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My Journey

God’s leading has been throughout my journey. Sometimes I feel His leading more in the grand moments—in passing hard tests or getting that final veterinary diploma. But I can also feel Him leading in those small moments when having quiet conversations with my friends and hearing that they want to give their life to God.

Visit nadadventist.org/ajsylviagrove for more of Grove’s story.

SYLVIA GROVE,
veterinarian, young adult church elder, Virginia

Sylvia Grove



Cover photo by Art Brando

Dear Reader: The publication in your hands represents the collaborative efforts of the North American Division and *Adventist World* magazine, which follows *Adventist Journey* (after page 16). Please enjoy both magazines!

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Correction: The occupation and location for Lentner Tom, Dec. 2022 cover video story individual, should have been local church leader and Kolonia, Pohnpei. We regret this error.

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THE PROMISE OF HIS PRESENCE

With Jesus' presence and power, doubt is erased, and we the church can accomplish the mission of God.

BY G. ALEXANDER BRYANT

This article is adapted from the October 29, 2022, NAD year-end meeting sermon entitled "Lo, I Am With You Always" given by G. Alexander Bryant. Some characteristics of the oral presentation remain.—Editors.

IN MATTHEW 28 JESUS HAD TO TELL His disciples He was leaving just when things were starting to click. By then Jesus had become very popular, and the disciples were popular by association. He couldn't go into a town or city without thousands of people trying to get to know Him. But just a few days ago Jesus had been crucified. He was the disciples' everything, the one they went to when things weren't going well, and now, having risen from the cross, He had to tell them He was going away.

Matthew 28:17 says, "When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted." The 500 people who saw the resurrected Jesus were not the hateful Pharisees, the backbiting scribes, or the careless crowd. They were His followers, those closest to Him.

Among His disciples were doubters, even as they witnessed Him firsthand. A lesson here is the call of God to advancement will always have

doubters. It's amazing that some people saw and worshipped, and others saw and doubted.

God calls us, as Seventh-day Adventists, to advance His kingdom. Oftentimes He'll give you a bold and audacious vision, one that others will doubt. Throughout the Bible God calls people to do the unthinkable. Noah. Joseph. Moses. Gideon. David. Their calling seemed preposterous to many, even their own families. But when God gives you a vision, forge ahead. Don't be afraid to make waves.

He is calling us to be change agents.

Jesus' response to His doubters was: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matt. 28:18, KJV).

Organizationally, when Jesus left, things were in disarray. Jewish services had been turned upside down. The thing they prized most was the holy place where the presence of God dwelt, but the curtain was torn from top to bottom. The Pharisees, the religious leaders or the brethren of the day, had been exposed as liars, cheats, and murderers.

The disciples were in the upper room, not knowing what to do and where to go. There was no organization. There was no money. There was no president. They didn't even have houses of worship. Jesus understood the situation in Galilee. The doubters were Christ's disciples, and they didn't have enough faith to overcome the present challenges.

Jesus didn't acknowledge their doubt, debate with them, or beat them up for their unbelief. Rather, He asserted, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matt. 28:18).

The two Greek words translated power in the Bible are *dunamis* and *exousia*. *Dunamis* means power that's inherent in a thing. But Jesus doesn't use the word *dunamis* here. He uses the word *exousia*, which

The call of God to His disciples is a global call.



North American Division president G. Alexander Bryant preaches the division's year-end meeting sermon on October 29, 2022.

means not just power but authority. *Dunamis* means you have power to act, as in Acts 1:8: “Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you” (KJV). That’s the word we get “dynamite” from, and dynamite changes things. But *exousia* is authority, and those who’ve been given power get it from the one who has authority.

God says, “I set up kings and I put kings down” (see Dan. 2:21). They have power, but God has authority. Therefore, when God calls you, He has already given you the authority to act and to move on His behalf. He calls you despite the doubters.

Here Jesus is saying, “Not just some power is given unto me. Not just religious power, spiritual power, Seventh-day Adventist power, or vegan power. All power is given unto me. I’m addressing your doubt. I want you to look at My power, and the more you look at My power, the more your doubt will disappear.”

