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The influence of
the pandemic on
mental health

Singing in the reign

Building our altar life



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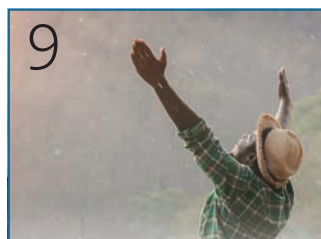
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CONTENTS



THE INFLUENCE OF THE PANDEMIC ON MENTAL HEALTH

Soon after COVID infections became widespread, all over the world, psychiatric clinics started seeing people who did not have a previous mental illness, but who were affected by the psychological problems caused by the pandemic.
by Pablo Daniel Canalis



SINGING IN THE REIGN

Truly, singing is a powerful gift from God. It can inspire, express our pain and our struggle, soothe our grief and loss, dry our tears, and bring back the joy.
by Alain G. Coralie



BUILDING OUR ALTAR LIFE

If we build our worship altar, God will meet us there and guide us day by day for the rest of our life.
by Dwain N. Esmond

DEPARTMENTS

- | | | | |
|----|--|----|---|
| 3 | EDITORIAL
Stepping out of the shadows of giants
<i>by Lisa M. Beardsley-Hardy</i> | 26 | PROFILE
Ansu D. Sonii Sr.
<i>Interview by Emmanuel G. M. Kollie</i> |
| 17 | REFLECTIONS
I shall not want
<i>by Katherin Jara Cáceres</i> | 29 | BOOK
VIVE SIN TEMOR
[Living Without Fear]
<i>Reviewed by Leylén Marcó</i> |
| 20 | FIRST PERSON
"Test me in this"
<i>by Carlos Biaggi</i> | 31 | BOOK
El Regalo Divino [The Divine Gift]
<i>Reviewed by Frank W. Hardy</i> |
| 24 | ACTION REPORT
Riding the K-wave:
PCM missionaries in action!
<i>by Choi Ho Young</i> | 33 | FYI
"IN 15 MINUTES"
<i>Interview by Cédric Lachenal</i> |

STEPPING OUT OF THE SHADOWS OF GIANTS

*“We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.’ And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, ‘The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them’” (Numbers 13:31–33, NIV).**

When the light strikes at a certain angle, a boy becomes a giant long-legged grasshopper. Even after the sun goes down, the menacing image can linger in one’s imagination. Giants come in all sorts of forms: an intimidating professor or a critical boss; bills you cannot pay or tuition costs beyond your means. Goliaths might be illness or the death of a loved one; they can be humiliating public criticism, deserved or not. The demands of studies in medicine, engineering, or law seem more than anyone can possibly master—especially if you put aside the books on Friday evening to keep the Sabbath holy, while your classmates continue to hit the books. The threat of a major examination may tower over you. Or the giant may be the weight of a secret sin that no one sees, but the guilt crushes your self-respect and confidence of salvation.

This issue of *Dialogue* is full of encouragement as well as practical guidance to improve physical, mental, and spiritual well-being—even how to improve your financial situation. Carlos Biaggi, dean of the faculty of business administration at Middle East University, shares the happy outcome of following biblical financial principles despite money being very tight when he and his wife were just getting started in married life. Also in this issue, Cédric Lachenal interviews Valentyna Kuryliak, and we hear firsthand how she was awakened in Bucha, Ukraine, the morning of February 24 to these unthinkable words: “Wake up. We are under attack. . . . We have only 15 minutes.” You will also want to read the review of the book by Yeury Ferreira

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about the range of fears common to the human experience and how to surrender them to the only One who is able to resolve them and comfort us.

Fears about the pandemic were warranted; and yet, we did not react as comprehensively as we should have. Unanticipated consequences to mental health will require attention to deal with and intentional action over time to heal. Initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic focused on infection control through public-health and regulatory measures such as handwashing, wearing masks, testing and vaccination, undergoing quarantine, enforcement of social distancing and restrictions on public gatherings, group size, and travel. Schools, businesses, and even churches were closed for many months. The resulting isolation, losses, and disruptions during critical periods of growth and development have disproportionately impacted the mental health of children and young people. The long-term effect of this trauma will become more clear over the next 10 years. The article by psychiatrist Pablo Canalis provides practical counsel on how to help oneself and others perform at our optimum and minimize the negative impacts on mental health.

Developing trust in God is a cornerstone to mental health in addition to a healthy lifestyle that includes a balanced diet and exercise (preferably in sunlight). Dwain Esmond challenges readers to set aside time and space for personal worship—to build an altar, as it were, to have a full-bodied

spiritual and intellectual life. As he grew spiritually, he realized how having an “altar life” improved his academic success as well. Health in one dimension cascades in benefits to the rest of our being.

Whether we experience distorted fears or very real threats, God is greater than all. Through His Spirit, and as guided by His Word, God will enable you to live out what He has called you to be and to do. Even more so, we as Christians are called to a life of gratitude and worship. It’s not just a matter of bearing up under the onslaught, keeping calm, and carrying on with grit. The Christian is empowered to be “singing in the reign” as Alain Coralie writes about in his reflection. That is not a typo. But alluding to the musical, *Singin’ in the Rain*, Coralie explains that “Christians should be first and best at singing in the rain. Convinced that the Lord reigns, and reigns supreme, Christians can sing—rain or shine.” So don’t hang back when fearful or in pain. Step out of the shadows of giants. Sing anyhow: Sing in the rain! ☞

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THE INFLUENCE OF THE PANDEMIC ON MENTAL HEALTH

PABLO DANIEL CANALIS

Soon after COVID infections became widespread, all over the world, psychiatric clinics started seeing people who did not have a previous mental illness, but who were affected by the psychological problems caused by the pandemic.



The patient thanked me and left my office. It took me longer than usual to organize the file, so I was late calling the next patient, whom we will call “Peter.” He walked in looking at the floor—agitated, nervous, and too worried to sit down for the appointment. Quickly taking the hand sanitizer on my table, he twice rubbed it into his hands.

Looking at me quickly, he asked if the previous patient had been coughing. “I am very afraid of catching this virus,” he said. Taking a deep breath, he looked up at the ceiling and then looked at me again, concern evident on his face. “This disease is driving me crazy, Dr. Pablo. I spray alcohol on everything before I go home; I spend the whole day looking at the news to know how many people have died; I can no longer participate in college classes on the computer. I am so nervous. I don’t know what to do!”

Have you felt that way at any point in the past three years? Have you, a friend, or family member become obsessed with the COVID-19 pandemic? How difficult has it been for you to face the changes in the way you live, study, and interact with other people each day?

Many claim that this disease is under control. Are they sure about that? How about the diverse effects of Long COVID on our physical and mental health? One issue that has captured the attention of scientists is the direct and indirect impact of the virus on mental health.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 WORLDWIDE

According to the World Health Organization, by January 25, 2023, there had been 664,873,023 reported cases of infection by the COVID-19 virus and 6,724,248 deaths caused by this virus. Europe and the Americas were the continents most affected, and the most severely affected country was the United States of America, with 100,651,473 confirmed cases.¹

We have spent the past three years of our lives trying to understand what was happening, attempting to adjust to new realities that were constantly changing. The many diverse and controversial opinions about the virus have tossed us about like a small boat in a rough sea, without a clear notion of where we will end up.

Health professionals, politicians, and the general public have expressed concern about this contagious disease, and about the varying recommendations being made regarding hygiene, use of masks, isolation, quarantine, and appropriate care for those who are at higher

risk. Schools were closed, hospitals were crowded, markets restricted, and many sorts of controversial and contradictory information about this new disease have circulated at a level never before seen in history.

PROFOUND EFFECTS ON MENTAL HEALTH

All areas of health have been directly or indirectly affected, and mental health is no exception. “People affected by the COVID-19 virus have had an increase in mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, stress, panic attacks, outbursts of anger for no reason, impulsivity, somatization, insomnia, emotional disorders, post-traumatic stress, and suicidal behavior.”²

Soon after COVID infections became widespread, all over the world, psychiatric clinics started seeing people who did not have a previous mental illness, but who were affected by the psychological problems caused by the pandemic. From the psychopathological point of view, this pandemic has behaved as a major stressor and originator of traumas for overworked health professionals, as well as the general public. The effect of this pandemic on mental health can be compared to catastrophic natural events like earthquakes or tsunamis, but on a wider scale.³

It will be some time before we fully understand the effects of the pandemic on people’s mental health, but it is speculated that isolation and the quarantine measures have increased anxiety, depression, insomnia, substance abuse, self-mutilation, and suicide attempts. Reports of domestic violence against both women and children, and an increase in Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder have also been reported.⁴

Although children were less likely than adults to experience severe effects from contracting the COVID-19 virus, their lives were profoundly changed by the consequences of the policies adopted to deal with the pandemic. The closing of schools, distance education, lack of outdoor activities, and changes in diet and sleep schedules caused an increase in boredom, stress, impatience, anxiety, irritability, domestic violence, physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as increased access to inappropriate content on the Web. Children of single parents and parents who work on the front line of the pandemic (health professionals) have suffered most directly from these consequences.⁵

PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

Taking this into account, and knowing that some traumas take time to manifest, I think that the next decade will reveal many other issues growing out of the pandemic that will impact the mental health of all humanity.

WHAT TO DO NOW?

1 The first step is to be aware that, to a greater or lesser extent, this pandemic has had and will continue to have a deleterious effect on our mental health. We must be careful not to underestimate these hazards, both in our own lives and in the lives of others. Does this mean that we need to live in fear? No, for fear often leads to despair, and despair deprives us of our logical reasoning skills and hope. So, my best advice is to learn to make decisions motivated by trust in God, obeying the health principles that He has given us, staying up to date on scientific information relating to health and disease, using logical reasoning skills to help prevent mental-health diseases, and obtaining appropriate treatment if you suffer from the effects of the pandemic or other conditions that require professional attention.

