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subscriptions@ministrymagazine.org
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MINISTERIAL SECRETARY

Jerry N. Page

ASSOCIATE MINISTERIAL SECRETARIES

Jeffrey O. Brown, Robert Costa, Pavel
Goia, Anthony Kent, Janet Page

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A new church for a new world

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has declared, “The COVID-19 pandemic is the greatest public health crisis in a hundred years.”¹ The consequences of the pandemic on the church and membership have been devastating. Over the past two years, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has lost more than 17,000 members to COVID-19. This includes “at least 773 pastors, retirees, church workers, missionaries, and church leaders.”² And, by all estimates, this is a conservative number.

But if there is one doctrine that unites us as Christians, it is the death and resurrection of Jesus. His crucifixion has taught us to believe that out of death can come life and that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28, NIV). The pandemic has triggered great resilience and helped churches change the way they do things. Indeed, churches have addressed challenges by reinventing themselves.

The right question

While the pandemic has been a time of suffering, it has also provided an opportunity to learn how the world has changed and to witness a new world. Church consultant Tony Morgan says churches must ask some questions. While some

members and leaders inquire, “When will we be able to return to normal church life?” Morgan says this is the wrong question. We should instead be asking, “How is this situation changing us?” Morgan suggests seven major shifts a church should make. Among them are moves from teaching to equipping, from gathering to connecting, and from attendance to engagement.³

We must quickly learn to deal with this new reality and look for the best opportunities to serve those in need. Thank God, churches have not only fed people but also launched various initiatives to support the mental health of congregants and communities. One such initiative, the Experience God project, offers counseling by phone and receives more than 6,000 calls a month in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Churches are adapting, but we must increase our service to the world and increase our witness and prayers. Indeed, I pray with Paul, “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else” (1 Thess. 3:12, NIV).

The right people

The pandemic has severely affected church workers serving as missionaries, many in extremely challenging areas. The most significant



Erton C. Köhler is the executive secretary of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.



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challenges have been experienced at the local church level. From online services and hybrid in-person and online services to drive-in services, pastors have been at the forefront of change.

They were brave and bold when facing unexpected crises. A pastor in Belarus caught COVID-19. It was severe. He was hospitalized. His hospital ward was now his church. He ministered to five other people who also had COVID-19. They exercised together, read the Bible together, and prayed together. They recovered their health—and discovered a faith. A pastor in Pakistan installed a loudspeaker on the roof of his house and used it to preach the gospel. In Bangladesh, church workers donated 10 percent of their salaries to support lay members in need.

Despite all these shifts and the increasing role of social media in the life of local churches, face-to-face interactions remain critical and should not be made redundant. Technology has come to stay in the church's life, but it has not come to replace the life of the church.

The right time

We must continue to find creative ways to bring people together, understanding that people are the main asset and business of the

church. Jesus came for people, bled for people, died for people, and will return to take people to heaven.

At the top of each church's agenda must be a commitment to the Great Commission. God is looking for a people who will stay the course and stay together, "for better, for worse, in sickness, and in health." This is an awesome time to be a minister. By God's grace, I am declaring, "Here am I, Lord, send me." Will you join me? "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14, ESV).



- 1 General Conference, "Reaffirming the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Response to COVID-19," Adventist News Network, October 25, 2021.
- 2 Author's findings reported to the General Conference Executive Committee. See Marcos Paseggi, "GC Secretary's Report Outlines Adventist Church's Challenges and Extensive Blessings," *Adventist World*, October 10, 2021.
- 3 Tony Morgan, "7 Shifts Churches Need to Make Because of the Coronavirus," *Tony Morgan Live* blog, April 15, 2020, <https://tonymorganlive.com/2020/04/15/7-church-shifts-coronavirus/>.

Jiří Moskala, ThD, PhD, is dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.



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A photograph of a single purple flower with five petals and green leaves, growing out of a crack in a grey asphalt surface. The background is a blurred asphalt road.

Surprising *grace*

Most, if not all, Christians know the song “Amazing Grace,” which explains that divine grace is amazing because God is able to save broken, sinful people. Bible scholars and theologians describe God’s grace as blazing, extraordinaire, living, surprising, astonishing, glorious, sacrificial, redemptive, or blistering. Such adjectives characterize God’s precious gift to humanity from various angles but do not do justice to its complexity and depth because no one term can adequately express its profound significance.

The word *grace* is rich with nuances and connotations because God’s grace is pregnant with a vast array of meanings. The apostle Paul speaks about “the immeasurable riches of his grace” (ESV, NABRE, NRSV, RSV) expressed in God’s kindness toward humans (Eph. 2:7). Translators render the Greek expression *hyperballon* (a present participle of the verb *hyperballo*) as “immeasurable” in a variety of ways: “the exceeding riches of His grace” (KJV, NKJV, ASV, YLT), “the greatness of his grace” (CEB), “the surpassing riches of His grace” (NASB), “the incomparable riches of his grace” (NIV), or “the incredible wealth of his grace” (NLT).¹

During His earthly ministry, Christ embodied God’s grace (John 1:14, 17). The Holy Spirit is the Dispenser of divine grace. Called “the Spirit of grace” (Zech. 12:10; Heb. 10:29), He “takes the ‘grace of Christ’ and confers it on us.”² Significantly, the term *grace* occurs in the Bible for the first time in the biblical account of the Flood. Noah found grace in God’s eyes (Gen. 6:8) amid God’s judgment upon the sinful world.

The term *grace* (Hebrew *chen*, signifying “favor, kindness, charity, elegance, acceptance, benevolent action, goodness, charm, beauty, loveliness”) derives from the root *chanan*, “to have mercy, be gracious, graciously provide, take pity on, show compassion, long for, inclined towards, or stoop in kindness to another person.” The equivalent to *chen* is the Greek term *charis*. An unmerited gift or favor, God’s grace is an expression of His love toward humanity. *Grace* has been defined as “God’s goodness toward those who deserve only punishment” because they are sinners.³ “It is God’s free, sovereign, undeserved favour or love to man, in his state of sin and guilt, which manifests itself in the forgiveness of sin and deliverance from its penalty.”⁴

Always surprising and often shocking, God’s grace disturbs and may even offend some people

because we want things we deserve and work for. Yet when accepted, grace takes our breath away, and we stand before the God of grace (1 Pet. 5:10) in awe, for He always bestows it in abundance. Paul explains that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom. 5:20, ESV).

God loves everyone without exception (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8), died for all (Titus 2:11), and wants to save all (1 Tim. 2:3, 4). Sustaining life in general, what we call common or universal grace, needs to be differentiated from special grace.⁵ But grace has many additional aspects for specific purposes. He freely gives people whatever they need. Let us unlock some of grace’s multifaceted roles.

Essence of grace

God cares for the physical life of our world and its inhabitants by *universal*, or *common*, *grace*. God’s love is universal, for He is good to everyone: “The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made” (Ps. 145:9, ESV). In His generosity, Jesus confirms that God provides the basic blessings of life to everyone even though they are wicked (Matt. 5:45–48). Daniel said to Belshazzar: “You did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways” (Dan. 5:23). The apostle Paul underlines that our breath and movement are in God’s hands (Acts 17:25, 28). God shows His mercy and gives gifts to all, not only to believers. Each person experiences basic divine blessings (James 1:17). Theologians have recognized different aspects of common grace besides God maintaining humanity’s physical life, such as restraining His wrath; limiting evil; and illuminating people with truth, goodness, and power (Ps. 117:1, 2; John 1:9; Rom. 1:19–21). Common grace can be described as “every favor of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God.”⁶

However, when we consider spiritual existence, we need to move beyond God’s general beneficence and recognize that without Him and a conversion experience, “we are dead in our transgressions and sin” (Eph. 2:1–3). How can we live a spiritually abundant life (John 10:10)? That is possible only by God’s special intervention on our behalf. Here we begin to explore the first flavor of what we can call God’s special grace. The apostle Paul uses the divine “but” to contrast the change: “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is

by grace you have been saved" (Eph. 2:4, 5). We become truly alive only when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. This divine "but" changes everything and brings the bright future perspective of eternal life.

