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## PERSPECTIVE

# PERSONAL THOUGHTS ON DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

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**M**ost of you know the tragedy that has been my life in the last few months. Just in case you were hiding under a rock, let me summarize. On June 9, 2022, I was called to take the responsibility of being the director of Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries for the General Conference. On June 12, 2022, my beloved wife of 30 years died after a 10-month battle with cancer. And just like that, I went from one of the highest places in my ministry to the lowest place in a span of only three days. More than ever before, the topics of our two last issues of *The*

*Adventist Chaplain* seem like they have been written just for me.

I am fully aware of my audience here. You chaplains out there are all experiencing a wave of empathy with my daughter and me as you read this. I want to take this moment to thank everyone for that, especially those who have reached out with texts, emails, and phone calls, expressing condolences and love for both of us. The grief of losing my beloved Anabel is still very raw. Mornings are especially difficult for me. There are no words to explain the “kick in the stomach” every morning when I



## CONTENTS

- 2 | Perspective
- 4 | Reflections on Death and Afterlife
- 14 | An Outsider’s Journey
- 18 | Coming Alongside the Prisoners
- 24 | ACM World

wake up and realize that to my right side, there's an empty space. The shower has become my "safe place" to allow the emotions to flow as salty tears are dissolved into the hot water dripping from my head.

Can I be honest for a moment here? It is at these moments that I would like to have enough faith to believe what my fellow Christians shout with experiences like this one. It would be nice, for my own sake, to be able to believe that Anabel is somehow "looking down on me" from somewhere. Yet, I find it also very cruel that she would stay away from my side seeing how much I am suffering from her death. That does not make sense!

As a student of the Bible, I am fully aware that there is no biblical evidence to support such a position, other than forcing a doctrinal interpretation on a parable of Jesus. Therefore, I go to the source and find that my only hope is found in the reality that Jesus conquered death, and one day soon the sting of death will be defeated forever. In my grief, I am so looking forward to the

fulfillment of the promise that says, "I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, 'Look, God's home is now among His people! He will live with them, and they will be His people. God Himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.'"<sup>1</sup>

In this issue of *The Adventist Chaplain*, you and I will be reconnected with our belief regarding this matter. I hope that you will find it a great tool to experience and share hope. In the meantime, I will continue to ask Jesus to help me every morning when I open my eyes. I will also continue to let my morning showers be a safe place to express my sadness, and to continue to be in Christ as I wait for the fulfillment of His promise to come back and put an end to the suffering of death. "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Revelation

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 22:20, New Living Translation

## WHAT'S



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- Copy your Union and Division ACM Directors.
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# *Reflections on* **DEATH and AFTERLIFE**

By **Alberto R. Timm**, Associate Director, Biblical Research Institute—  
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

**M**any people live today as if life and death are mere accidents and as if one's afterlife is a distant nebulous subject not to be concerned about. After all, why should one be worried about his or her future destiny if ignorance on this matter can help us to better enjoy the present?

In the last stanza of his poem "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College," the English poet Thomas Gray ponders,

*"Yet, ah! why should they know  
their fate,  
Since sorrow never comes too late,  
And happiness too swiftly flies?  
Thought would destroy their paradise.  
No more;—where ignorance is bliss,  
'Tis folly to be wise."*<sup>1</sup>

But the German poet and novelist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe alerts us that "nothing is more terrible than ignorance in action."<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the original meaning of this



*"If every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."*

statement, we must recognize that our existence is too precious, and death is too real for us to simply ignore them or even play with them as trivial matters. As Christians grounded in God's Word, we need a clear understanding of these subjects for our own benefit and to help those who are trying to find convincing answers to their existential concerns.

In this article, we'll examine (1) some conflicting perspectives of death and afterlife, (2) the biblical

view of death and afterlife, and (3) some counterfeit experiences. This brief overview is further expanded in my book entitled, *On Death, Dying, and the Future Hope* (2022),<sup>3</sup> which addresses not only these topics but also several correlated ones.

## CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES

The human drama with death and dying began in the Garden of Eden when Eve and Adam decided

between two conflicting statements. God had warned them, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”<sup>4</sup> But the seductive serpent—Satan’s medium—counterargued, “You will not surely die.”<sup>5</sup> Sin came into the world when Eve relied on the word of the serpent (instead of the word of God) and acted accordingly.