Power and Courage Are First

When we cite Matthew 28, we often start in the wrong place, with verse 19, God’s call to mission. We need to start in 18. When you start in 18, it gives you the power

and courage to go to 19. Another takeaway is that the call of God is an imperative to go, a command. In other words, you have no choice.

Usually we think this imperative applies to the church, but when you read the text, it applies to the individual. “Go ye to all the world” isn’t just a collective mandate for the church; it is a mandate for *any* disciple of Jesus Christ.

That’s why we need to be careful of thinking too locally with our mission. We have been assigned locally, but the call of God to His disciples is a global call. We have a global mission, for which we are

It doesn't matter who's against us when we have God on our side.

equally responsible. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is organized so that we have divisions, unions, and conferences, but it exists for one purpose—that is to fulfill the call of Jesus to all His disciples.

Finally, God's imperative to go brings the promise of His presence. Remember the context of Matthew 28. They're on the mountainside. Jesus is about to leave, and He knows what's going through their minds. They were used to the intimate, physical presence of Jesus, and Jesus knew in a few moments, they'd be losing that intimacy. So He promised them, "Lo, I am with you always" (verse 20, KJV).

The word "Lo" is translated from the Greek word *idou*. *Idou* is a demonstrative particle wanting to draw attention to what is being said. It could be translated "behold," "see," "lo," or "surely." "Lo" is a verbal expression of an exclamation point. Jesus is emphasizing His promise by saying, "Lo, I am with you always."

In fact, this word is inserted into the discourse after a genitive absolute. In Greek, a genitive absolute is used to announce there's something new. "I am with you" is special because He's getting ready to leave. Remember the story of Lazarus? When Jesus became man, He became confined to time and space. When Lazarus was sick, Jesus was two days' journey away and couldn't be where Lazarus was; so Lazarus died.

By using the word "Lo," Jesus is introducing a new phase in the disciples' experience. He's saying, "You are accustomed to My being confined to time and space. But when I leave, lo, I am with you always, because I'll no longer be confined. So when Peter is in Egypt, I'll be with him. And when Thomas is in India, I'll be with him. And when Bartholomew is in Spain, I'll be with him. And when Paul is in Antioch, I'll be with him."

That's why Jesus says, "It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come" (John 16:7, KJV). I'm confined,

but the Holy Spirit can be in all places at once.

The same Jesus that said "Go" said "Lo." We try to do the going without the lo-ing. But in fact, we can't do the go without the lo, and God never meant for us to attempt that. The task is too large. But if we have the lo, we get to go. Matthew pins the promise that God will never leave us as the last words of His book, and the last words of Jesus, because they're most important.

It Wasn't Luck

Some years ago my family and I were driving to Colorado from Kansas. It was about 600 miles and we had a high-top conversion van. These vans, because they have a high extension, can be top-heavy. In a wind or even at high speeds, they can flip easily. I had been driving for almost 400 miles, and I was sleepy. So I went to the sofa bed in the back, and my wife, Des, took over the wheel.

About 30 minutes into my nap I heard a terrible dragging noise and awakened. Rising from the sofa bed, I saw sparks flying up past the rear window. As I righted myself, I saw that the back tire that should have been on the back driver's side was beating us down the highway. Then the van was tilted. Des was doing her best to keep the van upright and hold on. I knew I didn't have enough time to get from the



The Tsikirai family plays worship music for the gathered delegates at the 2022 NAD year-end meeting.



Sara Devaraj sings "Goodness of God" during the year-end meeting worship service.

back all the way to the front to help her. All I could say was, "Des, hold the van straight. Don't let it move."

She kept saying, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." My three sons, Des, and I were in the van, and I felt helpless.

I turned around in the back and saw an 18-wheeler coming down on us. I kept begging Des to hold the van straight, and she kept calling "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." Meanwhile, heaven was watching. Heaven said, "The Bryants are in trouble 100 miles outside of Denver," and Jesus Himself came to the rescue.

The next thing we knew, the van had moved from the middle of the highway to the side of the shoulder of the road. The 18-wheeler whooshed by, and I exited the van. I couldn't believe it. I got out and walked back. For 60 yards there was a gash in the highway from the wheel drum of that van. Suddenly the gash stopped in the middle of the highway, and the van was sitting on the side of the highway.