2 The second step is to recognize that diseases of the mind alter our thinking and behavior in several areas, such as work/school, social life, and family relationships, and also cause physical disorders and dysfunctions such as gastritis, fibromyalgia, dermatitis, elevated blood pressure, and dysregulation of the glucose in our blood, among other complications. We need to reject the idea that mental-health diseases are an illusion, or that they result from a lack of faith, and accept that they can affect Christians, just the same as any other disease.

3 This prepares us to put into practice the third step: when necessary, seeing a mental-health professional (a psychologist or psychiatrist), who has the knowledge to help us deal with these difficulties by providing good psychological therapy or combining therapy with pharmacological/medical treatment.

In addition to understanding and following the previous steps, we also need to embrace health-promoting and preventive tools such as the *Eight Natural Remedies*, which many of us have known for a long time, although we sometimes have difficulty putting them into practice. They include the following:

Sunshine. Ten to 15 minutes of daily exposure to sunlight (exposing an arm or leg is sufficient) is adequate to increase the body's production of vitamin D, which is important not only in strengthening our bones but also enhancing our mental health. According to Rosa, et al., "vitamin D exerts several activities in the nervous system, as it acts in the regulation of neurotransmitters and increases neurotrophic factors, favoring brain function. Another important role is that this vitamin can reduce the concentrations of inflammatory mediators associated with the development of depression."⁶

Physical activity. It is important to engage in regular physical activity of a sort that is adapted to one's daily schedule and physical restrictions. I recommend engaging in an aerobic activity for 30 to 40 minutes a day, at least four times a week, especially on those days when you feel mentally fatigued. This produces an increase in endorphins, which are related to the sensation of pleasure and relief from pain, and also stimulates the increase of myosin and irisin, which have a protective effect on our hippocampus (brain structure), and play a key role in the formation, organization, and storage of new memories, which have been so affected in patients who have had COVID-19.⁷ This will enhance academic performance and the quality of our sleep, another of the natural remedies.



Excessive use of computer and cell phones, anxiety, depression, and sleep deprivation alter our mood, cause irritability, deplete psychic and physical energy, and lower our immunity.

Healthful diet. Maintaining a healthful diet that incorporates more nuts, fruits, vegetables, cereals, and grains, avoiding alcoholic beverages (which can worsen depression and cause other problems) and caffeinated drinks and stimulants (which can increase anxiety) will enhance metabolic function. It is important to maintain a regular schedule for mealtimes despite complicated and changing daily routines, to eat appropriate quantities and types of food (fatty foods and foods rich in animal protein tend to make digestion difficult and slow down the thinking processes). This will not only enhance our mental health but also boost intellectual and academic performance.

Other important natural remedies include fresh air, temperance and self-control, rest (not just sleep, which has already been mentioned), and the proper consumption and use of water, both externally and internally.

But there is one natural remedy that deserves special attention, in terms of mental health during this pandemic: *Trust in God*. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has destroyed the confidence we felt about our daily routines and safety, as no one was able to provide any guarantees, and no one knew exactly what was happening. We were left to speculate, often feeling lost, without a strong foundation on which to place our confidence—except in God. He became the only solid structure, the only true hope, the only shelter amid the storm. The pandemic left us with only two options: either believe or fall apart. For those who chose to believe, not even the threat of death could turn them away from the goal, from salvation, or deprive them of the peace that only Christ gives, which surpasses all understanding. It helps us fight our anxiety and destroys our terrifying thoughts, providing us with untroubled sleep, and allows us to smile and maintain a sense of optimism.

How much time do you spend praying? Do you devote some time each day to reading the Word of God? Do you spend talking to your friends or colleagues about God's blessings and protection, and engage in praise and gratitude?

More challenges will come, stronger and more demanding! We need to prepare for them and become aware that this life is not the end, that we have a promising future. We can be at peace, for our hope is real, and God's promise is faithful! 🙏

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SINGING IN THE REIGN

WHEN GOING THROUGH A DIFFICULT TIME, KEEP PRAISING HIM!

REFLECTION ON PSALM 137:1–4

S*ingin' in the Rain* is by far one of the most celebrated film musicals of all time. One of its most memorable scenes has a smitten Gene Kelly swinging on a lamp post and singing the theme song with a broad smile on his face. Despite its romantic exuberance and apparent nonchalance, that theme song is set against the backdrop of “stormy clouds” that are ever present. And yet, it reminds us that happiness can shine through even the gloomiest of times. As such, it offers an invitation to keep on singing when confronted with adverse circumstances. Christians should be first and best at singing in the rain. Convinced that the Lord reigns, and reigns supreme, Christians can sing—rain or shine—if they keep in mind that God remains the sovereign Creator and Ruler of the universe (cf. Psalm 22:28; 47:8; 103:19; Daniel 4:34, 35; 1 Timothy 6:13–15).

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S KINGDOM

God's kingdom transcends time and space, cultures and civilizations, priests and politicians. The kingdom is both now and not yet, present and still future.¹

ALAIN G. CORALIE

Truly, singing is a powerful gift from God. It can inspire, express our pain and our struggle, soothe our grief and loss, dry our tears, and bring back the joy.



freepik

This kingdom has come in the person of Jesus, who said, “The kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20, NKJV).² Therefore, Christians recognize the lordship of Jesus as they display the reality of the kingdom in their lives.

However, they also remember that the kingdom is not yet here in all its fullness. As pilgrims, they live with the great hope that God’s kingdom will soon be fully manifested at the second coming of Jesus (cf. Philippians 3:20). Consequently, Christians live in the “already–not yet” tension—the tension between the first and second comings of Jesus, between the inauguration and the consummation of the kingdom of God.

The problem is that many Christians tend to emphasize the consummation phase of the kingdom, while not fully appreciating the impact and implications of its inauguration. The focus is on “When Jesus comes in glory, there will be no more tears, no more sorrow, no more pain!” But what about now? How are we to handle the challenges and trials of this life as we wait for the consummation of the kingdom?

The answer lies in reminding ourselves that the Lord reigns, even now! Because He reigns, we can sing in the rain. Because He rules over the entire universe, including the minute details of our lives, we can keep on singing even when everything seems set against us.

WHEN TROUBLE COMES

Yet, there are times when we become forgetful, especially when adversities wear us down to a point where we become downcast, despondent, and desperate. We find such a situation in Psalm 137, as the people of God pondered over their exile in Babylon, hundreds of miles away from home. Jerusalem, the city of peace, lay in ruin. The Promised Land seemed to be lost. The temple, the symbol of God’s presence, was laid waste. Militarily, they were defeated. Politically, they were humiliated. Economically, they were devastated. Socially, they were subjugated. Spiritually, they were exhausted. Their faith had been so shaken that the children of Israel had nothing to say. As they looked back over their journey into exile, they thought of Zion. Disoriented and consumed with a great sense of helplessness and abandonment, they hung up their harps, sat down, and cried themselves out.

The answer lies in reminding ourselves that the Lord reigns, even now! Because He reigns, we can sing in the rain.

Then the taunting began. “Come on!” their Babylonian captors shouted. “You’re renowned for your singing and music. Sing us one of your songs now. You’re ‘God’s chosen people’ after all—Come on, sing!” But how could they sing those songs of Zion in this foreign land? How could they proclaim God’s power and might, when they, His own people, were feeble and defeated? How could they sing songs of joy, hope, and promise when all that were theirs had been reduced to rubble, ashes, and despair? No, they just hung up their harps, entered into a season of weeping, and refused to sing.

Why didn’t they sing?

Perhaps they refused to sing because of holy indignation. They might have said: “Don’t you realize how heartbroken we are? How dare you ask us to sing as if we were putting on a show for you. . . .”

Or maybe they did not sing because they were so disheartened, demoralized, and dejected. Have you ever reached a point so low in life where you might still have a song in you but cannot get it out? Sometimes life can be so hard, so difficult, so painful. Sometimes life seems to make no sense at all. Sometimes the pain is so deep that we think that we might go insane. Sometimes we try to be as positive and cheerful as possible, but our jovial spirit and bursts of laughter hide a deep sense of sadness and pain.

Choked with pain, the Israelite captives found it impossible to sing; they hung up their harps.

Why did they not sing? Could it be because they had the wrong focus? Listen to these words included in the psalm: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion” (Ps. 137:1).

They remembered Zion—their social, political, and economic center. They remembered their religious capital, a city where Yahweh had been particularly active in their nation’s history. How many times did God’s messengers preach repentance in that city, but they refused to listen? How many

times did the prophets walk down the streets of Jerusalem pleading with people to turn away from evil, but they would not heed the call? For years, they had clung to the outward signs of religion, the temple, the ceremonies, and yet were unwilling to follow God's ways. And now that the temple was gone, their faith was left wanting.

Sadly, when the Babylonian captives refused to sing, they also refused to witness. Their captors kept goading them for a song. Clearly, their captors would not have asked them for songs of Zion if they had been singing already. Instead, the children of Israel wept for Jerusalem when they could have testified through song that the Creator was greater than the city, that their God was bigger than the temple. They refused to sing when they could have borne witness that passionate faith was stronger than their trials, and that their God was stronger than any calamity. They could have sung to declare that their God rules over the nations; that His grace is not constrained by circumstances and that His power is not restrained by adversity.

SING ANYHOW

What do we do when things go wrong, when trials set in, when hope is gone? Do we still sing in the rain? Can we sing the Lord's song in the strange land of despair, of pain, and abandonment? What should we do when we feel like giving up? What can we do when we don't feel like singing?