By sinning, Adam and Eve received their consequent death sentence. But at the same time God’s mercy intervened and the *execution* of that sentence—in the sense of ceasing to exist—was delayed. At the same time, God revealed to them His amazing redemptive plan through the forthcoming Messiah<sup>6</sup> and illustrated the plan with the bloody sacrifice of an innocent animal, whose skin God used to cover their nakedness.<sup>7</sup>

Tragically, the two conflicting statements—God’s unpleasant warning, “You shall surely die,”<sup>8</sup> and Satan’s seductive words, “You will not surely die”<sup>9</sup>—were not restrained to the Garden of Eden but continued to reverberate loudly throughout human history. God’s trustworthy assertion about the mortality of the whole human being was unfolded in the Scriptures and acknowledged by many Christians through the ages.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, Satan’s widespread sophism of the natural immortality of the soul became the very foundation of all major world religions and of most Christian denominations, as well as of countless mystical philosophies.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most influential expressions of the immortalist theory is the *dualistic* (Western) worldview, with its strong distinction between the material and the spiritual realms. For dualists, the

person is formed by a mortal body that hosts an immortal soul or spirit which remains consciously alive after death. Rooted in Greek philosophy (especially Platonic dualism), this notion took over postapostolic Christianity and was popularized by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri in his famous work *The Divine Comedy*. Dante classified the disembodied souls of the dead into three different categories: those suffering in an eternal hell, those being purified in purgatory, and those rejoicing in Paradise.<sup>12</sup>

Another very influential immortalist expression is the *monistic* or *holistic* (Eastern) worldview, which assumes that all is one and denies the duality between body and mind, and between life and death. The Austrian-American New Age physicist Fritjof Capra stressed “the oneness of all living forms” and argued that life itself is characterized by continuous “cycles of birth and death.”<sup>13</sup> For him, the dualism of “life versus death” can be overcome by a transpersonal experience within a broader cosmic context of the paranormal or psychic phenomena.<sup>14</sup> The monistic worldview erases the biblical distinction between the Creator and the creation, and opens the doors to uncountable forms of mysticism, including reincarnation or transmigration.



## THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF DEATH AND AFTERLIFE

There is no room in the Scriptures either to the Western philosophical dualism or to the Eastern mystic monism. In contrast to those worldviews, the Bible portrays every human being as an indivisible individual without

any surviving element—whether soul, spirit, or mind—that remains conscious after death. In other words, death means the complete secession of life and consciousness, and consciousness is regained only through a bodily resurrection.

The Genesis creation story affirms that “God created man in His own image; in the image

*“And the Lord God formed man of the dust  
of the ground, and breathed into  
his nostrils the breath of life; and man  
became a living being.”*



of God He created him; male and female He created them.”<sup>15</sup> This process is described in the following terms, “And the LORD God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”<sup>16</sup> This wholistic (not holistic) notion is basic for the understanding of the human nature. Thus, as correctly pointed out by the British theologian H. Wheeler Robinson, “The Hebrew idea of personality is an animated body, and not an incarnated soul.”<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to the life-giving process described in Genesis 2:7, death is simply the reversal of this process. In Genesis 3:19 God told Adam after the Fall, “For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.” Ecclesiastes 12:7 describes the dying process in the following terms, “Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit [Heb. *ruach*] will return to God who gave it.” Other Bible versions (such as LEB and NRSVUE) use the word “breath” (instead of “spirit”) in this verse. But is the “spirit” or “breath” that returns to God a conscious entity, as many Christians assume? The biblical answer is a clear “No.”

The same book of Ecclesiastes—in which the expression “return to God” appears—also describes death as an unconscious condition. We are told that both human beings and animals “all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals,” for “as one dies, so dies the other.”<sup>18</sup> “For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing. . . . Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.”<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the psalmist elucidates that “the dead do not praise the Lord, nor any who

go down into silence,”<sup>20</sup> for when a person dies, “in that very day his plans perish.”<sup>21</sup> Although poetic language can be sometimes ambiguous, these statements are clear enough and in full harmony with the overall biblical teaching on the subject.

Biblically, the only condition for the dead to regain consciousness is through the bodily resurrection by God’s life-giving intervention. No wonder that the Bible writers speak metaphorically of death as an unconscious sleep and of the bodily resurrection as a divine act of awaking the dead from their sleep. For example, the prophet Daniel declared, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt.”<sup>22</sup>

Before raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus stated, “Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.”<sup>23</sup> About the righteous who will be alive at the final resurrection, the apostle Paul declared, “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”<sup>24</sup>

Christ foretold His disciples that the hour would come when “all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”<sup>25</sup> And the apostle John explained that those two final resurrections are separated by “a thousand years”<sup>26</sup> also known as the millennium.

No wonder that around AD 150 Justin Martyr still warned that those “who say there is no resurrection of the dead, and that their souls,



when they die, are taken to heaven,” could not be considered Christians.<sup>27</sup> In a lecture delivered in 1955 at the Andover Chapel, Harvard University, the leading Lutheran theologian and New Testament scholar Oscar Cullmann recognized an irreconcilable tension between the Greek idea of the immortality of

the soul and the Christian belief in the resurrection. For him, the Greek philosophical notion of the natural immortality of the soul cannot be harmonized with the New Testament doctrine of the final resurrection of the dead.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the Scriptures stress the unconsciousness of the dead,

*“For the living know that they will die;  
but the dead know nothing. . . .”*



and the final resurrection as the only condition for them to come to life again and to regain their consciousness. A clear understanding of these basic concepts is crucial for us to evaluate properly the alleged communication with the dead and the near-death experiences.