We called a tow truck driver. He came and looked at the same gash in the highway and asked, "Who moved the van? How did you get the van over there?"

I responded, "How much time have you got?"

And then he told me there was another van with a family earlier

that day. The same thing happened. The van flipped over, and three of the members were in the hospital in critical condition. "Mr. Bryant, you were lucky," he said.

I answered, "I'm sorry, luck didn't have anything to do with it. There's a Man named Jesus who said, 'When you need Me, call on Me, and I will come running to your aid. Lo, I am with you always, even until the end of the world.'"

For This Moment

When we're serving God, it's so easy to become jaded and, as we come up against failure, challenge, and difficulty, to allow that to become the rule of the day. So instead of setting our heights high, we set them low to avoid disappointment.

I've been in the ministry for 40 years, and I constantly ask God to help me believe the way I did when I started. The challenges are great and can cause me to shift from worship to doubt. My prayer is to retain the childlike trust and faith to believe God can do anything.

God has placed each of us where we are for this moment.

If you're feeling weak and not up for life's challenges, whether medical, financial, or ministry-related, that's not a bad place to be. Jesus says, "My grace is sufficient for thee,

for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9, KJV).

Romans 8:31 says, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (KJV). It doesn't matter who's against us when we have God on our side. We may not be much, but we have Someone behind us who has authority.

God is calling us to access the power He's made available to make disciples and hasten His coming by preaching the gospel throughout the world (see Matt. 24:14).

Let's say today, "Lord, in spite of my fears, in spite of my doubts, I want to give my life to You. I want You to work in my life Your will. I want to cast my net on the winning side. Father, the promise, lo, no matter where we go, what we do, what You've asked of us, is real. Jesus says, I can be in Seattle, New York, Los Angeles, or Toronto at the same time. Lo, I am with you."

What's holding us back? God is calling us to step out on the little faith we have. In spite of the fear that may be present and the obstacles that are certainly there, we're telling God that we're going to take the Matthew 28:18-20 challenge and go to our communities, to our big cities, to our small cities, and as He leads us, we will follow.

Thank You, Lord, for the promise of Your presence.

G. Alexander Bryant is president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America.



At the first in-person year-end meeting since 2019, G. Alexander Bryant preaches to a packed auditorium.

Collaboration, Resurgence, and Continued Service

Officers share their annual reports at the North American Division year-end meeting.

BY KIMBERLY LUSTE MARAN AND CHRISTELLE AGBOKA

The 2022 North American Division (NAD) year-end meeting (YEM) started on Thursday, October 27, at the division's headquarters in Columbia, Maryland. This annual business meeting provided the opportunity for more than 300 executive committee members to receive reports, amend policies, strategize, pray, and fellowship with church leaders and laypersons dedicated to sharing Christ and the Adventist faith with others. All business sessions and worship programs were livestreamed on the NAD website and various other social media platforms.

"Together in Mission: I Will Go" continues to be the year-end meeting theme for the second year in a row and echoes the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, which is "To reach the North American Division and the world with the distinctive, Christ-centered, Seventh-day Adventist message of hope and wholeness."

"During the pandemic the ministry of the church went forward, and we especially thank the Lord for our teachers, health-care workers, and IT personnel for their work.

And our union and conference leaderships, our pastors, and the faithful members for what you have done—a heartfelt thank-you for your service," said G. Alexander Bryant, NAD president, as he opened his report after thanking the division staff.

"We have had to do the ministry and mission of the church through incredible political strife, economic collapse, and natural disasters, and yet we have seen God's church move forward. God has been blessing His church during the pandemic," said

Bryant. He listed many of the events the division has held in the past year, including the CALLED Pastors' Family Convention, Pathfinder Bible Experience, Sabbath School virtual conference, Sonscreen Film Festival, Adventist Community Services convention, Society of Adventist Communicators convention, and much more. Bryant also briefly addressed innovative breakthroughs just on the horizon for AdventistGiving, Adventist Information Ministry, and Adventist Education's student information.