The answer must be clear: Whatever the travail, whatever the trial, whatever the tribulation, sing anyhow. Sing in the rain!

This is not always easy, especially when the evil one comes to taunt us and dare us to sing. Maybe we've been there. Father comes home and says to mother, "I'm leaving you and the kids." And the devil says, "Now sing your song."

The physician says, "It's cancer." And the devil stands mocking, "Sing your song now!"

The grades are not what we were expecting, . . . and the devil dares us to sing.

So, what then should we do when we don't feel like singing? Whatever the circumstances, sing anyhow. Sing in the rain! Whatever the trials may be, don't hang up the harps. Sing in the rain! For we are called to sing in the reign! Praise is a powerful weapon. Wrote Ellen White: "Let praise and thanksgiving be

expressed in song. When tempted, instead of giving utterance to our feelings, let us by faith lift up a song of thanksgiving to God. . . . Song is a weapon that we can always use against discouragement."³

Truly, singing is a powerful gift from God. It can inspire, express our pain and our struggle, soothe our grief and loss, dry our tears, and bring back the joy.

Consider Paul and Silas. They had unjustly been thrown into prison (Acts 16:16–26). Their feet were in stocks. In their pain, they began to pray. But when praying was not enough, they started singing. They started praising and worshiping God. What did they sing? I don't know. Maybe they sang something like this:

"All the way my Savior leads me;
What have I to ask beside?

Can I doubt His tender mercy,
Who through life has been my guide?

Heavenly peace, divinest comfort,
Here by faith in Him to dwell.

For I know whate'er befall me,
Jesus doeth all things well."⁴



Cettyimage

Whatever it was that Paul and Silas sang, they refused to let the devil take away their song. They sang in the rain. And the earth shook, and the prison doors swung open as they kept praising God.

Is this not what we should do when adversity sets in? Should we not sing in the rain? As Christians, we don't sing because life is easy; we sing because no matter what life throws at us, we know that God is still with us. We don't sing because we have no problems; we sing because we serve a God who specializes in solving problems. Sometimes, we may have to sing through the tears. Sometimes, we may have to sing through pain and suffering. Sometimes we may have to sing through dark clouds and stormy days. Sometimes, we may have to sing through tough questions and lingering doubts. But we must resolve to keep on singing in the rain, to keep on praising, to keep on worshipping. We must sing in the rain because we are under His reign.

God didn't say, Just praise Me after you receive your much-awaited blessing. He didn't say, Praise Me only when the bills are paid. He didn't say, Praise Me only when your health is good and when everything is going on well for you. He says, Praise Me because I'm worthy, good, holy, righteous, wise, and mighty. Praise Me because I'm the One who has given life to you, and I'm the One who can give meaning to your life. Praise Me because I have no equals. In relation to creation, I am self-existent. In relation to life, I am self-sufficient. In relation to time, I am eternal. In relation to space, I am infinite. In relation to knowledge, I am all-knowing. In relation to power, I am almighty. Praise Me because I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. Praise Me because I reign.

That's why, even when we don't feel like singing, let's sing in the rain because our Lord reigns. He rules! Like Paul and Silas, let's sing in the rain.

CHRIST, OUR SUPREME EXAMPLE

But even more than Paul and Silas, let's sing as Christ did. He never stopped singing. "He held communion with heaven in song." Even in the upper room, even in the shadow of the Cross, He sang. "Before leaving the upper chamber," Ellen White wrote, "the Saviour led His disciples in a song of praise. His voice was heard, not in the strains of some mournful lament, but in the joyful notes of the Passover hallel:

'O praise the Lord, all ye nations:

Praise Him, all ye people.

For His merciful kindness is great toward us:

And the truth of the Lord endureth forever.

Praise ye the Lord.' Psalm 117.⁶

Jesus sang a song of praise even when the battle in His heart was raging. He sang a song of praise even when He who knew no sin was about to become sin for us. He sang a song of praise as the Cross was being prepared for Him. He sang a song of praise as He who is altogether lovely would be hated. He sang a song of praise as He whose hands healed so many and whose feet traversed the roads of Judah and Galilee would be crucified. He sang a hymn as He who is life would know death. And because Jesus never stopped singing, He invites us to keep on singing in His reign.

Pilgrims in this strange land, let's keep on singing even when it rains because we are in His reign. Keep on moving, keep on praising. For one day, when God's plan of salvation will be completely realized, when hope will be fully translated into substance—on that glorious day, we will sing in that land made new, citizens of His reign. ☪

* This essay is an adaptation of a sermon preached at Wood Green Community Seventh-day Adventist Church in London, England, on October 15, 2022.

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BUILDING OUR ALTAR LIFE

DWAIN N. ESMOND

The summer after my second year in high school my parents decided I needed a change of scenery. They knew they had to get me—a wide-eyed 17-year-old with anger-management issues—to a better place; else I seemed headed for trouble.

I always had a “thing” for words and language. I excelled in any subject that involved English or writing, and this started at an early age. So, when I encountered Hip Hop music, which had burst onto the scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I was hooked. I overdosed on the wordplay of Run-D.M.C., The Fat Boys, LL Cool J, Eric B. and Rakim, and others. Added to the music was a new craze called breakdancing, and I was doubly hooked. It was fresh. It was urban. It was me.

“By beholding we become changed,” Ellen G. White often wrote, building on the Apostle Paul’s counsel in 2 Corinthians 3:18.¹ This was definitely true of me. I had been changed

If we build our worship altar, God will meet us there and guide us Day by day for the rest of our life.



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by what I was pumping into my ears and setting before my face. I was “rappin” in a small group, breakdancing with my friends, and dreaming of pop stardom. I still went to church with my parents, participated actively in Pathfinders and Adventist Youth Society (AYS), but I was losing my way. My parents could see it, and anyone else who cared to look close enough could see it, too.

My parents found the perfect antidote to my problems: Pine Forge Academy—an Adventist boarding school in the hills of Pine Forge, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., I agreed to go—I really did not have a choice—somewhat happy to put the “drama” of my public high school behind me. I comforted myself with the thought that though I would be far away, I would not be far away from the music I loved. Little did I know at the time that something else would have a much greater impact on my life than my new school.

TAKE THESE

As my father readied our car for the trip to Pine Forge, he gave me a two-volume set of Ellen G. White books. My dad loved her writings, and he would liberally sprinkle her quotes into the conversation wherever he found a listening ear. Regrettably, I also knew of less-careful Ellen White zealots who would breathlessly invoke her writings to beat into submission anyone whom they felt was out of line. It did not take long for the beauty and sweetness of Ellen White’s counsels to be lost on me during my early teenage years. Nevertheless, I accepted my father’s gift, and off I went.

When I finally opened the two volumes of *Mind, Character, and Personality*, something happened to me. I cannot fully explain it, but somehow, I had arrived at the intersection of desiring a personal change in my life and the resources to begin that change. I knew I had gotten into some bad things in my previous school, and Pine Forge was my opportunity to make a clean break with my former life, to start over, despite my young age. Nothing did more to transform my life at that time than the Bible and the books my father gave me. As a young man coming of age, immersed in city culture, I felt God began to put His finger on the difficult things that held me fast, such as music. I was growing up in a home in which God was cherished, worship was constant, and church life prized, but I still began to lose my way. I needed help. I needed a deeper walk with God.

I wanted desperately to be a good student, and here God worked through Ellen White to supply the tools I needed to not only change my spiritual life but also become a high academic achiever. It was during this period of my life that I read this: “As an educating power the Bible is without a rival. Nothing will so impart vigor to all the faculties as requiring students to grasp the stupendous truths of revelation. The mind gradually adapts itself to the subjects upon which it is allowed to dwell. . . . If never required to grapple with difficult problems or put to the stretch to comprehend important truths, it will after a time almost lose the power of growth.”² This statement alone transformed my Bible study habits. I gave priority to Bible study, and the results I experienced were staggering. My



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mind grew calmer, and my ability to grasp difficult concepts in my studies greatly increased.

No chapter in this amazing two-volume Ellen White compilation impacted me more than chapter 11 of volume 1, “Bible Study and the Mind.” After reading it, I began to study the Bible with intention and precision. That experience was the beginning of my “altar life” with God.

THE ALTAR LIFE

One need not possess a physical altar to worship God. In fact, if a follower of Jesus lives in consistent, earnest, Bible-bathed communion with God, he or she has erected an altar as real as the one that Elijah built on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18).

The altar life encompasses one’s connection with and commitment to God, and this will be seen in his or her consistency in personal worship of God. Jesus told the woman at the well that God was looking for worshipers: “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him” (John 4:23, NKJV).³ God is actually looking for people who want to worship Him.

Nothing will transform one’s life like a vibrant devotional life. My altar life began late in high school, and the benefits soon followed. I graduated fairly high in my senior class. As I prepared to leave for university, I knew the next four years would shape the rest of my life. I knew that very important decisions were ahead, and I wanted to get them right. I also knew that if I did not intentionally work to develop my devotional life, I would not be successful in life. I might have a good career, maybe even achieve some fame, but would I fulfill God’s destiny for me? I was terrified by the possibility of not doing so, so I prioritized my worship experience with God right from the start at the university.