A spiritually dead person is not sensitive to any of God's promptings. It requires God's grace in collaboration with the work of the Holy Spirit and His Word to respond to His leading (Ezek. 36:26, 27; 37:11–14; John 1:13; 3:5; 16:7–11; 1 Pet. 1:23). Let us unfold this special grace process by examining how grace enables a person to become fully spiritually alive.

Prevenient grace comes before salvation. The English word *prevenient* derives from the Latin *praevenire*, meaning "come before, preceding, anticipating, expectant." Such grace enables a spiritually dead person to hear God's voice and respond positively to His call of love. What we cannot do for ourselves, God does for us gratis. Jesus states: " 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself' " (John 12:32). God leads us to respond properly to His desire to save everyone (Gen. 3:9; Rom. 5:8; 1 Tim. 2:4; Titus 2:11; 2 Pet. 3:9). Paul explains it most eloquently: "For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13, ESV). All of Heaven works to help humans find the right path to salvation. God sends holy angels to serve people as they receive salvation (Heb 1:14). God's grace grips our entire spiritual life.

Prevenient grace is a universal benefit of Jesus' atoning ministry. In this sense, all "common grace is a subset of prevenient grace."⁷ God does everything possible to bring people to Himself (Isa. 45:22; 1 Tim. 2:4). However, they can harden their hearts and refuse to accept the gift of salvation (Heb. 6:4–6; 10:26, 27, 29).

Without Christ, we are not only dead but also slaves to sin and unable to follow God. However, with the preaching of the gospel comes power to every person to respond to the words of salvation (John 5:24; Rom. 10:17; Heb. 4:12; 1 Pet. 1:23). It enables our will to respond either positively or negatively to God's prevenient grace. Sinners do not have free will without prevenient grace. "With the God-empowered choice restored through prevenient grace, the sinner's role in salvation is to allow or reject the gracious gifts of God's saving operations on behalf of each and every sinner, empowering the saved sinner to will and act in accordance with God's law in response to God's love."⁸ The Holy Spirit awakens our conscience to receive forgiveness.

Saving grace emerges when we embrace prevenient grace. Prevenient grace leads people to accept God's saving or justifying grace when they do not resist or reject it. Because we can stubbornly say no to God (Ps. 81:12; Isa. 48:4; Jer. 5:23; 7:24), Scripture encourages, " 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts' " (Heb. 3:7, 8; 3:15; 4:7; cf. Ps. 95:8; Prov. 28:14; Eph. 4:18, 30). Jesus proclaimed: " 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me' " (Rev. 3:20, ESV). Salvific grace is amazing grace because it can save broken people, and it is blazing grace because it springs from the assurance that Jesus loves everyone.

Enabling grace results when we accept God's Word and do not resist His Holy Spirit. New life, spiritual revival, then blossoms within us, and we work and do things for Christ and others because we are compelled to do it by His enabling grace, Word, and Spirit (Ezek. 36:25–28; 37:4–10, 14; Zech. 4:6; Rom. 8:11; James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23).

If we do good works, we have nothing to boast about (Jer. 9:23, 24; 1 Cor. 1:29–31) because God has already prepared them in advance for us to walk in them (Eph. 2:10). Only the Holy Spirit enables us to act in harmony with His will. Christ intercedes for us as the only and all-powerful Intercessor to save us completely and enable us to do His will (Rom. 8:34; 12:1, 2; 1 Tim. 2:5; Titus 2:11–14; Heb. 7:25). Thus, obedience is only possible for the redeemed as God empowers them for it (Ezek. 11:19, 20; 36:27). God's grace forgives, saves, heals, liberates, and sustains the redeemed.

Transforming grace changes believers' lives, including their thinking, emotions, goals, motivations, desires, imagination, direction, service, and lifestyle. What is humanly impossible for us, God can do, for He makes us into new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Our behavior displays the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Paul speaks about God's transforming power in Romans 12:1, 2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18. Christ's followers become loving and lovable, trusting and trustworthy, changed into God's image with a new self (Eph. 4:22–24; Col. 3:9, 10). Grace completely alters our life, providing new orientations, attitudes, and values.

Empowering grace equips believers for effective service and witnessing for God. The Holy Spirit endows them with spiritual gifts to perform God's work, to serve and minister to people. Such grace is a divine enabling (1 Cor. 12:4–11, 27–31; Eph. 4:7–16).

Sustaining grace keeps us in a vital relationship with Christ (1 John 2:24, 27). Thus, as we stay connected with Christ and persevere in our walk with Him, we constantly grow in His grace and knowledge (2 Pet. 3:18).

Triumphant grace is the aspect of divine grace that works miracles in our lives, triumphs in everyday struggles over selfishness and self-centeredness, and enables us to focus on the needs of others. It gives victory over addictions, overcomes wickedness day by day (2 Cor. 3:18), and culminates in bringing believers to their eternal home (John 14:1–3). What God started for us, in us, and through us, He will bring to the final victory at His second coming. Paul emphatically states: “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6). As the Victor, Christ can keep us from falling: “To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen” (Jude 24, 25).

Choice of grace

From this study, it is evident that Seventh-day Adventists do not accept the notion of irresistible grace⁹ because one can choose to reject or fall from grace. While God’s grace is inexhaustible and irrepressible, God does not force His grace on anyone. The nature of grace is voluntary and free. We can refuse it, deny it, and betray it. Believers do not earn or deserve God’s grace but receive it gratefully.

God’s grace is the all-present, all-comprehensive Christian experience of our human existence in our sinful world. “Grace appears in the benediction, the blessings of God. The apostolic greetings (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3, etc.) and benedictions (Rom. 16:20, 24; 1 Cor. 16:23; and esp. 2 Cor. 13:14) always emphasize grace. . . . So all the blessings of God come to us by God’s sovereign grace. Without his grace we are nothing. By grace comes forgiveness of our sins, the power to do good works, and the ability to serve the people of God.”¹⁰

The apostle Paul explains the practical results of accepting God’s grace: “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while

we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:11–13). And the message of the book of Revelation begins and ends with an emphasis on grace (Rev. 1:4; 22:21).

Growth of grace

Key biblical texts underline the significance and benefits of the grace that comes from Jesus Christ: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). As we have seen, divine grace has different facets. We have noted these various functions but have stressed that they all belong to God’s singular, unique grace.

Paul exhorts: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14). The apostle Peter’s declaration should be our daily experience with God: “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen” (2 Pet. 3:18).



- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture is from the New International Version.
- 2 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 426.
- 3 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 239.
- 4 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 427.
- 5 Berkhof, 435.
- 6 John Murray, “Common Grace,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1977), 96. On common grace, see especially Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 432–446; and Gruden, *Systematic Theology*, 803–815.
- 7 John W. Reeve, “Grace: A Brief History,” in *Salvation: Contours of Adventist Soteriology*, ed. Martin F. Hanna, Darius W. Jankiewicz, and John W. Reeve (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2018), 280.
- 8 Reeve, “Grace,” 286.
- 9 The term *irresistible grace* is a favorite phrase in Calvinism and is part of the TULIP acronym (total depravity; unconditional election; limited atonement; irresistible grace; and perseverance of the saints). The Bible does not teach that it is impossible for the elect to reject or fall from God’s grace nor does it teach the concept of “once saved always saved” (e.g., John 3:36; 2 Cor. 6:1; Gal. 1:6; 5:4; 2 Tim. 4:10; Heb. 10:29; 12:15; 2 Pet. 1:10; 1 John 2:2–5; Jude 4).
- 10 John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 246.

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Incredible grace

At age 14, like many other teenagers, I was fascinated by my father's motorcycle and everything related to it. I asked him daily to teach me how to ride it. He finally agreed. He would take me to a grass field outside the city and show me how to ride it, then have me do it. He always made me promise never to take the bike out alone.

One day, while my father was at work, I kept looking at the motorcycle in the garage. Then I took it outside to just sit on it, and then I took it to the gate. *Maybe I will ride it for only one block*, I thought. But when it felt so good to ride it, I decided to have fun and go as fast as possible. Right after a curve, I was going so fast that I had no time to brake and crashed right into a concrete wall. I ruined the bike and hurt myself pretty badly.