G. Alexander Bryant gives his president's report on October 27, 2022, at the North American Division year-end meeting.



All photos by Pieter Damsteegt



On October 28, 2022, Kyoshin Ahn, NAD executive secretary, delivers his report to the executive committee gathered for the year-end meeting at the division headquarters in Columbia, Maryland.

Bryant explored the notion that evangelism has many different faces and approaches. He recognized the efforts of Health Ministries, Youth and Young Adult Ministries, and other ministry departments who have collaborated to address mental health and wellness. He also shared that “evangelism has been going on all across the division” through schools, food pantries, and digital outreach—among other efforts.

As part of his report, Bryant shared a look at the North American megalopolises, in particular 20 metropolitan areas. “God has called us to impact these epicenters of power. We need to have thousands of centers of influence all around the North American Division.”

“‘Together in Mission: I Will Go’ means that we’re stronger together. One of our strategic focuses for the next three years is to take our media resources and expand them, and to focus on how we can take these media resources to be more impactful in these big cities that God has called us to reach.”

Of the division’s three strategic focuses (multiply, media, and mentorship), the use of media will be vital in reaching the cities. Bryant encouraged year-end meeting attendees to explore the opportunities to network, and collaborate across all organizations, finding ways in which “we can maximize and expand our utilization of [social] media.”

“This is an area where we can allow our youth and young adults to help lead the way,” advised Bryant, “to train and equip 10,000 digital missionaries . . . to spread the love of Jesus Christ.”

He added that age or experience shouldn’t hold the church back as it strives for exponential growth, saying, “Whether it’s community outreach, or a health project, or a marriage seminar, or mental wellness, or an evangelistic meeting, or a weekly Bible study, let’s all do something for Jesus.”

Mentoring, the third strategic focus, is crucial. Bryant shared that in the past 18 months, five out of nine union presidents; 33 out of 59 conference presidents are new to their positions; and only one of six NAD vice presidents has served in their role longer than three years. And 140 NAD executive committee members are also new.

“We must collaborate with entities to create an intentional leadership development plan for leaders,” Bryant

said. Sharing data on the average ages of the church leadership in North America, he added, “About 2,000 pastors will be ready to retire in just a couple of years. . . . This area of mentorship is critically important.”

“May Christ’s Love Move Us to Such Extremes”

On October 28 NAD executive secretary Kyoshin Ahn and his team built upon president Bryant’s opening presentation by casting a vision for disciple-making in North America via the secretariat.

Ahn and leaders from secretariat ministries, including the Office of Volunteer Ministries, Office of Human Relations, eAdventist Membership Services, Archives, Statistics, and Research and Professional Services, offered a comprehensive, optimistic view of the post-pandemic church.

After thanking his team for their contributions, Ahn shared that by December 2021 the NAD had 1,271,642 members worshipping in 5,662 churches and 902 companies. The net membership increase was 5,888.

Resurgence was a recurring theme. “You may notice a steady increase in our division membership. It’s not drastic, but is still meaningful considering we were under COVID-19 in 2021,” Ahn said. “Because of the pandemic, we had a drastic decrease in baptisms in 2020, but saw [a] resurgence in this area in 2021. We had [more than] 20,000 baptisms in 2021, and we praise God for each and every person baptized.”

Furthermore, in 2021, 4,885 members were added by profession of faith, contributing to a total of 25,182 new members. Ahn reported that baptisms in the first two quarters of 2022 totaled 9,631, close to pre-pandemic numbers. “[New memberships] are down by 10,000 compared to before the pandemic, but much, much better than 2020!”

Among other findings, 47 percent (the majority) of the NAD’s members are ages 30-59 and 32 percent are 60+. The younger generation is far less represented, with ages 19-29, at 15 percent; 13-18, at 5 percent; and 0-12, at 1 percent (although children are underrepresented because statistics include only baptized members).

Sadly, 10,415 members died in 2021—2,000 more than in pre-COVID years, with a total of 4,100 abnormal deaths throughout the pandemic. Ahn added, “Last year 7,800 people were removed from our membership data because of missing or being dropped. [But] when you tally up the [numbers], we had more gains than losses in 2021.”

