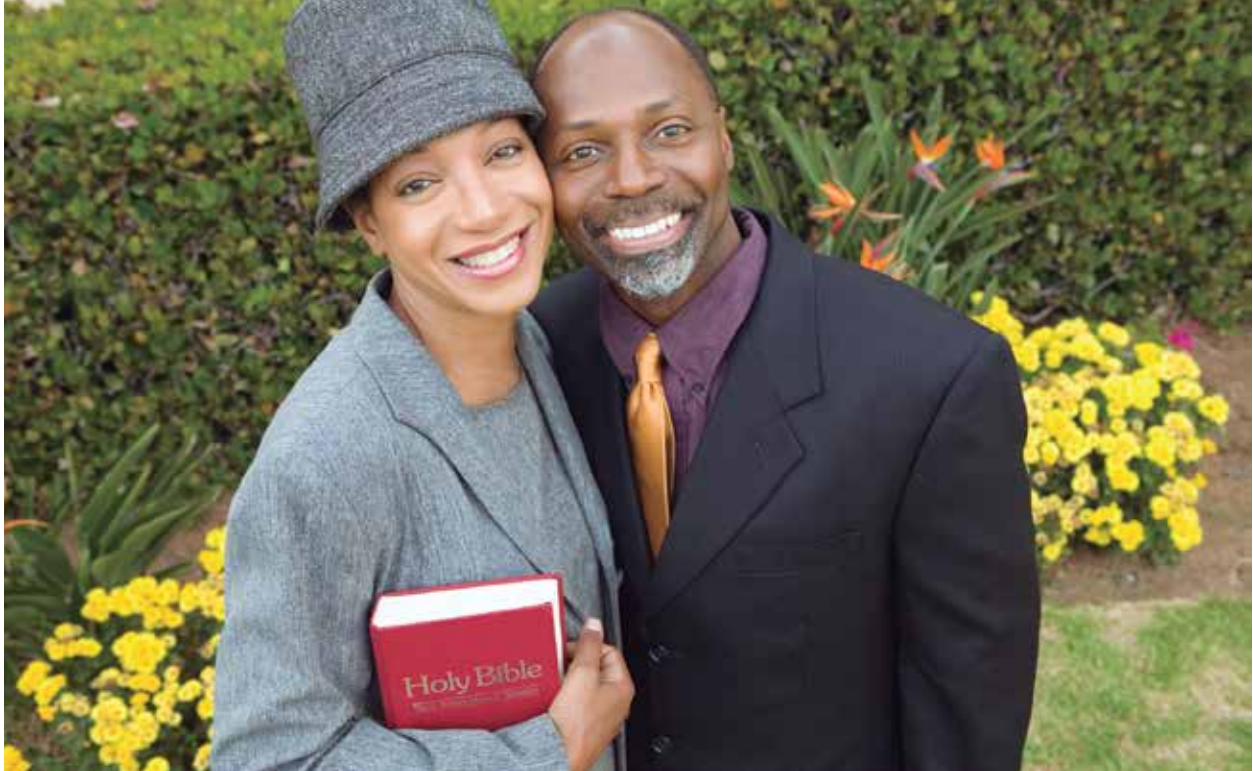
because it is pleasurable, then any pleasure including singing hymns, reading the Bible, or eating should also be forbidden. Isaiah was talking about my seeking my own selfish pleasure. If sex is nothing more than ‘my pleasure,’ it is selfish and therefore wrong not only on the Sabbath but on every other day of the week as well.”⁷

Another significant argument against sex on Sabbath is that it is distracting. For this reason, some Adventist ministers boast that they sleep in separate beds from their spouses on Friday nights. When asked whether sex on the Sabbath was a distraction, one Adventist pastor replied with another question: “Is it really less distracting when your spouse does not have sex with you?” Those present nodded in agreement that, of course, it was far less distracting to have sex rather than to be left thinking about it. As Richard Davidson observes, “If those who have sexual intercourse understand how much it teaches us about the deepest levels of intimacy, then such intimacy on the horizontal level actually helps us to grasp the nature of intimacy God wants us to have with His creatures. Far from being ‘distracting’ from intimacy with God, sexual intercourse practiced as God intended it leads us to a deeper understanding of intimacy with Him.”⁸

BIBLICAL VIEW OF SEXUALITY

Upon their return from exile, faithful Jews established vigorous codes for keeping the seventh-day Sabbath holy. Rabbinic codes allowed married people to have sex on Sabbath,⁹ and they even described it as a special “Sabbath blessing.” Sabbath was considered the bride, and Friday evening was the time of connubial consummation. Even the wife living apart from her husband was granted the privilege of having relations with him on Friday night.¹⁰ A refusal on the part of the husband was grounds for the wife to take her husband to the rabbinic court for abandonment.¹¹