Step 1:

SET A TIME

If we think we’re too busy to set aside time to worship God, we’re too busy. Personal devotional time is the compass that God uses to set the direction of our lives. If we miss it, we will be off course—fast. When the Israelites were delivered from Egyptian captivity, God commanded Moses to tell the people, “One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight” (Exodus

29:39). Worship was to be the spiritual bookends of Israelite life—a way of ordering their steps morning and evening, day to day. According to Ellen White, this connection to God is critical: “There is not an impulse of our nature, not a faculty of the mind or an inclination of the heart, but needs to be, moment by moment, under the control of the Spirit of God.”⁴

Let’s plan our time with God and never, ever break it. If life gets in the way, as it often does, start again with God. If we set a time to be with God, He will meet us every time!

Step 2:

CHOOSE A PLACE

I lived in the men’s dormitory on the campus of Oakwood University (Huntsville, Alabama, U.S.A.) my first year of college. My room became the place where I built my altar life. My worships were not long, but they were meaningful. I was blessed to have a roommate who also had an altar life. We gave each other room to worship. When we awoke early in the morning, we did not talk much. He needed to worship, so I gave him space. He in turn would do the same for me. Little did I know that I was building devotional habits that would last a lifetime. I still meet with God at the beginning and end of each day.

Maybe the place of our altar will be a room, a bench, a meadow, or a field. Or perhaps the place of our altar will be mobile, changing from day to day. Do whatever works best, but find a place and spend time with God there!

Step 3:

QUIET YOUR SPACE

When we attempt to erect our altar life, we will soon discover that our life is quite “loud,” filled with many distractions. According to several recent studies, our cellphones/smartphones are perhaps the biggest distraction we will face in our spiritual life—single biggest threat to our altar life and to our overall well-being. The average social media user, it is said, spent two hours and 27 minutes a day on social media in 2022,⁵ and a 2020 study reported that people used mobile devices for more than 50 percent of the time that they spent on the Internet.⁶ One Internet research organization found that

based on self-reported data, the average person taps, clicks, surfs, and swipes his or her phone an average of 2,617 times per day. The heaviest users average 5,427 touches per day.⁷

Our smartphones not only offer multiple methods of communication (voice, text, Zoom, social media, and e-mail) but also serve as a radio, disco, newspaper, dance club, library, newspaper, camera, GPS, cinema, banking tool, and much, much more. As a tool of distraction, they are unequaled by anything else in history. Our altar life will never get going until we quiet our space, and that especially means our smartphones and tablets. Sure, we can use them as a part of our worship experience, but it would be so much better to forgo them altogether during worship time. Read the Bible and see if there is an attitude to change or adopt, a person to serve, or Jesus to see. Play an instrument and sing out loud to God. Read a devotional book the old-fashioned way, and spend a quiet season in prayer, meditating on what you read.

After his great triumph on Mt. Carmel, Elijah faced threats on his life by Queen Jezebel. The forlorn servant heard God's gentle whisper, after the wind, earthquake, and fire (1 Kings 19:11–13). It is in the quiet spaces of life that God speaks loudest.

Step 4:

FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

No person in Scripture had a more powerful altar life than Jesus. Amid a busy life of daily ministry, constant threats, and withering assaults from the devil, Jesus made time for long seasons of prayer and worship. He who was equal with the Father (Philippians 2:6) still thought it important to be still and know that God is God. Jesus understood from an early age that His calling required constant connection with His Father. This was the only way to carry the sins of the world to the Cross. Ellen White described the altar life of Jesus: "The Majesty of heaven, while engaged in His earthly ministry, prayed much to His Father. He was frequently bowed all night in prayer. His spirit was often sorrowful as He felt the powers of the darkness of this world, and He left the busy city and the noisy throng, to seek a retired place to make His intercessions. . . . All night, while His followers were sleeping, was their divine Teacher praying. The dew and

frost of night fell upon His head bowed in prayer. His example is left for His followers."⁸

Jesus craved communion with His Father. This was a habit that He developed early in His life on earth and continued until He ascended to heaven. It was the source of His power and the secret to His peace while on earth. Just as Jesus depended on His Father for everything, so must we depend on Him: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

The time we spend building our altar life will be time well spent. If we build and lean on the altar of prayer, there God will meet us, and will lead us, guide us, and bless us. If our prayer altar is sure and certain, from then on, we can be sure and certain that God will meet us there and carry us through the rest of our lives. ☮

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I SHALL NOT WANT

KATHERIN JARA CÁCERES

When we let God be first, we will realize
that He has already filled many of our
empty spots and needs.

Every generation has at least one iconic breaking-news event. Some would cite the assassination of American president John F. Kennedy, while older ones would remember the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Yet others would mention the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of communist oligarchy in Europe; and for many, the focus would be the attacks of September 11, 2001. Without any doubt, the current generation will remember the coronavirus pandemic. While the sensation of these events retains the same focus, the technological sophistication of these newsflashes and communication of breaking news tends to show an increase in intensity and fervor.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1, NKJV).¹

“I shall not want.” What do I understand by that? It is an affirmation that leaves no room for second-guessing. If the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall want nothing. Absolutely nothing.

I have thought about this many a time. But I find myself often asking: *If the Bible states such a promise, why is it that I haven't received those things I have been asking God for so long? Why am I not doing well in my studies? Why are my financial resources inadequate? Why am I not receiving other things I have been waiting for?*

It is here that an analysis of such a well-known text acquires importance.

If we still feel we are “missing something,” it could be due to various reasons. One such reason could be: we don't lack what we think we lack.

I want to emphasize this point. There is a real possibility that, due to our human nature, there are things we think we are lacking when this is really not the case. As victims of a consumerist society and due to the limited scope of our vision, we end up convincing ourselves and believing the opposite. In this, I am not referring to basic needs of life or the resolution of health problems that we may have because God is clear in telling us to have life and health in abundance.

It's possible we may have been praying for specific things for a long time. It may be that our requests are for something that is not truly a need or that is not what God desires for our life. Or maybe now is not the time. If so, would we easily accept a mes-

There is a real possibility that, due to our human nature, there are things we think we are lacking when this is really not the case.

sage from God like this: “No, my son/daughter. Now is not the time for you to be dating. Focus on your studies, get good grades, and eventually you will find a partner for life”? It is very likely that we would not like such a suggestion, and would ignore that message, especially if we have met someone who seems like a good candidate.

Likewise, when we ask for a good friend's advice, we accept it willingly if that advice agrees with our interests. On the other hand, if it doesn't agree with our ideas or plans for our life, we tend to question such advice or even seek to counter it by identifying a solution that better fits our preferences.

USING GOD'S TOOLS TO FIND HIS GUIDANCE

Although God doesn't use the phone to call us, and there is no WhatsApp to convey His suggestions, He provides tools like prayer and Bible study that we can use to obtain His guidance and help us understand His plans for our lives. And God often uses a variety of people, such as pastors, leaders, counselors, and teachers, who can provide guidance. God is always willing to give us what is best for us, as His Word reminds us: “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

If we think there is something we lack but don't get it even when we are convinced of our need, then it's time to stop, meditate on the verse from Psalm 23, and pray for wisdom. If we claim the promise of James 1:5, God will give us abundant wisdom to understand and accept that, perhaps, we are not really lacking what we think we are lacking. When our prayers are no longer not limited to what we want or what we think we lack, we will be able to accept that when God is our all, then we would not need anything else. And this is how God's will for our lives becomes our will.

Sometimes it's hard to accept that process, especially if our health or life is at stake. However, as we immerse ourselves in the presence of God, we will be able to accept, with gratitude and serenity, even a difficult and discouraging prognosis. When we reflect upon the suffering and death of Christ, we will come to understand that, even in pain, God is at the helm and can turn pain into a blessing.

It is difficult to understand that we already have everything from God, and that we might not need anything else. Human nature makes us reluctant to accept God's plan rather than the plan we have set up for ourselves. It is an ongoing struggle: learning to live without what we think we need and accepting what God has in store for us. Jesus urges us to ask, seek, and knock (Matthew 7:7-11), and the apostle implores us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:7). We must always seek to be in sync with God's desires, because our desires may sometimes go against His will, and may not be the best for us.


It's not that we should not dream. Not at all. God wants us to aspire and dream and enjoy an abundant life. All those aspirations, however, must center around a more encompassing goal: being in Christ Jesus. In His wisdom, God knows what will take us through that path and what will not.

LEARN TO ACCEPT GOD'S PLAN

It might be that the goal we have in mind when we pray is not what God has in *His* plans for us, or maybe it is not in God's schedule *now* to give us what we request. As we wait for God's answer to be revealed, however, our challenge is to learn to accept God's plan as He lays it out before us, because every decision we make can take us farther from or closer to His original plan. His plan is for every one of us to be saved. Our challenge is to find refuge in Him and learn to live in His grace.

God's promise is: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9). God's grace should be the only source that fills the empty places we think we have. When we understand that God must be first, we will realize that He has already filled many of our empty spots and needs. And we will be able to identify and understand what our true needs are.

It would, therefore, be good for each of us to ask ourselves the following questions: Is God my Shepherd? Is He the One filling my life? Do I live daily under His grace? Do I consistently listen to His voice? If I do not yet feel that God's grace is sufficient for me, then do I accept the challenge to learn to live in it every day? Might this, then, help me stop feeling that something is always lacking in my life?

The best course is for us to lean upon God today and every day. As someone has said, "You will have all of God when He has all of you."² The biggest challenge in our life is learning to be patient when God's answer is "wait" or "not now." We will lack nothing when our innermost being belongs fully to Him. 

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“TEST ME IN THIS”

CARLOS BIAGGI



At the end of my first year of marriage, I became very worried: We had not saved any money. I had grown up believing in the importance of saving in all situations and could not imagine the future of my family without savings. Saving would be the key that would allow us to plan our next vacation, replace the car within three to five years, and eventually purchase a home. If we had not managed to save the first year, what guarantee did I have that we could save in the second or subsequent years?