Ahn then turned to Bonita J. Shields, associate secretary, who has been spearheading work in nurture and retention. Shields shared recommendations arising from recent brainstorming sessions with union and conference secretaries. These included training and

resourcing executive secretaries to foster a culture of nurture and retention; and aligning with other church entities in the work of nurture and retention.

As he concluded the secretary's report, Ahn referred to the early church. "They were small in size and didn't have many organizational resources. How was it possible for [them] to move forward and ultimately change the course of history?"

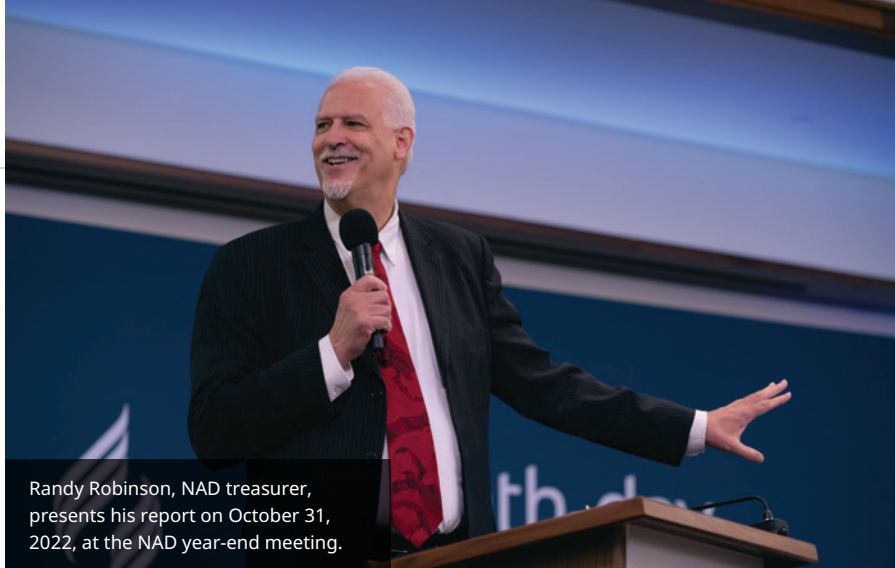
"The answer is in 2 Corinthians 5:14," Ahn continued. "May Christ's love [unite us] and move us to such extremes. May that fantastic reality be ours."

The Goodness of God

As he began his treasurer's report on October 31, Randy Robinson referred to the song "Goodness of God," powerfully interpreted by Sara Devaraj during NAD YEM's Sabbath service. Robinson said, "That sentiment is the underpinning upon which my report rests today, along with the fact that God is in control. There's no doubt God is leading His church. In 2021, when so many, and that included me, thought it wasn't possible to have a tithe gain, God blessed with a collective gain of 10.35 percent."

Robinson revealed that in 2021 approximately \$750 million was processed through AdventistGiving, including half the NAD's collective annual tithe. "God saw what we would need long before it happened. He placed this platform in our grasp to [enable] our members to continue supporting the church even during the pandemic when churches were closed. He is truly good."

Robinson also thanked the church members. "Through His providence and faithful members, God has allowed us to keep up with the 2021 pace of giving and [added] an additional 1.5 percent on top of what we had last year so far



Randy Robinson, NAD treasurer, presents his report on October 31, 2022, at the NAD year-end meeting.

through 2022," Robinson continued. "A takeaway through this ordeal of the past two years is that regardless of circumstances, God is faithful, and His people are faithful. He can be trusted to sustain the church for His glory."

Part of the treasurer's report included reports from the NAD audit review committee, General Conference Auditing Service, retirement, and the 2023 proposed budget shared by Judy Glass, NAD undertreasurer.

Robinson presented highlights from the 2021 audited financial statement, including operating and plant fund trends, recommended working capital, and tithe. He spoke to the NAD's working capital, and in reviewing five-year gains and losses, Robinson stated that while operating fund net assets took a hit with the 2017 purchase of the NAD's headquarters building, combined operating and plant fund net assets resulted in a net gain. He shared, "The year 2021 was significantly better than the previous few years, a tribute to what God can do in the middle of a pandemic."