God created Adam and Eve and made the marriage relationship holy. During the Creation week, He “made the Sabbath day holy.” These two holy institutions belong together. Sabbath and sexual intercourse were blended together from the very first Sabbath in history.¹² Sexual relations as God intended, and as later expressed by Solomon, are described as this “flame of Yahweh” that helps human beings better understand God.¹³ In God’s original design, sex was intended as the ultimate way for a man and a woman, in holy matrimony, to experience the deepest level of intimacy.¹⁴ Adventist ethicist Duane Covrig argues that the Sabbath and marriage are the only institutions that fulfill all six of Jonathan Haidt’s six innate moral foundations (care, fairness, liberty, loyalty, authority, and sanctity). This rich pairing indicates that the Sabbath is



a “tool to help all six areas get reinforced in the life of humans.”¹⁵

Such a beautiful gift has been distorted and perverted. God’s concern about sexual perversions, especially as associated with pagan rites and rituals, was one of the reasons He enforced such vigorous demands about uncleanness in conjunction with Hebrew worship. Sexuality was holy but had been perverted by other pagan rites and rituals. The perversion of sex was the ancient sin that contributed to the destruction of the human race during Noah’s time and later with Sodom and Gomorrah. Sexual perversion is a sign of the final days of earth’s history (see Matt. 24:38). Satan clearly wants to distort and pervert the beautiful gift that God bestowed upon the human race.

PERVERSION OF BIBLICAL VIEW

Another perversion came within Hellenistic thinking that denigrated the human body. Early Christian thinkers viewed the soul as being trapped inside the body. This concept of the separation of body from soul, a distinctive feature of Platonism, caught on in the early Christian church. It destroyed the meaning of the seventh-day Sabbath and introduced new and unbiblical anthropological teachings such as the idea that the body and soul were separate.¹⁶ Through the influence of a series of thinkers, the early Christian church adopted such views with very little resistance.

The early church fathers discussed sex at great length. Tertullian embraced a rigid asceticism that included fasting and celibacy. It is said that Origen “had himself castrated in order to avoid all temptations of the ‘flesh’ and to be able to engage in spiritual conversation with women but not be erotically aroused.”¹⁷ Augustine, in his autobiography, described his sexual misconduct to emphasize the dramatic nature of his conversion. As perhaps the most influential thinker in

early Christianity, Augustine had a “permanent and fateful impact on the Western Church” regarding human sexuality.¹⁸ He believed that since all human cultures hide private body parts, “humans are deeply ashamed about their sexuality.” The separation of body and soul was evident when the body took over the rational capacity of the mind to subjugate the body. He thus argued that sex constantly reminds people of their rebellion against God. The human body symbolizes the fact that “[s]exuality and the Christian faith . . . [are] incompatible.”¹⁹

The lasting impact of Platonism and, in particular, Augustine can be seen in their view of Christian sexuality: All sexual urges must be repressed. This view of Christian sexuality had a direct correlation to ecclesiology as monks retreated to outposts and caves. Those who denied themselves sexual pleasure and became celibate were perceived as more spiritual and thus more deserving of church office. All of this contributed to a theology that moved away from the biblical view of sexuality, similar to the seventh-day Sabbath. Such beauty was lost during the Dark Ages.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The topic of sex on Sabbath is a deeply personal decision that should be prayerfully discussed between a husband and wife. For some married couples, this may be something that they choose “by mutual consent” (1 Cor. 7:5, NIV) to forgo during the hours of the seventh-day Sabbath in order to maintain their spiritual focus. This is admirable, but for others, this may be yet more distracting.

For those married couples who do engage in sexual relations on Sabbath, such a view has deep roots in the original Creation. A view of sexuality that embraces the whole person connects sex with Creation as God’s beautiful gift to humanity. Satan has distorted this gift. Whether that distortion comes

from the view that sex is self-centered pleasure and therefore needs to be suppressed or from the view of today's mass media that sex has nothing to do with morality and is at the will and wish of the indulger, Satan is behind every such attempt to rob this precious gift of God's original design.

So, let's go back to our question about sex on Sabbath. The principle the apostle Paul conveyed in another context may apply here as well: "Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him" (Rom. 14:3, ESV).

ED

¹ In less than 24 hours, a social media discussion between pastors about whether sex was permissible on Sabbath resulted in over 100 comments, with the majority in favor.

² Gina Spivey Brown and Loretta Parker Spivey, "Sex on Sabbath?" *Adventist Review*, September 1996, 19; Martin Weber, *Adventist Hot Potatoes* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1991), 86, 87.

³ Nancy L. Van Pelt with Madlyn Lewis Hamblin, *Dear Nancy . . . : A Trusted Advisor Gives Straight Answers to Questions about Marriage, Sex, and Parenting* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2005), 56.