I pushed the motorcycle all the way back home, and then I hid it in the back of the garage under a tarp. Instantly, I decided to do all types of chores. When Dad came home, Mom said to him, "Pavel was a really good kid today; he helped me as never before."

Dad turned and looked at me. "What have you done?" he asked. "Did you take the bike out?"

I was quiet. My dad went to the garage and found the bike. It took a few seconds for him to take it all in—then he came back. I did not know what to expect. My Dad looked at me—came over—and gave me a hug. I couldn't believe it. "I'm so glad you are alive!" he said. "What you did was wrong—but I forgive you. And I'm also giving you a

gift—this bike is yours. It's broken now, but you will work with me and make some money. I'll match the money you earn and together we'll fix the bike."

"I don't deserve it," I said in amazement.

"It is grace, Son," he replied. "It's all out of grace."

"Why would you show me grace?" I asked.

Back came the reply. "Because I love you."

God's undeserved gifts

God has given us many undeserved gifts—natural talents, spiritual gifts, salvation, forgiveness, and transformation—all favors based on His infinite love, compassion, and mercy. We cannot earn these on our own—we cannot pay for them, neither do we deserve them; all are based on infinite, amazing, incredible grace. "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:4–9, NKJV).

Yet, we are all far from being like God, so how do we show grace, especially when someone does not deserve it? Where does grace start? "In the heart renewed by divine grace, love is the ruling principle of action. It modifies the character,



Pavel Goia, DMin, is the editor of *Ministry*.



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governs the impulses, controls the passions, and ennobles the affections. This love, cherished in the soul, sweetens the life and sheds a refining influence on all around.”¹

How is love involved?

An attribute of God listed in Ephesians 2 is “love.” God is love. And because He loves us, He shows us grace. And we are called to love God and to love our neighbor. If you are a Christian and you say you love God but do not love your neighbor, then you lie and the love of God is not in you (1 John 4:20). You may be a pastor, you may know a lot of theology, you may even think you love God, but if you do not love your neighbor, you may not actually know God. You, then, lack the transforming relationship with Him and, therefore, cannot share grace with others.

The more we experience God’s presence, understand His grace, and partake of His love, the more we are transformed into His image. His grace is contagious. If there is no transformation, no love, and no grace shown to others, then Christianity is not an experience, just a theory. To the degree that you love the person you like least and show them the grace God shows you, to that same degree, you love God. The real power that transforms your life is God’s grace manifested in so many ways toward you. The more you receive and appreciate it, the more you will share it.

As pastors, we stand on the podium week after week, talking about grace manifested in

forgiveness, transformation, and salvation, and lifting up God’s wonderful promises. Our goal is to save souls for Christ, yet only God’s presence in us, with His love and grace, can bring true transformation that shines out to our parishioners.

Submersion in the presence of God should be the desire and focus of our lives, what we seek daily and thirst for continually. “Christian workers who succeed in their efforts must know Christ; and in order to know Him, they must know His love. In heaven their fitness as workers is measured by their ability to love as Christ loved and to work as He worked.”² You cannot give what you do not have. God’s presence makes God’s kingdom of grace real inside of us now and His kingdom of glory real at His second coming.

How do you extend grace?

God “demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8, NIV). He has shown us forgiveness, compassion, He has offered us salvation, transformation, eternity. He is blessing us daily. All undeserved grace. As “faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Pet. 4:10, NIV), we are called to do the same in all areas of life. “Freely you have received; freely give” (Matt. 10:8, NIV).

How do we share or extend grace to others? The more you take time to fully investigate His grace and try to understand a drop of that magnificent, complete, unconditional grace, the more you are filled with it. When you naturally

share it, it flows through you; it radiates from you. That is the single power that transforms you and others around you. You cannot be any other way but gracious, kind, and compassionate. Only the one who experiences grace can extend grace.

Paying back grace?

To explain a little of how God's grace works in different situations, let's look to the parable in Matthew 18:21–34. A servant owes 10,000 talents of gold. One talent in our actual measurements would be about 30 kilograms—or about 66 pounds of gold. One talent was wages for about 6,000 workdays—roughly 16.4 years' wages if the debtor worked every day and put all of the earnings toward the debt. So 10,000 talents was about 60 million (60,000,000) workdays' wages, over 164,000 years' wages or, to be more specific, over 164,383 years' wages if he worked seven days a week.

Let's put this in today's context, which includes inflation over the years. If we say that an average wage today is US\$100 a day, considering that one talent at that time was 6,000 workdays' wages, then one talent in our day would be about US \$600,000 or about 1,644 years wages. So, 10,000 talents would be equivalent today to about six billion US dollars (6,000,000,000)—or more than 16 million years' wages, more specifically, 16,438,356 years' wages. If a person worked 80 years straight in a lifetime, then, with today's inflation, it would take about 205,479 lifetimes to pay back that debt.

Very interestingly, the servant asks for forgiveness and promises to pay the debt back. He does not seem to understand the enormity of his debt and the fact that he cannot pay it back. Forgiving his debt is an act of grace. Clearly, if his debt is forgiven, he does not need to pay it back. If he pays it back, he does not need forgiveness. He confuses forgiveness, received freely by grace, with merits. This means you don't need grace; you work for it and therefore deserve it.

He also imagines that he can pay it back. In his day, he would have had to live over 164,000 years, work every single day, and never use any of the earnings for food or bills to pay it back—without considering interest. He would never have been able to make a dent in paying his debt back.

Because he is not cognizant of his situation, he does not appreciate the infinite, extended grace. Because he does not fully appreciate the grace he receives, he cannot extend grace to others.

His neighbor owes him 100 denarii, which would be, more or less, about 100 days of work, a little over three months of working seven days a week. The first servant is pardoned for more than 160,000 years of debt, yet he cannot forgive 100 days.

Grace received, grace imparted

To the degree that each one of us understands, receives, and appreciates God's infinite grace expressed in a variety of ways, to that same degree, we need to extend grace to others who may not deserve it and cannot pay it back. Only then can the forgiven forgive, the loved love, and the saved save. Only then can we genuinely preach God's grace in the pulpit. It is said, "The more you walk among flowers, the more you smell like flowers." So, the more you walk in God's grace and experience it, the more you share that grace with others—and without strings. The more you receive and understand it, the more you love God and love your neighbor. Effortlessly and naturally, you are transformed and disciplined. You follow God, obey Him, serve Him, and care for your neighbor.

Charles Swindoll says, "Grace acknowledges the ugliness of sin by choosing to see beyond it. Grace accepts a person as someone worthy of kindness despite whatever grime or hard-shell casing keeps him or her separated from the rest of the world. Grace is a gift of tender mercy when it makes the least sense."³ Real Christianity is to be filled with God's love so much that your life will reflect that love. You will then show grace in a variety of forms to those who do not deserve it.

Grace received becomes grace imparted, the real proof of Christ living in the heart. In a self-centered world, a world that is in confusion and need, God's children must reflect God's character in showing grace and compassion, care and love to others around them. As we extend grace, we guide them to God's love and grace. God is calling us to experience and share His grace daily. That is the best sermon we can deliver.



- 1 Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 551.
- 2 White, 551.
- 3 Charles R. Swindoll, *Jesus: The Greatest Life of All* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 90.

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Jason Sliger
serves with
Adventist Frontier
Missions in Papua
New Guinea.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

Heavenly banking

We'll be sending you a check for . . ." I almost dropped my phone when I heard it. I tried to say something but could not think of any intelligible response to this miracle. I managed to stutter, "Thank you."

Rewind. About five months before this, our family had felt the leading of God to go into foreign missions and to serve among the Gogodala tribe of Papua New Guinea, a river-going people in the Western Province. This was a radical change from the steady, comfortable, though sometimes challenging, life of a North American pastor. This decision triggered an avalanche of changes in our lives.

As my wife and I poured our hearts out to God asking for His leading, we sensed His moving us to step out in faith and for me to quit my job. Getting to the mission field as quickly as possible was top priority for us, so I notified the conference of our decision to move into full-time support-raising for our project. With their blessing and the blessing of our local churches, we began to pray that the Lord would supply our needs and be our Support during this huge transition.