Turning to the year-to-date (YTD) unaudited financial statements, Robinson shared that comparative tithe was up by 1.46 percent year over year through September 2022. He then showed the expense summary comparing actual 2022 departmental expenses with budgeted expenses in a third column titled "dollar variance." That column, which was mostly red, signifying being under budget, was subtitled "red is good."

He added, "Looking at the report, one can conclude that we have a strong financial position. God has been very good. And we have amazingly generous members. The North American Division is well positioned to weather [upcoming] challenges." He cited a few challenges, such as contribution uncertainty, post-COVID cost increases, significant inflation, and last-day events, but reiterated, "God is faithful, and He will sustain His church. I'm confident in that. I thank God for the privilege of service, and what He has provided for us to do His ministry."

Kimberly Luste Maran is editor of Adventist Journey and director of communication for the North American Division; Christelle Agboka is news writer/news producer for the NAD.

IN DEPTH ON YEAR-END MEETING

To read these reports in full, and access links to other news reports and videos of each YEM session, visit <https://www.nadadventist.org/news/2022-nad-year-end-meeting-video-and-news-coverage>.

Adventist Education, Online Churches, and eAdventist Discussed at Year-end Meeting Breakout Sessions

Over the course of the 2022 year-end meeting of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists (NAD), the executive committee comprised of church leaders participated in three breakout sessions on specific topics. They were divided into groups based on unions and tasked with responding to a few provided questions, then bringing back a summary of their main points to the group at large. Reports from NAD leadership on the progress of each of these breakout session focus areas were promised no later than the 2023 year-end meeting.

A Crisis of Education

Friday's breakout session on October 28 focused on supporting and meeting some of the challenges Adventist education faces today. Leaders were tasked with addressing the issues surrounding the current national teacher shortage, and discussing ideas for recruiting and retaining qualified teachers in Adventist schools.

The two biggest factors to the Adventist teacher shortage, as identified by every single group, were compensation and working conditions. Solution concepts ranged from raising the percentage of tithe allowed by the division to go toward education, to marketing a career in teaching to students as young as elementary school.

The practice of loan repayment for medical and pastoral staff was mentioned several times, with a request that similar programs for teachers be considered. Increased subsidy for church employees was also a recurring theme, alongside giving teachers a 12-month pay structure rather than a 10-month structure.

Aside from financial issues, many unions also brought up the very real issue of teacher burnout.

The Church of the Future Today

On Sunday, October 30, breakout groups tackled the daunting and relevant topic of online churches. The pandemic brought to light the limitations but also the possibilities of hosting church online, and as a result, the post-pandemic world is looking at online communities entirely differently than they did pre-COVID.

Though the general consensus was that in-person church was still the best model, most unions acknowledged not only the necessity of online options, but also their value.

Several unions pointed out that creating an online church meant doing more than simply providing a live-streamed sermon each week. Another regular concern was ensuring accountability so not just anyone could start an online "Adventist" church.

Solutions to the challenge of online churches ranged from hiring influencers to establish and manage them, to creating a virtual reality church within the metaverse, to placing digital strategists in each conference to assist with developing online communities. Unions also suggested a change in pastoral training at the seminary to include online churches.

Primary Source or Privacy Concern?

Monday's breakout session centered on eAdventist, the church's platform for collecting data on church members across the NAD. During the breakout discussions, unions were tasked with responding to the concept of data mining with eAdventist, and discussing what they saw as advantages, best practices, and challenges.

Predictably, most of the conversations centered on privacy for personal information, and the desire for members to be able to opt in before their information is collected and stored. Additionally, many unions requested a detailed application process for entities obtaining access to eAdventist data.

All nine unions urged additional training for church clerks; one recommended clerks be appointed by the board, not the nominating committee, and be expected to serve multiyear terms, and several suggested some sort of compensation for members serving in clerk roles.

Though the overall sentiment was that eAdventist can be a useful tool, most unions felt that it could not become a primary source of reliable data until a larger number of members understand what it is and how to use it, and an intentional process exists for requesting access to said data. Some unions also recommended building a connection between eAdventist and AdventistGiving.