⁴ Rene Gehring, "Is Sexuality Impure? An Alternate Interpretation of Leviticus 15:18," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 24, no. 2 (2013): 75-115.

⁵ Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 305-314.

⁶ Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, *A Sense of the Supernatural: Interpretation of Dreams and Paranormal Experiences* (n.p.: Gal Eina Institute, 2008), 70fn.15.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Email from Richard M. Davidson to the author, December 27, 2014.

⁹ Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 192.

¹⁰ Kethuboth 5:9, 65b.

¹¹ I am indebted to Alex Golovenko for these insights.

¹² Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 52.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ I am indebted to Jiri Moskala for this insight.

¹⁵ Duane Covrig, AIIAS Lecture, October 22, 2014; see also his blog post "The Sabbath as Moral Healing and Training," *Adventist Ethics*, October 31, 2013, <http://www.adventistethics.com/the-sabbath-as-moral-healing-and-training/>. Covrig furthermore notes that he disagrees with the evolutionary premise but that his identification of these six moral values is helpful for identifying the significance of the seventh-day Sabbath.

¹⁶ Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 300-321.

¹⁷ Hans J. Hillerbrand, *A New History of Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 41.

¹⁸ Ibid., 50.

¹⁹ Ibid., 51.

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LIFE-CHANGING STORIES:

THE MINISTRY OF PRESENCE - PART 2

One of Jesus' major functions on this earth was to demonstrate what it meant to have "God with us." In the same way, through our presence in the lives of others, we are able to show that God is still with us. He is intimately concerned with what concerns us. In His parable about the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus makes it clear that we are to reach out in tangible ways to the people around us. Not only are we to see Jesus in "the least of these," but others should see Jesus in us. As we will learn from the stories below, our interactions with people are a testament to the Jesus we serve.

OPEN EYES

A church plant initiative took advantage of the unseasonably warm fall weather to host a service in the park. James, an elder who had just started working with the church, noticed a couple who had come with their infant daughter. This couple, who were not members of the church or even Adventists, had been attending the plant on a semi-regular basis. As the weather started to get cold, the couple was not sure what to do because their daughter was not dressed warmly. The elder, remembering that he kept a blanket in his car, ran to get it for them. The couple was surprised by the gesture but thankful that they could stay and worship. The couple began attending the New Believer's Sabbath School class that James taught and soon made a decision to be baptized. Four months after the church picnic, James and the pastor baptized the couple. What joy it was for the elder to see how one seemingly insignificant action could impact a whole family for Christ.

Taking time to pay attention to people and being attentive to those around you will not only bring smiles to their faces but to yours as well. "We little know the bearing of our acts upon the experience of others. What we do or say may seem to us of little moment, when, could our eyes be opened, we should see that upon it depended the most important results for good or for evil."²

OPEN HEART

Mary, one of the local elders, befriended a young woman who had moved into the area and starting attending church. When the young woman's church attendance dropped off, Mary made a point to connect with her. The young woman was struggling in her faith and feeling unsure about where her life was leading. Mary knew that she would not be able to provide all the answers but felt strongly that she needed to be intentional about keeping a connection with the young woman. So they arranged a standing lunch date once a week in which they could talk about the daily ups and downs of life, including spiritual matters. During these


lunches, the young woman is able to voice her struggles without fear of judgment. Although Mary cannot always relate to the struggles, she continues to listen and be present. Both Mary and the young woman are thankful to have the opportunity to deepen their friendship.

People are hurting all around us. Marriages, careers, and family problems abound; spiritual, emotional, and physical aches are present. So we must bring to those people the presence of Jesus which brings peace, hope, and rest. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

OPEN ARMS

In addition to being in the right place at the right time, a ministry of presence is also manifested in intentionally providing for the felt needs of both members and the community. Many elders hold English classes for immigrants or computer classes for people returning to the workforce. Others provide welcome baskets to families who move into the neighborhood, while some coordinate Welcome Baby baskets for new mothers at the local hospital. Some elders focus on a reconnecting ministry and reach out to former members, often through visitation. And visitation goes beyond the home and the hospital. For example, an elder with a gift for hospitality might invite families to her home several times a month for Sabbath dinner. Or an elder could make phone calls or send cards to let people know someone is thinking of them.

OPEN TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

As a Navy Chaplain candidate, Kristy has come to understand the significance of the ministry of presence. It is about holding the hand of the hurting and slowing down enough to walk beside these individuals. We worship a "God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Cor. 1:3, 4). It is about helping people realize that the Holy Spirit can empower them to move forward in their spiritual journey. Allow yourself to be a conduit for the One who loves this world unto death (John 3:16). 

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¹ To avoid confusion, we will refer to S. Joseph Kidder with the pronoun "I" and reference Kristy by name.

² Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 483.

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