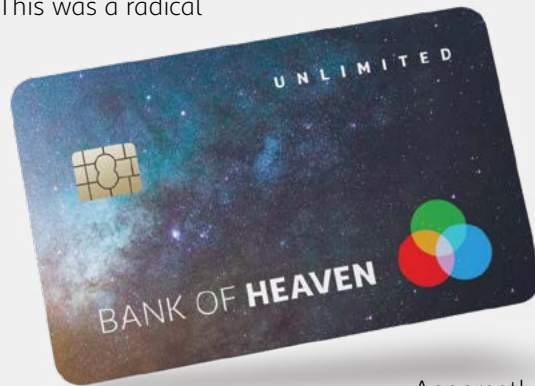
About two months into my unemployment, I was suffering from mental fatigue. "Give us this day our daily bread" meant increased faith but diminished finances. The Lord had provided for our needs with helping hands and funds to live on, but one particular day I felt a storm cloud over my head. Overwhelmed and needing a sympathetic ear, I looked for my wife. I found her—balancing our three young kids circling stacks of moving boxes. I saw half-finished DIY projects clamoring for consideration in the middle of the room—and dust bunnies that seemed to be yelling for attention in the corners of the room.

I collapsed into a folding chair, about to succumb to despair, when my phone rang. I looked

down at my caller ID. The conference president! "Hello Jason!" came the friendly voice over the phone. "How are you doing?"

"I'm doing great!" I responded automatically. "How are you?"

It was then that God overwhelmed me with the miracle. We had changed church districts about three and a half years before this.



Slowly, I am learning that God steps in when we are utterly and completely dependent on Him.

Apparently, I should have received an increase in my cost-of-living allowance, but it had been overlooked. Hence the phone call.

"Jason, we owe you some money, and we want to make it right. So, we'll be sending you a check for eighteen thousand dollars." I finished the call and hung up. In complete shock and disbelief, I told my wife. She started crying tears of joy. I just stood there with my head in a fog. Did that just really happen? Later it struck me. Three and a half years before, God had impressed us to open a savings account so that when we needed to know that He was still in control in our lives and that we were in the center of His will, He could drop a blessing in our lap. This was an unbelievable blessing. "But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19, KJV).

Slowly, I am learning that God steps in when we are utterly and completely dependent on Him. May our revival prayer be as David Livingstone is said to have prayed, "God, send me anywhere, only go with me. Lay any burden on me, only sustain me. And sever any tie in my heart except the tie that binds my heart to Yours." 🙏

Giving appeals during a global crisis:



Lessons from the apostle Paul

Aniel Barbe, MA in Religion, is an associate director for Stewardship Ministries at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

In several of his letters, the apostle Paul appeals for funds for the Jerusalem church (Rom. 15:25–28; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 11:8, 9).¹ In fact, bringing the gift from the church of Antioch to Jerusalem was one of his first acts of ministry (Acts 11:30). Paul later organized similar efforts among the churches in Macedonia and Achaia (Rom. 15:25–28). First and Second Corinthians reflect his longing to enlist them in this giving initiative.

While Paul's appeals were not new within the early church, his process has a special significance for us today. The context was a global crisis, and Paul's approach offers guidance to leadership currently serving under difficult circumstances.² The biblical record reveals some pointers for instructing church members in giving today.

The global crisis

Paul's first collection came in response to the prophet Agabus's prediction of a global (Roman Empire-wide) famine (Acts 11:27–30).³ Many historical documents situate the event during the years AD 46–54, the reign of the emperor Claudius. Daryn Graham, an expert on the Roman Empire's responses to natural disasters, discovered that the River Nile in Egypt, the major source of food for the empire, had experienced an unprecedented increase in water level in AD 45, causing a poor harvest in Egypt. Drought conditions in Syria and Judaea in AD 46, the other two

breadbaskets of the empire, compounded the problem.⁴

Two passages from Paul testify of an emergency lasting beyond Claudius's reign. In his first letter to the Corinthians (circa AD 55), Paul mentions the "present crisis" and advises believers not to spend resources on marriage (1 Cor. 7:26, NIV). Then, in his second letter to the Corinthians (circa AD 56–57), he describes Macedonia as also under "severe trial" (2 Cor. 8:2). The context reveals that Paul was referring to the economic challenges that they were facing. Hence, he addressed his appeals for the poor in Jerusalem to believers who were not enjoying financial prosperity. In such a difficult economic context, how did Paul present his appeals in order to convince those who were themselves hit by the crisis to participate?

Paul highlights the principle that we should encourage and instruct church members to give even in times of crisis. Reflecting on the identity of the recipients of the apostle's appeals, Christoph Stenschke, a New Testament and early church scholar, observes that "Christian charity is not just a status-enhancing project for the wealthy upper-class members and of no concern to other Christians."⁵

Paul's arguments

Amid the global crisis, Paul presented, among other arguments, that participation in the collection as an act of charity was both a means to foster unity and an exchange principle.

Paul refers to acts of charity as sending "relief" and defines the recipients as the

“poor” (Acts 11:29; Rom. 15:26). Acts of charity were already common in the early church (Acts 2:44, 45), but Paul’s approach was unique and revolutionary. He introduced the notion of “translocal” charity, where conditions or events at one place have an immediate impact on other connected places. During those days, church members employed funds locally to assist the needy in the community, an act that often resulted in public recognition and honor.⁶ The book of Acts testifies to that reality by mentioning Barnabas, Dorcas, and Cornelius as benefactors of their local communities.

In contrast, Paul invited believers outside of Judaea to give to people they did not know personally and who would have no chance to reciprocate or express gratitude. By doing so, he was introducing the concept of interchurch solidarity, of giving beyond specific borders.

During a crisis, more than at other times, naked self-interest—seeking one’s own safety and benefit—easily comes to the fore. Paul’s appeals call us to resist this natural inclination and point to the importance of global giving as a Christian ideal.

Closely associated with the concept of translocal charity, Paul also argues that the collection is meant to foster unity.⁷ Stenschke views the apostle’s appeals as a statement against the ancient anti-Judaism that was prevailing in the Empire. This collection affirms the oneness of believers from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Besides the cross-cultural element, it aimed to bridge the gap between the poor and the rich in God’s church. We read in 2 Corinthians 8:14 that “the goal is equality” (NIV). New Testament researcher Julien Ogereau explains that it is not about an “exact equalization” but rather an invitation “to achieve a relative, proportional equality by restoring a certain balance between need and surplus.”⁸ It was a demonstration of unity beyond words.

Even crisis can provide an additional opportunity for God’s church to strengthen the bonds of unity. This principle has been demonstrated by the Inter-European Division’s decision to invite unions less severely hit financially during the COVID-19 pandemic to help those most heavily affected.

Another argument put forward by Paul for the collection is the exchange principle: those who have received spiritual blessings should reciprocate by sharing their material blessings (Rom. 15:27). He uses the identical rationale to

justify the financial support that those who preach the gospel are entitled to receive (1 Cor. 9:7–14). Interestingly, the exchange principle rests both on the idea of obligation-indebtedness of the givers and on a voluntary motive, an action that “pleases” the givers (Rom. 15:26, 27, KJV). The same response thus combines goodwill and duty.

The current COVID-19 pandemic crisis has led, in many places, to a more significant drop in offerings than in tithe. A possible explanation is members’ ignorance that the exchange principle applies to both tithe and offerings. A prevalent conception considers offerings to be solely a voluntary act with no obligation for the believer. A renewed emphasis on the broadness of the exchange principle could correct the disproportionate decline in offerings.

Paul’s practical approach

Three of Paul’s strategies especially deserve our attention: respecting the giver, providing encouragement, and removing possible hindrances.

1. Respecting the giver. Although convinced of the necessity for the collection, Paul refrained from coercion. He spoke about the Macedonians participating entirely “on their own” (2 Cor. 8:4, VOICE). He invited the believers in Corinth to present “what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion” (2 Cor. 9:7, NIV) and not “grudgingly given” (v. 5).