—Becky St. Clair, freelance writer



During the online church breakout session discussion on October 30, at the 2022 NAD year-end meeting, a delegate writes down group comments to later share with the larger body of delegates. Pieter Damsteegt

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BY BETTINA KRAUSE

Remembering Our “Why”

It was while I was speaking to a group of political advocates in Washington, D.C., that I truly began to appreciate the power of our church’s religious liberty message. At the time I was representing the Adventist world church headquarters on Capitol Hill on issues such as international religious freedom. I suspect the men and women I was talking to that day knew very little about our church. But as I described our 150-year history of defending religious freedom—not just for ourselves but for people of other faiths as well—I sensed a rising interest.

I told them that our International Religious Liberty Association is the oldest such organization in the world and that our magazine, *Liberty*, is the oldest continuously published religious liberty journal. I shared that our work in Washington started back in the 1860s on issues such as conscientious objection and resisting Sunday laws. I showed how our work has stretched forward through the years on different issues right until today. I mentioned that every year, on the second Sabbath in January, all our churches across the country are encouraged to have a special day focused on religious liberty.

Afterward someone asked me, “But why?” He was asking, in effect: Why should a relatively small denomination such as ours spend so much time, effort, and resources on this issue?

The answer to this question can’t simply be “self-interest”—that we’re trying to protect religious freedom only for ourselves. Yes, we do work hard for our members who face discrimination and hardship in the secular workplace because of the Sabbath. But we’ve also worked to defend the rights of those from *other* religious traditions as well. And more than that, we’ve supported the rights of those who choose to hold no religious beliefs at all.

The answer to the question “why” is also not because we’re convinced that we’ll ultimately triumph in ridding the world of religious discrimination and persecution. We know this won’t happen—the Bible makes clear where the trajectory of history will eventually take us.

The book of Psalms is not the usual place we turn to when explaining our church’s religious liberty mission. But for me, this is where I find one of the clearest answers to these “why”

questions. In Psalm 139 David paints a vivid picture of God’s connection with His created beings: “You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar” (verse 2). He continues: “If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there” (verse 8). David is describing an intimate, unshakeable connection with God. And he gives an insight into why this connection exists: “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (verses 13, 14).

We know these beautiful words are much more than mere poetic license. They tell us that there’s an inherent dignity in human beings, something worthy of freedom and respect.

When Jesus came to earth, He demonstrated this respect for human dignity. We see His care for the Samaritan woman at the well, His kindness to the sick woman who touched the edge of His garment, His compassion for Mary Magdalene, His rescue of the woman caught in adultery. We see His remarkable connection with people from different spheres. He set aside labels and social categories and met individuals as individuals.

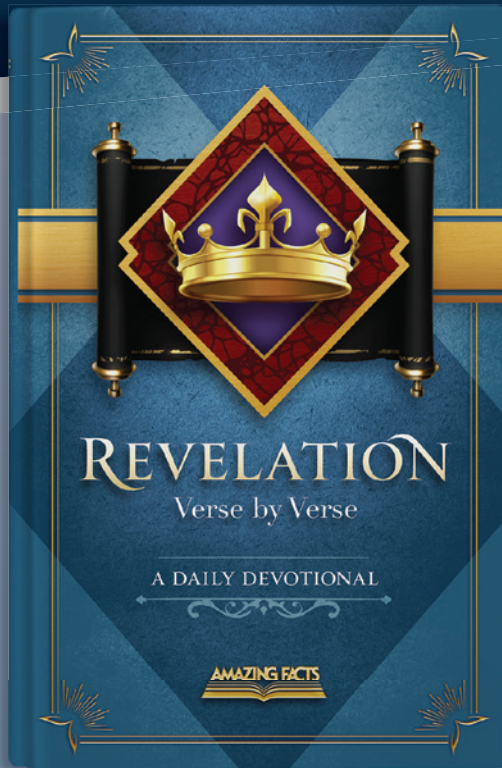
When we defend the principle of religious liberty, we’re defending the character of the Creator God; the one who has endowed each of His beings with both dignity and freedom. And it’s *this* truth that lies at the heart of our religious freedom message and mission. This is the ultimate answer to the question: “Why?”

Bettina Krause is editor of Liberty magazine and an associate director of the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department of the North American Division.

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