To find a solution, the cause of the problem had to be identified. This led me to reflect for several days during January 2003. How was it possible that we had both worked for a whole year, earning a normal salary for junior professionals, but we had not been able to save a penny? Something was wrong. If other families were able to support themselves with one salary, how was it that we couldn't save even a small portion of the second salary? We had not purchased big things for the house. We did not have extravagant expenses. We lived prudently. We hadn't been sick, and the car had not given us any problem.

Since all such reviews did not provide a satisfactory answer, we began to ask God, “Lord, why haven't we been able to save?” After several days of prayer and meditation, the answer came in the form of a favorite Scripture from Malachi 3:8 to 10: “Will a mere

mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, “How are we robbing you?” In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it’” (NIV).¹

TITHE ON ALL INCOME

My prayer continued but now with different questions: “Are we robbing God? Is it possible that we are under God’s curse?” My employer—the Paraguay Mission—deducted the tithe from my salary every month, so returning tithe was taken care of. Likewise giving offerings. Yet I could not understand what God was saying: “You are stealing from me.” For several days, the thought troubled me, as I sought for an explanation. I found an answer in Ellen White’s writings:

“We are not left to stumble along in darkness and disobedience. The truth is plainly stated, and it can be clearly understood by all who wish to be honest in the sight of God. A tithe of all our income is the Lord’s.”²

Could it be that we were not tithing all income? Did we have other sources of income besides salary? Yes. They were small, but they existed! The mission gave us a monthly car allowance and reimbursed a portion of some expenses (medical, telephone, etc.). In addition, from time to time, we received cash gifts from our parents or relatives.

After praying about it and continuing to read, I felt the conviction of sin, of stealing from the Lord for not being faithful in returning the tithe *of all our income*. I felt the weight of sin, because of ignorance or carelessness, and the need to reverse the situation. After my wife and I talked about it, studied the subject further, and prayed about it, we decided to tithe all our income, adding to the tithable base the gifts (in cash and in kind) and benefits we received besides salary.

OFFERINGS: PROPORTION AND MOTIVATION

And what about offerings? As I studied the issue, I came across the story of the widow who donated two coins. Jesus and His disciples were sitting in the temple court, chatting and watching worshipers deposit their offerings in the box. Some well-dressed persons depos-

To make her offering, the widow had deprived herself of even the necessities of life, trusting God to supply her needs for the morrow.

ited many coins, which made a big noise as they fell into the box. Proudly they looked around and smiled as they continued on their way. But a poor widow, bent over by the conditions of life, waited in a corner until there were few people present, and no one was lining up to deposit an offering. Trying to avoid having anyone look at her, she quietly went to the box, dropped in two small coins, and swiftly left the temple.

But Jesus and His disciples had observed her. Then the Master made a comment that reveals the true value with which God receives His people’s offerings. “Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you; this poor widow has put *more* into the treasury than *all the others*. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on’” (Mark 12:43, 44, NIV, italics supplied). Awesome! God does not look at quantity, but proportionality. Ellen White explained Jesus’ words as follows:

“Christ called the attention of the disciples to this woman, who had given ‘all her living.’ Mark 12:44. He esteemed her gift of more value than the large offerings of those whose alms did not call for self-denial. From their abundance they had given a small portion. To make her offering, the widow had deprived herself of even the necessities of life, trusting God to supply her needs for the morrow. Of her the Saviour declared, ‘Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury.’ Verse 43. Thus, He taught that the value of the gift is estimated not by the amount, but by the *proportion* that is given and the *motive* that actuates the giver.”³

I concluded that God does not value my offering by the amount, but by the *proportion* and the *motive* that drive me. Immediately images and words learned in childhood came to my mind. For example, that my offering was proportionally greater than my tithe.

That my father had said that in the Bible, the people of Israel had come to give 33 percent of their income to the Lord (10 percent of tithing plus 23 percent of offerings/taxes that sustained the political-religious system of government).

I immediately started doing calculations, How much were we giving in offerings? What percentage of our income was it? The calculations showed that we gave offerings equivalent to 2.5 percent of our income. I was shocked! Although the offering amount seemed reasonable, the percentage seemed so small. After talking with my wife, we decided to increase the percentage of offerings for that year to 3 percent, an increase of 20 percent over the previous year (0.5 is 20 percent of 2.5).

And what about our motivation to give? Why did I give offerings? What motivated me and drove me to give? The quick answer was: I gave because I had to give; because I would be ashamed to pass the offering bag in church without giving anything. Besides, I discovered that I was doing it by habit, as a tradition.

I did not find a deep and spiritual motive. I was filled with shame before the Lord and asked: “Give me the right motivation; I want to give offerings from my heart to Your heart.”

“TEST ME”

God guided my thoughts back to Malachi 3. After the Lord showed His people that He was being robbed, He gave them a promise: *Test Me now on this*. Bring tithes and offerings to my house and see “If I will not open for you the windows of heaven And pour out for you such blessing That there will not be room enough to receive it” (vs. 10; NKJV)!

“Lord.” I said, “are You sure You want me to test You? Didn’t Jesus tell Satan in the wilderness that we shouldn’t tempt Jehovah?” The impression was clear: *I have given you conditional promises to strengthen your faith. Test me now! I want to show you My power and My love for you.*

“But, Lord, if I bring You offerings waiting for Your blessing, won’t I have a selfish motivation?”

*Think, Son—who gives you the strength and time to work and generate your income? I have already blessed you, otherwise you wouldn’t have anything from which to bring Me offerings. I have pledged My word because I want you to make a **covenant** with Me!*

“Lord, thank You for your promises. I want to have Your protection and blessing. If You tell me to test You, I want to test You! Increase my faith.”

Our *covenant* with the Lord had four parts:

We will put You first in our personal and family finances.

We will cry out to You to fulfill Your promise: *Test Me, and I will pour out blessings.*

We will tithe all our income.

We will give offerings as a percentage of our income.

In making the covenant with God, we decided to keep a faithful record of all our income and expenses. Without a faithful record, it would be impossible to be able to return faithful tithe and offerings. In addition, we decided to prepare a monthly budget that would include our income, expenses, and savings.

At the end of that year, 2003, when we summarized our income and expenses. I was amazed to discover what had happened. Despite having increased spending—for giving more tithe and offerings—we had not lacked anything. Not only that, but despite having had less money in hand than the previous year, we had started to save! Thank God!

We knelt and thanked the Lord because He had fulfilled His promise. We did not know how, but He had fulfilled His promise. Maybe the soles of our shoes were not worn out so much, or the clothes lasted longer. Maybe the car did not need to visit the mechanic so often or the fuel was more efficient. Or maybe God sustained our health, and we thus spent less on medicines. He had promised to



rebuke the devourer and make the vine fruitful in the field. So, it was. Our weak faith was strengthened by Him fulfilling His promise.

This confirmation encouraged us to take another step of faith. As we started a new year—2004—we decided to renew the covenant between the Owner of the universe and our lives. That covenant consisted of the same four elements, but with an increase in the percentage of offerings from three percent to five percent. It was a significant increase, but we pledged in faith. We said: “If this is from the Lord, it will succeed.” We made a new budget of income, expenses, and savings, and we prayed throughout the year for a new fulfillment of the promise, “*Test Me.*”

The end of the year arrived, and God again showed us the fulfillment of His promise. We had saved 25 percent more than what we had budgeted! How did it happen? We don’t know exactly, but we know that God worked miracles, as He had promised. Thank you, Lord, because You were, You are, and You will be faithful to Your promises!

Soon after, a pastor with whom we shared our testimony invited us to give a seminar in his church. Thanks to some materials I had from my dad, I began to give family-finance seminars in the churches and schools of the Paraguay Mission. What a privilege and joy it was to share the biblical principles of stewardship and faithfulness!

As the blessings increased, our commitment to the Lord also increased. Each year we increased the percentage of offerings until reaching 20 percent in the sixth year. Each year, God gave us clear signs of the way He fulfilled His promise. Dreams we thought would take many years to achieve, God opened the doors for them to be realized. For example, being able

to visit my parents in Russia, receiving many gifts for the births of our two children, buying an apartment, and studying for graduate degrees. The wise man said: “Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine” (Proverbs 3:9, 10, NIV).

Jesus is preparing your heart for heaven, and that preparation includes correct financial planning. The Lord invites you today to put Him first in managing the resources He puts in your hands. Will you test Him today? 🙏

* The article is based on the second chapter of the book *Libertad financiera: Principios bíblicos de administración, fidelidad y generosidad [Financial Freedom—Biblical Principles of Administration, Faithfulness, and Generosity]* (Santiago, Chile: Asociación Casa Editora Sudamericana, 2019), paperback, 248 pages, and is reprinted by permission. Translated into English by the author.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1940), 82.
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RIDING THE K-WAVE: PCM MISSIONARIES IN ACTION!

CHOI HO YOUNG

Nothing can suppress the K-wave—evangelism patterned after the South Korean passion for mission. Not even the global threat of COVID-19.

The Northern Asia-Pacific Division initiated the Public Campus Ministries (PCM) missionary program in 2019. Dedicated and trained young men and women were sent out to help in church planting, making the most of their status as university students. They dedicated one year of their lives to serving the Lord directly in the field. They built bridges to connect local churches

with university students and collaborated with pastors of the Pioneer Mission Movement (PMM).

The rest is history: a steady harvest of souls for the kingdom of God.

Fast forward to 2022. In the fourth year since the first PCM program began, nine missionaries were trained and sent out from South Korea to different parts of Taiwan for campus ministry, where they were to give one year of service as a witness to their Lord.