Furthermore, as a sign of respect for the individual condition of each participant, Paul did not establish a fixed amount, not even a minimum one, that each participant had to contribute, thus leaving it to the discretion of each individual (2 Cor. 8:12). Instead, he invited the believers to use their personal income as a reference point to establish how much they should give: “Set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income” (1 Cor. 16:2, NIV). Nevertheless, generous giving was valued and praised (2 Cor. 9:11, 13). To avoid undue pressure at the time of collection, he encouraged them to plan their contributions in advance and give regularly (1 Cor. 16:2).

During a financial crisis, people can easily perceive appeals for giving as pressure, resulting in resistance and withdrawal. Paul goes to great lengths to prevent such an outcome. The concept of proportional giving decided solely by the contributor, not a fixed or minimum amount, would be relevant today. In addition, teaching the principles of planning in advance and systematic giving, rather than making last-minute decisions

to give, may help many to materialize what they have purposed in their hearts to offer.

2. *Providing encouragement.* Paul gave extensive encouragement to his readers. He employed the word *charis* (grace) no less than eight times to speak about how God enables the believers to give and the privilege of participating in the collection (2 Cor. 8:1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 19; 9:8, 14; cf. 1 Cor. 16:3). The power to give comes from the One who invites us to give. Once believers consecrate themselves to God, the propensity to give emerges naturally (2 Cor. 8:5). They are transformed into the image of the divine Giver.

The apostle elaborates on the reward that awaits the one who gives (2 Cor. 9:6). In his understanding, “generosity is as beneficial to the giver as to the receiver.”⁹ It never goes unnoticed in the eyes of God. Paul uses the expression *pasan autarkeia echontes*, translated as “having all that you need,” to describe the benefit of participating in giving (2 Cor. 9:8). The word *autarkeia*, “need,” captures both the idea of sufficiency and contentment.¹⁰ The needs of the giver are met, and they are content in their condition. It represents a desirable condition during a time marked by scarcity of resources.

Paul also points to the example set by Christ, who offered Himself for the spiritually needy (2 Cor. 8:9). Believers are called to emulate the same spirit that was in Christ: to give is to be Christlike.

3. *Removing hindrances.* In the exercise of Paul’s ministry and the collection effort, some members had raised doubts about his integrity.¹¹ In response, he energetically addressed the issue through both reassuring words and concrete actions. He was fully conscious that “an accidental mismanagement of the offerings would damage his reputation as a spiritual leader and would give credibility to the accusations raised against him by false apostles.”¹² In one statement, he declares: “Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly, we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2, NIV). Furthermore, Paul put in place measures for himself and for others to maintain the highest confidence regarding the handling of the collection: “Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me” (1 Cor. 16:3, 4, NIV).

Grace to give in time of need

Times of crisis often become periods of heightened suspicion, fake news, and conspiracy theories. This association is beyond our scope here. However, Paul’s efforts to maintain and build credibility are very instructive. Our present crisis is definitely not the time to push the issue of personal and institutional trust under the rug.

The ministry of encouraging members to partner with God must happen in and out of season. Paul upheld the challenge during a global crisis, and we can learn much from his practice. Let us not underestimate the convincing power of God’s grace at any time.



- 1 A version of this article was first published as Aniel Barbe, “Giving Appeals During a Global Crisis,” *Dynamic Steward* 24, no. 3 (July-September 2021): 7–9.
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- 4 Daryn Graham, “The Genesis of the Jerusalem Donation,” *Themelios, An International Journal for Students of Theological and Religious Studies* 45, no. 1 (April 2020): 62–64, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-genesis-of-the-jerusalem-donation/>.
- 5 Stenschke, “Leadership Challenges,” 6.
- 6 Stenschke, 3.
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- 10 *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*, electronic database (Biblesoft, 2011).
- 11 Paul B. Duff, “Paul’s Collection for the Poor in the Church at Jerusalem,” *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*, accessed November 23, 2021, https://global.oup.com/obso/focus/focus_on_paul_collection/.
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Lori Cicarelli Stotko, MPS, is a hospice volunteer and grief recovery specialist residing in Santa Maria, California, United States.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

Church ministry for end-of-life care: Lessons from a pandemic

Never did I imagine at the outset of the COVID-19 lockdown its ramifications: to experience one of the most challenging times of my life, not only personally but also professionally, as a spiritual care chaplain and an end-of-life and grief recovery specialist. With my belief that no one should ever die alone, my heart still breaks because I could not be that calming presence for my mother at the end of her life. Not to be holding her hand and praying over her still brings me an overwhelming soul sadness.

My communication with Mom in the intensive care unit was restricted due to limited resources. Our talks on the phone or virtual visits over the last two weeks of her life were few and far between. And, as never before, I understood the challenges of end-of-life care.

Family advocates

“Providing support to families before and after the death of a patient can help mitigate a poor bereavement outcome. . . .

“. . . Communication skills and trusting relationships are core elements of palliative care; both are even more important now given the increased distress and social distancing associated with the pandemic.”¹

With so many unknowns about the future, when loved ones come to the end of their lives, how can church members support one another, especially if restrictions are extended and resources remain limited? Church members can extend Christ to one another by being a compassionate presence and acting as family advocates to help those facing end-of-life challenges. Key members can help make arrangements for families to connect with their loved ones and help them prepare for that encounter.

The following are a few things that church members can do to assist families in preparing for a memorable visit with their loved one.

Reminisce about meaningful memories.

Reminiscing is like show-and-tell in school. When Mom was first admitted and still coherent, my

brother dropped off family photos at the hospital to place at Mom's bedside and a special blanket to wrap around her with love. "Surrounding a loved one with pictures and mementos, . . . playing music, . . . and recalling life stories promote dignity and comfort all the way through life's final moments."²

During a phone call when Mom was still coherent, I played music from a Christmas ornament she gave me the year prior. It brought an abundance of joy as we reminisced together. On a later virtual call accompanied by my three siblings, I shared a photo book Mom created of Christmases past from our childhood memories. It sparked conversation and laughter. Even though Mom was now unresponsive, I knew she could still hear us because she stopped her restless moving and moaning and lay peacefully in her hospital bed. It helped turn a very sad situation into a joyous time of celebration. We ended each call with prayer, bringing a sense of peace and comfort to us all. Studies show reminiscing provides comfort and a sense of security for people facing severe loss and emotional distress.³

Talk about life accomplishments. On another call, it was inspiring to share how Mom made a difference in this world and in our lives, what she meant to us, and how she reflected Christ while raising us, grateful for the godly role model as a mother and woman after God's own heart. Again, she was unresponsive, but I know she heard us. Research indicates that a life review process of reminiscing on the past can help patients face death more peacefully as it reaffirms a sense of identity, uniqueness, self-worth, and accomplishment.⁴

Restrictions allowing, churches can offer activities directly to end-of-life patients that will bring comfort by (1) supporting them in prayer; (2) helping them write letters to loved ones for significant life events they will miss such as birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays; (3) addressing areas of unforgiveness and areas to extend forgiveness and let go of past hurts; (4) reading a book or the Bible to them while they rest. The Word heals the heart by restoring joy, peace, and hope. And, (5) helping to create a memory book, scrapbook, or prayer book celebrating their life's journey.

We all want to live well, but we need to finish well too. To celebrate Mom's life with her while she was still with us was invaluable. It not only helped comfort Mom in the hospital but also helped us process our grief and left us with a beautiful memory at the end of her life, even when we could not physically be there with her.

Spiritual support

The death of a loved one is considered the most powerful stressor, with bereaved individuals at increased risk of adverse mental and physical health problems.⁵ Restricted access to a patient and not being able to say goodbye are associated with a prolonged grief disorder and PTSD in bereavement.⁶

I believe bereavement care is an integral component of quality end-of-life care. To continue walking alongside families during the aftermath is vital for the healing process so that grief does not become pathological. Here are ways in which churches can provide additional support to families.