The students used the same approach they employed in their witness to university and college students in South Korea. The strategy is one of grafting on to and riding on the K-wave (Hallyu) culture that is currently captivating and influencing popular culture in South Korea, Taiwan, and other parts of the world. Korean icon groups such as the boy band BTS and girl group Blackpink, for example, continue skyrocketing in popularity among college students in Taiwan. Keeping with this trend, university students are increasingly interested in Korean dramas, Korean food, Korean culture, and the Korean language.

The PCM missionary movement seized on this K-wave, and why not? They used it to adapt their outreach to students.

To be sure, Adventist students in Korea, sent to universities in Taiwan after completing a certain



Fourth group of PCM missionaries during training.



The PCM missionaries ready to depart to Taiwan.

period of training, are front-line missionaries. What they do is not a one-off presentation or event, but a year-long engagement. They actively serve as student missionaries, teaching and making friends in Korean language clubs established at each university. Other examples of outreach (shown in some of the pictures with this report) include on-campus prayer meetings conducted outside, small-group fellowship over a shared meal, and discipling that may lead to baptism.



Campus prayer meeting.

Meeting types and places vary. Consider a special meeting held on December 3 and 4, 2022, at the Caesar Park Hotel in Taipei City, Taiwan. Members of Korean language clubs in six Taiwan universities where PCM missionaries are serving gathered to hold a joint camp. About 100 non-Adventist college students also attended. Because of the relationships and what they experienced with the PCM missionaries, the group actively participated in the program prepared by the PCM missionaries. The session was a planning session for an evangelistic program scheduled for later in 2023. The dedication and service of PCM missionaries and the influence of the Holy Spirit witnessed at these ministry meetings on public campuses are expected to bear abundant fruit in the coming months.



A university student being baptized.

We ask for your prayers that God's Spirit will continue to inspire the PCM missionaries with creativity in reaching students so that they in turn might respond to God's call to them.

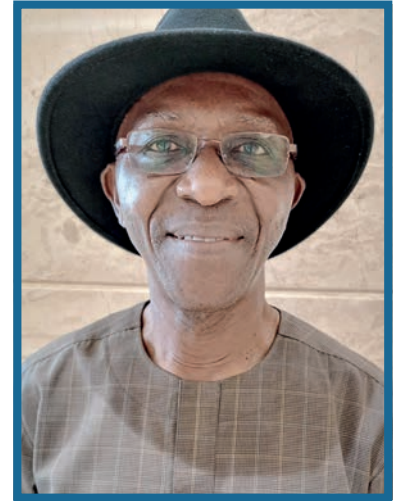
Even more than that, as Adventist college and university students around the world, would you like to join in this great challenge of serving as a PCM missionary abroad for one year? If you would like to volunteer for this program or explore other volunteer opportunities worldwide, you can find more information at the following link: <https://www.adventistvolunteers.org/>. ☮

*See *Dialogue* 34:1 for the experience of Kwon Soon Beom in "Sharing Jesus With University Students Through Korean Language Classes": <https://dialogue.adventist.org/3647/sharing-jesus-with-university-students-through-korean-language-classes>.

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ANSU D. SONII SR.

A dialogue with an Adventist who is the Minister of Education of Liberia



INTERVIEW BY EMMANUEL G. M. KOLLIE

With 40 years of experience in education and accounting, Ansu D. Sonii, Sr. was appointed as the Minister of Education of the Republic of Liberia, West Africa, in 2017.

Professor Sonii has thrived at every level of education in Liberia and is a self-motivated Certified Public Accountant (CPA), with a wide range of experience in public and corporate accounting practices. He began his journey in tertiary education as an instructor at the University of Liberia (UL) as part-time instructor in the Department of Accounting in 1981. In March 1983, he was appointed as a fulltime instructor. He was subsequently called to serve as the chair of the Department of Accounting, dean of the College of Business and Public Administration, and then as acting president of the university. In 2006, Sonii was promoted to vice president of administration, a position he held until retirement in December 2014. After his retirement, the University of Liberia invited Sonii to serve as an adjunct faculty with an assignment in the Graduate School of Business Administration, where he taught finance and advanced accounting.

As a Certified Public Accountant, he has served the nation as member of the Liberian Institute of Certified Public Accountants (LICPA) and a distinguished associate of PKF-Liberia for 25 years. PKF is a firm of accountants and business advisors, serving most of the professional financial advisements and national auditing services in the country. Sonii has also occupied some key financial managerial positions in senior corporate institutions in Liberia, including the Liberia Tractor and Equipment Company (Libtraco), Liberia Produce Marketing Corporation (LPMC), the Mesurado Group of Companies, and General Auditing Office, now General Auditing Commission (GAC). Sonii has been married for 41 years to Adoley, who served as the chief administrator for the Seventh-day Adventist Cooper Hospital in Liberia for many years; and more recently, country director of the Liberia office of Sightsavers International until 2019, when she retired from active national services. The couple is blessed with four biological children and three adopted ones, all of whom are adults with graduate education in professions of their respective choices.

■ *What is your philosophy and your general outlook on life that has kept you in the path of integrity in your educational career?*

My focus has always been to develop a personality that will serve God and His people at all times. My first work assignment was with the Seventh-day Adventist high school in Grand Bassa County, Liberia. The way I conducted myself and took my assignment at the school in 1970 brought me to the attention of the church leadership. Their confidence in my skills and performance led them to transfer me to another Adventist institution where they felt my presence would have additional strength.

In Konola, I began as a history and English teacher, and later served as the dean of boys. While at Konola Academy as dean of boys, I took an interest in education and teaching methods. Eventually I decided to quit my teaching job and move to the University of Liberia to study accounting. Even while I was at the UL, I was involved with teaching at other educational institutions nearby. Since then, I have paired up the two disciplines of education and accounting as my way of life.

■ *What about your faith? How did you come to know about the Seventh-day Adventist Church? And what does it mean to you to live as an Adventist?*

Both my parents were Muslims, but they did not compel us to live as Muslims. In 1965, I was sent to Konola Academy to pursue my high school education. For my parents, Konola was a Christian school with high moral standards, discipline, and value-based education. While at Konola, I admired the spiritual lessons. But I was not interested in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The spiritual-lessons teacher recommended that we buy and read a textbook called, *Facing Life*. It was a textbook written to counsel young people generally. The textbook provided me with a new perspective.

Meanwhile, the school pastor, Jack King, conducted a series of revival messages. During these meetings I responded to the call to get baptized as a Seventh-day Adventist. And since then, I have been working and living as a Seventh-day Adventist. I admit, there were challenges that I faced after my baptism, which impressed me to leave the church. As time went by, I began to attend church services sparingly. The good

news is that my spiritual grooming and involvement with church activities at Konola made me knowledgeable about Adventism. These real-time Bible lessons enthralled me, and I rethought my relationship with God and returned to the church, where I once again became an active member. To admit, living without being an Adventist wouldn't have been a better life. Seventh-day Adventist living impacted me even more after I got married 41 years ago.

■ *As an accountant by profession, what have been some of your contributions to Liberia? What are some of the expectations of PKF Liberia?*

My practice in my professional life began when I joined PKF in 1984. In PKF, we were involved in the creation of the double currency development in Liberia (United States Dollars and Liberian Dollars). Dealing with dual currency bookkeeping began with my firm. In fact, I was a member of the team of auditors who developed the idea of the harmonization of dual currency in Liberia. We also served as auditors for most of the banks and institutions in Liberia. The PKF, as an auditing firm, reawakened the Liberian Institute of Certified Public Accountants (ISA) that had gone dormant at the time. It is the PKF that brought back the ISA to normalcy in the 1990s. These are few of my contributions to Liberia.

■ *You have served the University of Liberia in many capacities: from instructor, to chair of the Department of Business Administration, to dean of the A. Romeo Horton College of Business and Public Administration, to acting president of the university, and then as vice president of administration, a position you held until retirement. What do we need to know about such progression?*

I returned to Liberia in 1979, when I completed my studies in the U.S.A. I was sponsored by the Government of Liberia to the U.S.A. I committed myself to serve my country in the teaching profession. So, all that came my way only showed that those who depend on God can achieve beyond their expectation.

■ *How have you been able to merge your faith as a Seventh-day Adventist with your current appointment as the Minister of Education of Liberia? Adventist culture does not fit in most settings of society.*

I have never allowed my work to conflict with my faith. Wherever I went, I took along my religion with me. Wherever I went seeking for employment, the Adventist Church was a prerequisite. The President of the Republic is aware that I am a Seventh-day Adventist. My colleague ministers know that I am a Seventh-day Adventist. All I can say is that my consistency in the things of God have brought me this far. I accepted to serve my country because that is the right thing to do. Yet it has been a delight to serve as a Seventh-day Adventist in my capacity as the Minister of Education.

■ *How is your appointment as Minister of Education a blessing to the Seventh-day Adventist mission in Liberia?*

First of all, from the inception of Liberia, there had been no Adventist minister in any governmental administration in Liberia. To the glory of God, I am the first Adventist to serve as a minister in the republic. This means a lot to me. The president and others are aware of who I am. This has molded my conduct among my colleagues. All the other ministers know my stand as a Seventh-day Adventist in all manners and functions of my office.

I became the first elder of the Monrovia Central Adventist church in 1979. Since then, I have always been counted among those with a positive influence in the church. Besides, I stand to promote young and innovative Liberians, not just Adventists but anyone who wants the good of our country and church. My position has always been to promote qualified Liberians who can take seriously the responsibilities of the Adventist Church in Liberia. Knowing that leadership makes mistakes, I believe that if we continue to wait for perfection, we will be nowhere as a church. We would continue to sit and wait for

help from anywhere, thereby looking down on our replacements in leadership. I encourage all Adventists to stop looking down on one another for accepting leadership within the church and the national government at large. Let us lift up the spirit of the young people who show consistency in their spiritual walk with God. This is where my advocacy is.

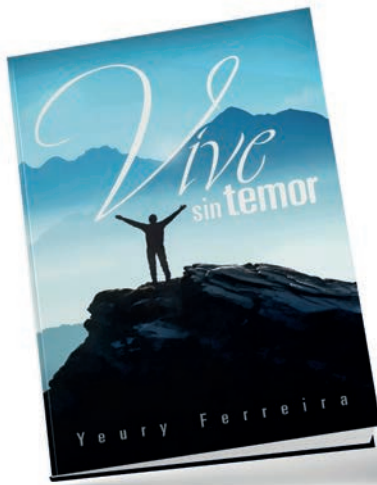
■ *What advice would you share with Seventh-day Adventists who are seeking to work in the public sector of a nation?*

What you believe is what you are. If God puts you on a path, remain faithful, and “he will make your paths smooth and straight” (see Proverbs 3:5–8, NIRV).* I believe God planned for Joseph to be a leader in Egypt. I think God puts you through a path for reasons. Do not be too quick to give up in your life’s journey. ☮

* Quoted from the *New International Readers Version* of the Bible. Copyright © 1995, 1996, 1998, 2014 by Biblica, Inc.®. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

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**VIVE SIN TEMOR
[LIVING WITHOUT FEAR]**

Yeury Ferreira (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2021); paperback, 128 pages.

Reviewed by Leylén Marcó

Why is rejection so painful? Where does our fear to fail take us? What is the difference between being alone and feeling lonely? Yeury Ferreira, in his book *Vive Sin Temor [Living Without Fear]*, invites us to reflect on these and other questions that delve into the fears lurking behind every human being. They are as intimate as common. They often prompt us to look away from God, who is incessantly looking to love and restore us.

Reading Ferreira’s book guides us toward the origin of our fear of rejection, failure, and loneliness. The book also explains the various ways these challenges trap men and women in a sphere of fear. It subtly connects contemporary experiences with biblical stories, which, in turn, moves the reader closer to the most private and spiritual of human conditions. In

the final analysis, the book is a valuable invitation to readers to deepen their knowledge about fear through a deep and involved study of the Bible, and what it says about living without fear.

The book has nine chapters and 10 Bible studies on fear and how a Christian should approach its challenges in his or her life. Contents are contextualized to our times of pandemic, constantly inviting the reader to ongoing insights. After an introductory chapter, the book briefly discusses various types of fears that weigh heavily on humans, and how fear relates to real issues of life, such as rejection, failure, the unexpected, the future, loneliness, disease, and death. These fears are introduced as pervasive and natural in our contemporary society. The author approaches each one in the spiritual sphere through biblical reflections, showing how fear is related to the power and presence of sin in life, and how fears can be overcome by being closer to God and His Word, which gives us this assurance, “Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God” (Isaiah 41:10, NKJV).^{*} Ultimately, fearing God and being closer to Him provide foolproof armor against any sickening fear in life.

The author begins his study on fear by discussing various fears that the COVID-19 crisis triggered in relation to health and national economies. An analysis of the human situation before the pandemic shows that there was an inclination toward those damaging fears, which do not discriminate between different people and can take control of the mind, often voiding reason.

Ferreira goes beyond fear’s neurological and psychological implications to focus on its spiritual relevance. The Bible discusses fear on a significant number of occasions, tracing its origin to the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve’s fear occurred after they disobeyed and distanced themselves from God (Genesis 3:10). Against that reality, the Bible repeatedly invites us to shorten, through faith, the distance that separates us from God. Thus, to the author, the essence of faith “implies taking God at His word and trusting that He will do what He has promised” (p. 16—translation provided).

The author then turns to discuss rejection. When fear of rejection places our self-esteem in the hands of what is around us, how can we have the assurance of

our worth beyond current circumstances? How can we face rejection victoriously?

Fear of rejection, the author argues, often leads to fear of failure. But neither the fear of rejection nor the fear of impending failure should be allowed to dominate the life of a person whose faith in God remains firm and unshakeable. To support that central recommendation for dealing with fear of any kind, the author uses Joseph's story as an example of our daily struggles and the reality of overcoming those struggles—even as we reach up to claim victory over fear of failure. Here the author stands at his strongest point: Fear of failure may seem real and strong, but to surrender to that fear does not need to be the ultimate resolution. Victory over every kind of fear is within the reach of a Christian whose life stands on faith—not just ordinary faith, but faith in the God who never lets the believer down. “With God,” assures the biblical promise, “all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

After claiming that assurance, the author moves to discuss fears relating to the unexpected and the uncertainty of the future. Just as the disciples of Jesus experienced an unexpected storm on the Sea of Galilee, we all encounter unexpected circumstances that are beyond our control. When that happens, when a cloud of stormy emotions overpowers us and when we are not able to control what is happening, who will quiet the thunder in our lives, and how can we sail to safety even as we face the winds of the unexpected in the sea of uncertainty? The author shows us the answer: Fear of any kind stands stripped of its power by the unfailing surety of faith.

The author further expands his study to discuss how fear of the present and the future deprives human beings of many hours of sleep and peace. This kind of fear has caused many to stumble and embrace deceitful divinatory practices. The biblical counsel firmly condemns God's children consult-

ing magicians and palm readers and asking them to predict their future. Trust in God is a sure and certain way of knowing that in Him we can find an infallible tool against our fears of a transient and unknown future.

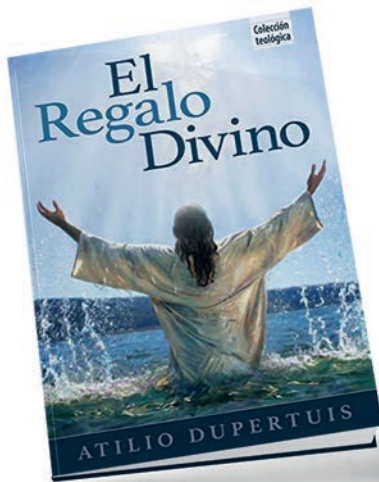
Finally, the author offers 10 lessons relating to 10 fundamental truths of faith, including such titles as: “The Truth About Salvation,” “The Truth About the Day of Rest,” and “The Truth About Christian Baptism.” (translation provided) Each lesson raises a series of questions organized in a thematic format, with answers from the Scriptures that guide the reader to know Christ and understand what He can do to enhance the spiritual and faith growth of the reader.

Given its deep commitment to the discovery of truth, and its pleasant and relatable writing, the book will meet the spiritual needs of readers. Those who have already decided to walk with Christ will have the opportunity to examine their condition and include God more fully as they face their worries. Those who have not yet thought about searching for God will find a satisfactory reason to do so. This book offers us an opportunity of getting close to our Creator and surrendering our human condition to the only One able to comfort us. ☮

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EL REGALO DIVINO [THE DIVINE GIFT]

Atilio Dupertuis (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2021), paperback, 96 pages.

Reviewed by **Frank W. Hardy**

E*l Regalo Divino* is the first volume in a new series of Spanish-language publications of theological interest to be published by Pacific Press. At 96 pages, the book is compact, with 24 chapters organized in two parts. The first part (“The Person of Christ”) has eight chapters; the second (“The Work of Christ”) has 16. The author, Atilio Dupertuis, is a systematic theologian with a Doctor of Theology degree from Andrews University. He has all the academic qualifications one would expect, and yet writes in an engaging and readable manner.

In Part 1, Chapter 2 (“Announcement and Fulfillment”), the author establishes that there is a unity between the Old and New Testaments, with the former predicting the coming of Christ, and the latter showing how the promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New.

Chapter 4 discusses historical controversies about the nature of Christ. Chapters 5 to 8 show how in some cases these earlier issues have become part of the theological discourse in contemporary churches. One question that Seventh-day Adventists have discussed is whether Jesus inherited the nature of Adam before the Fall or after the Fall. The author argues for the former position.

In Part 2, the focus shifts from the person of Christ to the work of Christ. Three chapters from this second section should be mentioned in particular. Chapter 13 shows that the Cross provides the best illustration of God’s justice, while also providing the best illustration of His love. Chapter 17 deals with the question whether justification means that God declares us righteous or actually makes us righteous. The author argues that justification is a legal declaration whereby God declares us to be righteous.

In some ways this is similar to a minister of the gospel saying, “I now declare you man and wife.” In a wedding ceremony, these words make single people married. The declaration takes only a moment, while the marriage that follows endures over time. In the same way, justification is the work of a moment, while sanctification is the work of a lifetime.

Chapter 20 addresses the relationship between law and grace, which Martin Luther considered to be one of the most difficult issues in Christian theology. The author uses the exodus from Egypt to argue that grace must precede law (Israel could not reach Sinai without first leaving Egypt), and similarly that law must follow grace (if they had not accepted God’s leading, the Israelites would never have reached Canaan).

If the book has a weak chapter, it is Chapter 21, where the author discusses Matthew 5:48 and the concept of Christian perfection. The author correctly argues that Jesus is not talking about moral perfection when He says, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (ESV); He is merely saying we should love others because God is love, not because the people we deal with are lovable.

Dupertuis has less to say about sanctification than about factors he considers more objective. But I would argue that, correctly understood, sanctifica-

tion is every bit as objective as justification. That is saying a lot because Dupertuis sees justification as a unilateral declaration made by God concerning our legal status in heaven. Before we come to Him in faith, our status is that we are lost; after coming, our status is that we are saved. The reason for this change is that legally, when we accept Christ, God sees His Son when He looks at us, and in Christ there is nothing to see but holiness. This is substitution, just as we see in the sanctuary. Christ takes our place before the Father (see John 1:29, 36). But what relationship is there between our legal status before God and the way we think about other people in the privacy of our innermost thoughts—especially if justification does not have the function of changing us?