The Center for Loss and Life Transition says, "Grief is what you think and feel on the inside after someone you love dies. Mourning is the outward expression of those thoughts and feelings. To mourn is to be an active participant in our grief journeys. We all grieve when someone we love dies, but if we are to heal, we must also mourn."⁷ Scripture says: " 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted' " (Matt. 5:4, NIV).

Mourning is the action following grief that brings comfort, connecting us to others who are also mourning and bridging our past to the present. We can mourn through written, verbal, or physical activities, expressing ideas, thoughts, and beliefs that help us transition from pain and chaos to wholeness and healing. We have daily rituals or routines to help us process life. We need rituals, or actions during our time of loss, to help us process our pain.⁸

Making space to listen provides a safe place to vent, which helps those grieving with their emotions and pain. To be an empathetic listener reflects Christ. Listen with your entire body, giving your undivided attention; turn off any distractions. Reflecting back what you heard without judgment or unsolicited advice will validate feelings. Save advice for those who ask; most often, people just want to be heard and affirmed. This is healing to the soul.

When in pain, we crave connectedness. Those experiencing grief seek comfort from community. Churches can offer community through grief-support groups or help to find local support resources. Many organizations, such as hospitals and churches, offer this kind of group support. Encourage families not to isolate, as it leads to depression and anxiety. Help surround them with those who love and support them, ensuring that they are not alone.

Encourage with practical application of spiritual truths because they will carry families to victory through the deepest loss. “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor. 4:16–18, NIV).

Access to spiritual support at the end of life is important for many patients and families, whether or not they are religious; but this is an aspect of care somewhat neglected in acute hospitals.⁹ Research studies indicate religious

and spiritual beliefs are an important factor and predictor of outcomes during a time of grieving. Those who profess stronger spiritual beliefs seem to resolve their grief more quickly and completely after the death of a person close to them than do those with none of these beliefs.¹⁰

Compassionate presence

God’s mission for each of us is to advance the kingdom by reflecting Him, to be His heart and hands. What a wonderful opportunity to extend Christ as a compassionate presence through end-of-life ministry, bringing the kingdom forward on earth as it is in heaven. After the death of Mom—in less than perfect circumstances—I know just how important that care really is.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

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SCAN ME



Luca Zagara, MA, is a pastor serving the Newport, Hereford, and Llandrindod Wells Seventh-day Adventist churches in Wales, United Kingdom.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

Diaconal church in COVID-19 times

In most countries of the world, the church has been greatly affected by COVID-19. Many local congregations have been forced to rethink their way of doing and being church. New ways to effectively impact and connect with the community are currently being explored—both on a material and spiritual level.¹ This article will assess some of the characteristics of the diaconal ministry that, if adequately understood and integrated by local churches, can increase their impact on the wider community during a crisis, such as that brought on by the coronavirus outbreak. It offers an example of how ministers can train church members to follow the first-century church model of service in a variety of situations.

What *diakonia* is all about

The English words *diaconal* and *deacon* find their roots in the Greek noun *diakonia*. This term can be defined as “service” or “ministry,” as well as “relief” and “aid.”² Some have rendered the verb *diakoneo* (“to be a servant” or “to minister”) as “to have responsibility to help others” or “to be responsible to take care of the needs of believers.”³ Etymologically, it is thought that *diakonia* comes from *dia*, “through,” and *konis*, “dust,” suggesting a service done “close to the ground, among the grassroots.”⁴

In the New Testament, the verb *diakoneo* is used in relation to the serving of

food (Luke 10:40; Acts 6:1); Paul uses it when he speaks about his ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 20:24; 21:19). The deacon’s job description, illustrated in 1 Timothy 3:8–13, portrays someone whose role is to attend primarily to the practical needs of the church. The centrality of service as mission—and the first step in understanding the diaconal dimension of the church—is revealed in Ephesians 4:11–13. “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service [*diakonia*], so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (NIV).

In light of this text, the function of the diaconal church is not simply reduced to charitable acts. A more spiritual and pastoral purpose emerges from Paul’s words—it is indeed a more holistic resolution.⁵ In fact, as Mariano Avila notices, in *diakonia*, “there is a stronger approximation to the concept of a service of love.”⁶

The role of the diaconal church is, then, to create a caring community that links the needs and burdens of people with the local congregation. Therefore, the volunteer, minister, or deacon becomes a social intermediary, agent, and symbol of *communitas*.⁷ Because of the diaconal church’s strong connection to the community, the

World Council of Churches affirms that “the role of the local congregation in diaconal work is to speak in situations of crisis for the needs of the whole community and not on specific interests. Local congregations have a certain power and can give safety and raise issues. Governments and local authorities recognize churches and specialised ministries as important forces and part of civil society.”⁸

The way in which diaconal ministries take form varies considerably. However, by evangelizing in the church and community, they all share the same pastoral nature and spiritual goal: the desire to “create new experiences of solidarity, relatedness, and dealing with differences”⁹ in networks of cooperation.

Linking *diakonia* and *koinonia*

The following case study reveals the relational dimension of a diaconal ministry by indicating some of the practical implications that have remarkably impacted and involved a local community during the COVID-19 crisis. One Vision is an action group part of the Community Chaplaincy Service at Stanborough Park Seventh-day Adventist Church in Watford, United Kingdom. One Vision’s mission statement is “to create a network and community of people . . . and bring together all the beliefs, cultures, smaller charities, non-profit organisations.”¹⁰ Their team is formed entirely by volunteers: some are members from different church denominations, while others are not religious at all.

Before the first nationwide coronavirus lockdown in March 2020, One Vision had already been empowering the local community in Watford by providing safeguarding courses, mental-health first-aid training, and free daily meals to the homeless.¹¹ Soon after COVID-19, they implemented new strategies to meet the needs of those most affected. In partnership with Members of Parliament and Borough Council officials, as well as the Co-operative Food Stores, they have been able to deliver hot meals to schools and food parcels to the elderly and vulnerable.¹² Many young people have started volunteering for One Vision, and their efforts have been officially recognized and awarded, creating a sense of belonging and a stronger willingness to serve. In addition, One Vision volunteers have provided “items of personal protection equipment made by a secondary school”¹³ and also supported businesses and shops that help National Health Service workers.¹⁴

As a natural result of addressing the neighbors’ concrete needs (*diakonia*), many people have had the opportunity to meet one another, resulting in a new form of fellowship (*koinonia*) that is, indeed, flourishing. One of the long-time volunteers of One Vision has shared her experience: “I feel I have become a part of this special family here during my time of this One Vision operation and would like to become a member of Stanborough Park Church. I am very happy with the beliefs of the Adventist church and they resonate very well with me and all it means to be a Christian.”¹⁵

The volunteer became a member in October 2020. By showing solidarity and demonstrating generosity, the One Vision project is an example of a diaconal ministry that centers its theology on the transforming power of hope.¹⁶ This hope can “transform a person spiritually in such a way that a new dignity is adopted and a new identity is formed.”¹⁷

Incarnation and proclamation

In the case presented above, the diaconal elements of participation and collaboration have created a deep sense of belonging. One of the benefits of the diaconal church during a crisis like COVID-19 is that, by providing for the physical needs, a “poverty of the heart”¹⁸ that is a deeper existential need in human existence is also awakened. This poverty, or thirst, of heart, can be satisfied as the servanthood role of the church surpasses the religious routines. The coming together as a mission-shaped ministry and community allows a shift in reality—a relational reality. The core identity of deacons, ministers, and volunteers becomes the revelation, to others, of who God is. Reading *diakonia* not just in functional terms but relationally has the power to personally involve everyone in a graceful and forgiving experience with God.¹⁹

The apostle Paul had been entrusted by God with the ministry (*diakonia*) of reconciliation (2 Cor. 3:6; 5:18). The diaconal church is not about “doing ‘something’ to people or taking responsibility for people, but it is to live with people in the presence of God and the reality of their society.”²⁰ Anglican ecclesologist Paul Avis interprets *diakonia* as a “God-given, Christ-centred, gospel-focused ministry of proclamation,”²¹ implying the rise of a diaconal ecclesiology that is not simply centered on service for humans and love for the neighbor but as being life-giving and whole-making, ultimately gospel- or salvation-oriented.

“Wholemaking is inherent to creation because, although it may not always be visible to us from a quotidian perspective, God’s intention remains the salvation of all creation—human and non-human alike.”²² Therefore, those aspects of the diaconal church that reveal the true essence of God’s salvation and forgiveness through the empowerment of hope are the features that can be considered beneficial in times of crisis.

Beyond the walls

The practical consequences of diakonia reveal a deeper theological insight: the calling

to servanthood and the spirit of generosity is the foundation for a diaconal theology of hope. The empowerment of hope, understood as an ecclesial strategy, rests on the “participation of people to be conscious role-players in their own transformation within the communities they find themselves in.”²³ Individuals, part of a local congregation that has expanded its diaconal mandate beyond the walls of the church, will be able to impact families, schools, businesses, and organizations, wherever they are.²⁴ In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the church has the opportunity to develop a *diakonia* of hope.



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A strange combination

I so often hear of beasts, dragons, days, and wars drawn from the Word of God. I was thrilled to see the article “The Uplifted Christ” (Edwin Reynolds) in September 2021’s *Ministry* magazine. This article followed the admonition of Jesus as outlined in John 12 (“I, if I be lifted up. . . I will draw all men to Me,” v. 32) and concentrated on His substitutionary death and redemption of us snake-bitten humans. It was a brazen serpent used in the illustration, and brass is made of two combined metals. Jesus, too, was a strange combination of God and Man. Not only that, He took our sin upon Himself and became “sin for us” so we could “look and live.” What a beautiful gift for all of us. Thanks for the article.

—Ray Eaton, New South Wales, Australia

Not by accident

Thanks for the article “Proclamation and Discipleship: God’s Strategic Planning to Evangelize the World” (Kim Papaioannou, September 2021). The author carefully highlights the distinctions between Matthew 24:14 and Matthew 28:19, 20. These distinctions are noteworthy. He also highlights the important discipleship counsel we would do well to heed. The biblical concept of discipleship must take priority among the people of God if we are to fulfill the

gospel commission. Jesus used the shepherd/sheep and the vine/branch metaphors to illustrate the relational nature of discipleship. Every follower will become a disciple maker, no exceptions. Clearly, Matthew 24:14 and 28:19, 20 must be coupled with Matthew 4:19.

The author of the article clearly sees a distinction between a person who is a member and the one who is a disciple. Unfortunately, there’s no call in Scripture to membership. Truth is, we have too many members and too few disciples.

It seems to this writer that Scripture supports the idea that the moment a person receives Jesus as Lord and Savior, that person is ready for baptism. Consider the Philippian jailer. He was baptized the same night of his confession of the Lordship of Christ. How much doctrine did he really know? How much teaching did he get? Also, consider Cornelius and the people there who heard Peter’s message. Peter himself said, there’s nothing that should hinder their baptism after the Holy Spirit filled them. How much “doctrine” did they know?

Salvation is based on a relationship with the risen Christ. The moment a person receives Christ, like the believers at Pentecost, they are ready for baptism. I think that New Testament believers and the apostles would be alarmed [at] our practice of 13 baptismal vows and our knowledge-based approach to discipleship. Yes, we must

teach, and teaching will always be ongoing, so every congregation must have a clear discipleship-making process that includes an ongoing process to help disciples mature. However, we can no longer convey the idea that salvation is knowledge-based. Just as in a family, every individual is at a unique stage of maturity, so it will also be in the church of God. Could it be our intolerance and desire to clean the fish that drive us to attempt to sanitize new believers before they are baptized?

—Max Ferguson, email (Partial) 

Author’s response

Many thanks for your kind letter, brother Max, that states: “the moment a person receives Jesus as Lord and Savior, that person is ready for baptism.” I agree fully. To accept Jesus as Savior and Lord, a person should understand the salvation Jesus offers, and also His Lordship over the believer’s life. In cases of prompt baptism, individuals were usually well versed in Judaism and therefore familiar with Biblical teaching. Baptism is entry into a covenant relationship with God, into the family of God. Bottom line: the more thorough the understanding, the firmer the commitment will be. Allow me to add a clarifying point on the member/disciple relationship. In the path to discipleship, membership through baptism is a most important step. I am grateful for every single member in the family of God, and look forward to ongoing growth into discipleship. [Kim Papaioannou]



Ryan Rogers is the pastor of the Palmer Seventh-day Adventist Church in Palmer, Alaska, United States.



Winning the War in Your Mind

by Craig Groeschel, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Books, 2021.

As a pastor and content creator, when I come across content that is exceptionally valuable, something happens. I get the urge to preach it myself. When I read Craig Groeschel's book *Winning the War in Your Mind*, that urge came midway through the first chapter. The book pinpoints crucial areas where the Bible and modern science come together regarding the mind. The message is particularly relevant in our current culture, and the book is exceptionally clear.

Groeschel states that our lives are always moving in the direction of our strongest thoughts. So, if we want to change our lives, we have to change our thinking. The book is structured around four principles for changing the way we think. Each principle is supported with practical exercises.

Part 1 explores the replacement principle. We must remove lies and replace them with truth. Lies are the devil's weapon. Our defense is the truth of God's Word. Behavior modification falls short if it fails to uproot the lie that produces the behavior. When we believe a lie, it affects our life as if it were true. We become trapped and controlled by our false perceptions of reality.

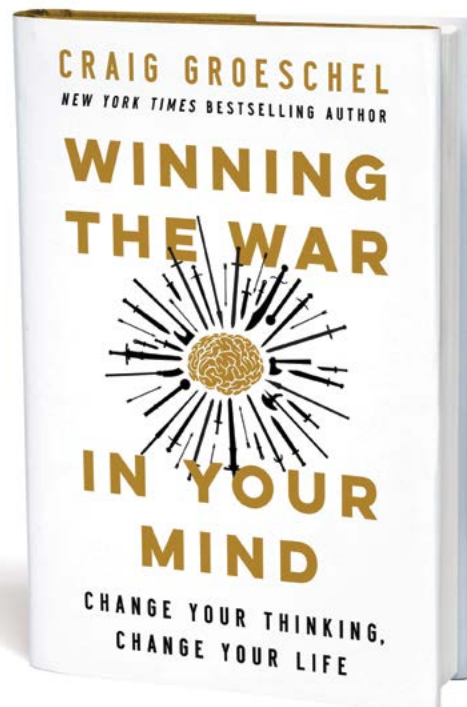
Part 2 explores the rewire principle. Satan does not have to be creative if he can just be repetitive. When a lie is repeated often enough, we start to believe it. We form neuropathways for those lies to travel. We cannot fight against the way neuropathways' work. Instead, we need to be intentional about creating

neuropathways based on truth. God created neuropathways to be good things. We can replace our unhelpful ruts with trenches of truth.

Part 3 explores the reframe principle. We cannot control what happens, but we can choose how we process what happens. We all have lenses, filters, and cognitive biases that do not always serve us well. We can choose a negative perspective on almost anything. If we accept the lenses God provides, we can reframe the worst of situations and see what Groeschel refers to as "God's collateral goodness."

Part 4 explores the rejoice principle. An active feature of the war in our mind is the incessant battle between the prefrontal cortex (the brain's reasoning center) and the amygdala (the brain's fight or flight center). The rejoice principle leverages the neurological benefits of prayer and praise. Praise moves us from a focus on the presence of our problems to a focus on the presence of God. Prayer and praise check the adrenaline-pulsing panic response of the amygdala.

We do not have to look far to find people filled with anxiety, letting negative thoughts overwhelm and take control. If we are honest, we are all in this struggle. The author insists that to win the war in our mind, we must engage it. We have to do the hard work of thinking about what we think about. We must be proactive about taking our thoughts to Christ so that our thoughts do not take us captive. Because there is a war in every mind, everyone would benefit from reading this book to help them win that war. 🙏





Pandemic hits Bible societies hard

STUTT GART, GERMANY

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic had a massive impact on the worldwide distribution of the Bible, according to a recent report by the United Bible Societies (UBS). The UBS recently shared that in 2020, only 30 million complete Bibles were distributed, a quarter less than in 2019.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has severely restricted the work of many Bible societies,”

Horst Scheurenbrand, director of international programs for the German Bible Society, said. “Numerous projects ended up being scrapped, and events had to be canceled due to contact bans. Also, production and supply chains were temporarily restricted,” Scheurenbrand explained.