I would argue that justification does change us—not all at once, and not because of our legal status, but because coming to God for any reason involves entering His presence on a spiritual level. We come as we are, but do not leave as we were. Allowing the Holy Spirit to lead us to faith initially is a sea change—the counterpart on earth of God’s declaration in heaven. But there are also imperceptible changes, which over time become cumulative. The above process continues for as long as we live a life of faith, and this is why “sanctification is the work of a lifetime.”

But whose work is it? If the question is who justifies and who sanctifies, the answer both times is God. In both cases there is truly “not one thread of human

devising.” Even our faith is a gift (Ephesians 2:8). So, my point is that we need not be apprehensive when discussing passages such as Matthew 5:48 if our distinctions are clear and we have maintained them consistently.

The last three chapters bring the book to an appropriate close, doing so in a way that is deeply moving. Dupertuis has given us a balanced presentation of a significant topic that will be of special interest to Seventh-day Adventist readers.

The author is at his best when wrestling with difficult problems and bringing balance to the issues he deals with. His arguments require thought, and reward thought. One hopes that the publisher will see fit to have this slender but significant volume translated into English. ❧

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3. *Ibid.*, 311.

“IN 15 MINUTES”

RECOVERY OF UKRAINIAN ADVENTIST CENTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN BUCHA, UKRAINE

AN INTERVIEW WITH VALENTYNA KURYLIAK BY CÉDRIC LACHENAL

The city of Bucha, shaken and desolated after Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, is rebuilding its walls, streets, and buildings. Near the center of the city, Ukrainian Adventist Center of Higher Education¹ opened its doors again in order that dreams of a place where wisdom will reign, and where education will proclaim the wholistic development of all those who seek it, will become a reality.

I talked recently² to Valentyna Kuryliak, associate professor and vice-rector for research for scientific work at the Ukrainian Adventist Center of Higher Education, about the future of Adventist higher education in Ukraine.

■ *Dr. Kuryliak, let's begin with a little about Ukrainian Adventist Center of Higher Education (UACHE).*

The institution began its operation in 1999. Unlike most Adventist institutions of higher learning that start with a theological seminary, the early focus of Ukrainian Adventist Center of Higher Education was on humanities and economics, and this was in response to a high demand by the church for education in these areas in our part of Europe. Today, the school has grown to just over a thousand students, and the school offers a number of majors, including degrees in journalism, archeology, and cybernetics—all fully recognized by the Ukrainian State and international accrediting bodies such as the Accrediting Association of Seventh-day Adventist Schools, Colleges, and Universities (AAA).

The campus is blessed to be in an ideal part of the city of Bucha. The property is surrounded by woods and is less than a kilometer from the center of the city. During the recent invasion and occupation, the campus itself did not suffer from intense bombing and destruction. Therefore, while you may have heard in the news about buildings in the city being blown apart, our institute was spared and still stands, by God's grace. However, our buildings bear many bullet holes and have sustained broken furniture and other damage. The campus was first

occupied by Russian troops which used it as a station for troops. Later, Ukrainian troops took over the campus and informed the administration that they would protect our buildings from damage. A lot remains to be done to restore the shelled buildings. The work began immediately to clean the entire campus and buildings in preparation for the upcoming academic year.

■ *During the war, what happened to students and teachers when rockets and bombs began to fall at the military airport so close to the college?*

Prior to the invasion, none of us believed that anything would really happen. Since 2014, we have been used to hearing about possibilities of war and invasion, but never thought that it would actually become a reality.

But on February 24, 2022, my husband woke me up around 6:45 in the morning, shouting, “Wake up. We are under attack. We need to pack. We need to leave. We have only 15 minutes.” It took me a while to realize what was happening. I had to settle things fast, not only for myself, but also for students, and the university. “Fifteen minutes” became the focal point that resonated in my mind. In 15 minutes, I had to make sure that I had called the rector and other administrators about the evacuation; in 15 minutes I had to make sure that students were taken care of; in

15 minutes I had to help my younger sister to be ready to leave; in 15 minutes I had to pack just what was necessary; in 15 minutes I had to decide where to go. It probably took more than 15 minutes to do all that, but this “15 minutes” charge echoes in my mind even to this day.

Most of the students and families left the campus on the first day of the invasion. Due to martial law promulgated by the Ukrainian government, most men, including students, were expected to go into public services supporting the logistics and economy of the country. Ukraine recognizes the noncombatant status of the Seventh-day Adventist Church so Adventist men, including students, ended up performing civil service, and working in the city’s premier bakery that supplies bread for the entire country.

A number of the male students relocated to the Adventist Rzhavintsi youth camp in western Ukraine, where they could continue their theological studies online. In addition, along with some women, they are taking care of 97 orphans who are internally displaced from the Nikolaev region. While disruptive to university studies, caring for this vulnerable population is commendable training for future pastors and theologians.

■ *Have you kept contact with your students and colleagues? Are there any known casualties among them?*

We have had some losses, and heard of some terrible stories, but perhaps the experience of Olga, our head librarian, will help us understand the tragedy of war anywhere.

Olga and her husband had spent years renovating a house for their retirement. In early March, bombing reached their district, and a rocket totally destroyed their house. Olga had sought refuge prior to the attack but her husband, still in the house when the bombs fell, was hit badly, and lost both his hands. Other rockets fell all around the neighborhood, and Olga’s son, a policeman, pressed on to provide assistance to people. He was shot to death while carrying a child whom he had just rescued from a burning house. He was their only son.

Through social media, we have organized groups and means of communicating with most of our students, but our institution is a complex one. Our campus welcomes students from about 20 countries, although Ukrainian students are in the majority. Besides them are large numbers of students from our neighboring countries. We continue to have contact with all European students, although communication has become difficult lately due to the conflict and displacement of so many. We just pray that wherever they are, the Lord will keep His embrace upon them.

■ *What are the perspectives and hopes for your campus?*

Our campus has a great mission to share. We are in the process of removing the relics and debris of war in order to prepare our campus to fulfill its ordained mission to all the students who will fill its halls. We will not be able to remove all the traces of the conflict, but we believe that with time, the campus will be able to recover and continue its primary mission. What we do not really know at this point is how many students will be able to join us. For elementary and secondary schools, the opening may be well ensured (if the school has a bomb shelter), but it is a bit more complicated for collegiate studies. But the work is not ours; it is God’s. We must plan and do all we can, and let the Lord lead and provide.

Our hope is that our campus will serve as a testimony of peace and resilience, and as a thriving definition of Adventism. Through all the events I faced in the past few months, Matthew 24:6 has helped me to look forward. “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed” (NIV).³ But after these, the Son of man will appear. The Second Advent is the essence of our church and her faith proclamation. More than ever, our campuses must make this message the core of its teaching.

■ *Dr. Kuryliak, on behalf of many who will read this interview, please be assured that we will certainly pray for your institution, for Ukraine, for Russia, and for the soon second coming of our Lord, who is the Prince of Peace.* ☩

Cédric Lachenal

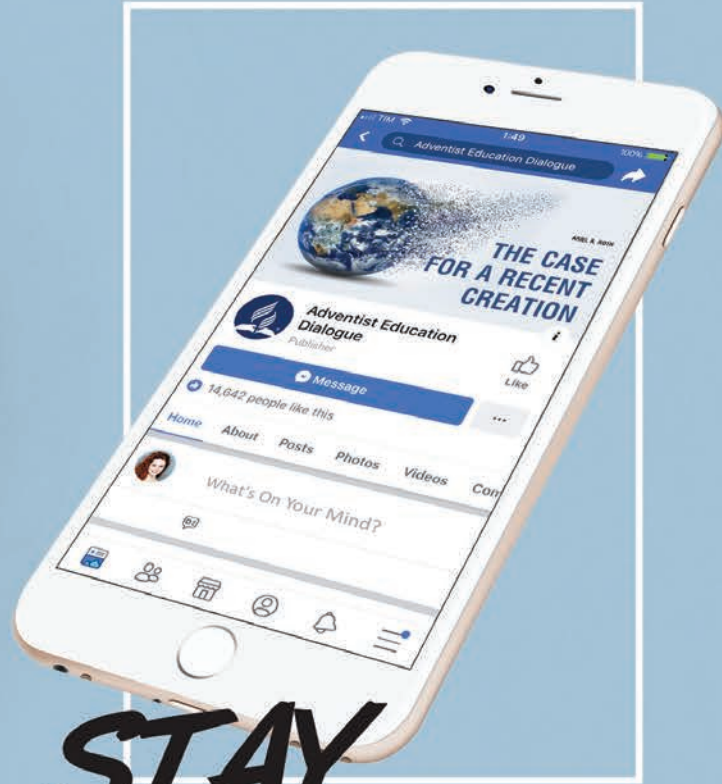
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Website: <https://ugi.edu.ua/en/> Updates and pictures of Ukrainian Adventist Center of Higher Education and its recovery from the war are regularly put on <https://ugi.edu.ua/bozha-blagodat-i-naslidky-vijny-yak-instytut-perezhyv-okupacziyu/>.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Also referred to as the Ukrainian Institute of Arts and Sciences.
2. The interview was conducted on July 14, 2022. Information was reviewed and updated in early August. As of October 21, the situation was stable; recent bombings did not cause any damage to the school’s infrastructure. A few classes are in session by Zoom, but no students are currently on campus.
3. Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

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