According to the Scripture Distribution Report, besides the 30 million copies of full Bibles distributed in 2020, there was also a significant decrease in the distribution of New Testaments and other Bible-related publications. For instance, only 5 million New Testaments were distributed in 2020, compared to 15 million copies in 2019.

Also, the distribution of Bible-related publications went down from 261 million in 2019 to just

155 million during the first year of the pandemic. Overall, 2020 saw the distribution of 191 million pieces of biblical writings, which was about 125 million fewer than the year before the beginning of the pandemic.

In the first year of the pandemic, digital Bible editions represented a growing Bible sales and distribution segment, the report stated. In 2020, 38 percent, or more than one in three Bibles, were downloaded in a digital format. The number of Bibles issued for computers, tablets, and smartphones more than doubled compared to the previous year. The most frequent downloads were in Brazil, followed by the United States, Mexico, Colombia, and the Philippines.

“The worldwide distribution figures reflect the acute crisis of many Bible societies during the pandemic,” Scheurenbrand said. Of the current 160 Bible societies, 88 have been in danger of closing during the pandemic. Their continued existence was secured only through an international Solidarity Fund.

The annual Scripture Distribution Report considers only the figures of publishers and organizations that belong to the United Bible Societies, an international association of 160 national Bible societies. Bible societies are active in 184 countries. [Adventistischer Pressedienst (APD) and *Adventist Review*]

Wisconsin Adventists give Afghans a warm welcome

FORT MCCOY, WISCONSIN, UNITED STATES

The desperate airlift out of Kabul, Afghanistan, had barely kicked into gear in August 2021 when a call went out to the state of Wisconsin’s Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) group. The sudden collapse of the Afghan government created an urgent need for clothing to help the displaced Afghans arriving in the United States with only the clothes they were wearing.

Wisconsin Conference Adventist Community Services (ACS) director **Alice Garrett** learned

that 12,600 migrants were arriving at Fort McCoy, an army base some 170 miles (270 kilometers) from Milwaukee. In this location, the refugees would be processed before most were dispersed to other states.

Garrett emailed the Wisconsin pastors and Seventh-day Adventist churches asking for new clothes for men, women, and children. “The response was overwhelming,” Garrett said. “Pastors and members responded, and we delivered 95 boxes with an estimate of 2,000 items. What a blessing!”

Since the need for clothes remained high after the first effort, Garrett decided to request another clothing drive, this time for a longer period. She dashed off another email to pastors, ACS leaders,

and certified volunteers to start another collection, this time focusing on winter clothing, such as jackets, boots, and warm sweatshirts.

Once again, a crush of items came in. Volunteers sorted about 1,300 items and packaged the goods in 94 boxes labeled with the contents. This brought the total to 189 boxes and 3,300 items collected in just one month.

During this period, more than US\$10,000 in monetary donations was received from Wisconsin church members and individuals in Michigan and Minnesota. "Every penny will go to help these people," Garrett said. "We have and are continuing to purchase what is the immediate need, and that includes a lot of winter coats, underwear, toddlers' clothes, and infant formula."



Photo: Lake Union Herald

Derrick Lea, NAD ACS director, said, "I rely on Alice and her team of dedicated team members to rally our church members to respond when calls for help go out. It's a privilege to work with those willing to be the hands and feet of Jesus in their local communities."

As of September 29, more than 300,000 clothing items had been processed and Fort McCoy is transitioning into resettlement and relocating the refugees. [Alice Garrett, with *Lake Union Herald* staff]

Adventist leaders pause to remember church workers lost to COVID-19

SILVER SPRING, MARYLAND, UNITED STATES


Members of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee paused during Annual Council meetings on October 8, 2021, to remember scores of church workers and missionaries who became infected by and ultimately lost their lives to COVID-19, starting in August 2020.

The Adventist Mission office put together a video that included the names, ages, and positions of some of the workers who passed away during the pandemic. "As we know all too well, COVID-19 has killed millions, and we have also lost many Adventist believers and church workers, our colleagues in mission to the pandemic," the video's narrator said. "These dedicated workers fell in the line of duty, carrying a message of hope to a dying world, a message of hope in [Jesus'] soon return."

The nine-minute video, which General Conference president **Ted N. C. Wilson** described as "an amazingly touching presentation," opened

by showcasing the experience of missionary **Manuel Bellosillo**. Bellosillo, a 67-year-old Filipino physician in Cameroon, was the first to become infected and die from the virus in August 2020.

The showcase list included pastors, administrators, evangelists, health workers, teachers, literature evangelists, and office workers. The disease affected not only many seasoned workers but also young missionaries. Among the workers were 42-year-old **David Apu Baroi**, an Adventist mission volunteer in the Bangladesh Union; 31-year-old **Levi Hernandez**, a pastor in the Central Tabasco Conference in Mexico; and 20-year-old **Ingrid Garcia**, who was a women and children's ministries director within the East Andean Venezuela Mission.

The tribute closed with an invitation for church members to look forward to the day when, according to the Bible's teachings, those who died in the Lord will be raised to new life and welcomed to live with God. "Well done, good and faithful servant," the video's narrator read, quoting Jesus' words in Matthew 25:23. "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." And it closed with, "Until we meet again on that glorious day." [Marcos Paseggi, *Adventist Review*] 



Robert Zdor, PhD, is a professor of biology, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.



When CPR is needed

Over the past few years, my wife and I renewed our CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) certification. As I revisited the procedures and mindset of one working on behalf of another in need, I could not but help think of some parallels to church life. *Disclaimer:* I have never actually had to implement my CPR skills.

1. CPR requires intense focus, effort, and initiative on the part of the one implementing CPR

The one in need typically does not request CPR but relies on someone who is prepared and equipped to take the initiative to get involved and start the process of resuscitation.

As we reach out to those in need spiritually, we need to be prepared to invest individual effort.

2. CPR requires interacting with someone in ways that you normally do not interact with them

The actual process of CPR (chest compressions and rescue breathing) requires you to touch and interact with someone in ways that may seem uncomfortable and downright scary. There is the possibility of touching their body fluids and getting “dirty.”

As we reach out to those in need spiritually, we need to be prepared to have some uncomfortable and complicated conversations as we address issues that overlap with someone’s experiences, emotions, and hurts.

3. CPR is not done the same way for all those in need

How I apply chest compressions is tailored to the person in need: I don’t push on an infant’s chest in the same way as I would an adult’s. If something is blocking the victim’s airway that needs to be removed by hand or if abdominal thrusts are required to eject an object causing choking, I need to consider whether the person is pregnant or obese. The end goal is the same, but how I arrive there probably will differ based on the individual person.

As we reach out to those in need spiritually, we need to be prepared to customize our approach.

People react differently to different approaches, but our end goal should be spiritual renewal and redemption.

4. The goal in CPR is to maintain life long enough so that more qualified individuals (i.e., emergency medical services) can take over the care of the individual

In every case of CPR I can think of, the rescuer should initiate a call for help: he or she should not go solo with no hope of additional help. Use whatever tools are at your disposal to make the call.

As we reach out to those in need spiritually, be prepared to seek divine help and work to connect them to spiritually grounded individuals who can join the “rescue” effort. In some cases, professional help may be part of the recovery process.

People react differently to different approaches, but our end goal should be spiritual renewal and redemption.

5. If other CPR-trained individuals are on the scene, team up in your efforts

Draw on the strengths of others who are knowledgeable and take turns in your resuscitation efforts. Remind each other of effective CPR methods and work together to optimize the rescue.

As we reach out to those in need spiritually, we need to be ready to team up with others who are working toward the same goal and communicate so that our efforts are coordinated and complementary to each other’s.

The ability to intervene on behalf of someone else truly provides an opportunity to make a difference—both medically and spiritually. May God grant us wisdom as we work as His ambassadors in this world of need. 🙏

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