## COUNTERFEIT EXPERIENCES

One of the most appealing arguments for the immortality of the soul is the traditional mediumistic experiences and personations of the dead. Some grieving people are much seduced by spiritistic sessions where they can supposedly speak and even see their beloved ones who died. There, feelings and emotions tend to speak much louder than reason, and people truly believe that they are in contact with their deceased ones.

But the Bible condemns any forms of alleged communication with the dead and qualifies such experiences as from satanic origin.

In the Pentateuch, the Israelites were instructed by the Lord to stone to death all spiritists, mediums, sorcerers, and necromancers.<sup>29, 30</sup> The prophet Isaiah warned, “And when they say to you, ‘Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter,’ should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.”<sup>31</sup>

Following the Mosaic law, Saul destroyed all mediums and spiritists from Israel.<sup>32</sup> But after the Lord rejected him, Saul himself went to the Canaanite city of Endor to consult a woman medium.<sup>33</sup> He asked her to bring up the deceased prophet Samuel, who supposedly came up in a necromancer apparition and spoke

with Saul.<sup>34</sup> The deceiving spirit, who pretended to be Samuel, told Saul, “tomorrow you and your sons will be with me”<sup>35</sup> This was undoubtedly a demoniac personation of Samuel, because why should the evil king Saul and the righteous prophet Samuel be together in the afterlife?

Another very popular argument for the natural immortality of the soul is the modern cases of near-death experiences (NDEs). Already in Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates tells the myth of Er, a brave soldier that was killed in a battle and twelve days later came back and “told people what he’d seen in the other world. He said that his soul left his body and went on a journey with lots of other souls as his companions.” But when Er arrived at the judging place, the judges told him to listen and observe everything that happened in the place and then return and “report back to mankind about what goes on there.”<sup>36</sup>

In his popular book, *Life After Life*, Raymond A. Moody, Jr. presented the results of his five-year study of more than one hundred people who experienced “clinical death” and were revived. These individuals claimed to have seen a loving and warm being of light before coming back to life. This has been regarded as “exciting evidence of the survival of the human spirit beyond death.”<sup>37</sup> In his later book *Reunions: Visionary Encounters with Departed Loved Ones*,<sup>38</sup> Moody deals specifically with cases of people who received visions of the so-called “Middle Realm,” where the living and the dead can supposedly meet and talk. Over the years, many other similar books have been published, promoting the same idea.

Taking seriously the biblical teaching of the unconsciousness of the dead, one wonders about the causes of the near-death

experiences. Some scientists have identified those experiences with the natural psychochemical changes of the dying process, causing hallucinations as those of LSD. Even so, we cannot deny their paranormal components and post-experience psychic leanings.<sup>39</sup> The Near Death Experience Research

Foundation (NDERF) study with more than 1,300 people found “that 45.0 percent of those surveyed said they had ‘psychic, paranormal, or other special gifts’ that they did not have prior to the experience.”<sup>40</sup> Hence, these experiences provide an alleged “scientific” motivation for people to join the psychic/paranormal world.

*“If they do not speak according to  
this word, it is because there is no  
light in them.”*





*May the Lord keep us faithful to  
Him and His infallible Word.*

## **REMAINING VIGILANT AND FAITHFUL**

Our world today is a huge mosaic of spiritistic expressions and mystical philosophies, popularized by the media through all means possible. Under the label of being culturally acceptable, people are being subtly ideologized by the old sophism, “You will not surely die.”<sup>41</sup> If Satan can transform himself “into an angel of light,”<sup>42</sup> we should not be surprised that demoniac spirits will personate the apostles of Christ—to contradict their own biblical writings—and



Satan will personate Christ Himself.<sup>43</sup>

This is a time when we need, more than ever before, a clear understanding of the biblical teachings on (1) the unconsciousness of the death, (2) the bodily resurrection as the only way for the dead to regain their consciousness, and (3) the satanic origin of all alleged communications with the dead and the so-called near-death experiences. Since none of those who were raised from the dead in biblical times ever reported any near-death experience, why should we trust such modern experiences? After all, may the Lord keep us faithful to Him and His infallible Word and protected from any misleading teachings and practices.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Maxims and Reflections of Goethe*, trans. by Bailey Saunders (New York: Macmillan, 1906), 108.

<sup>3</sup> Alberto R. Timm, *On Death, Dying, and the Future Hope* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 2:16, 17, NIV.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 3:4; cf. Revelation 12:9.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 3:15.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 3:21.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 2:17, NIV.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 3:4.

<sup>10</sup> LeRoy E. Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers: The Conflict of the Ages Over the Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1965–1966); Edward W. Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 3rd ed. (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

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<sup>12</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry W. Longfellow

(New York: Barnes & Noble, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 415.

<sup>14</sup> Capra, 370, 374.

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 1:27.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 2:7.

<sup>17</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, "Hebrew Psychology," in Arthur S. Peake, ed., *The People and the Book* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925), 362.

<sup>18</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:19, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Psalm 115:17.

<sup>21</sup> Psalm 146:4.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel 12:2.

<sup>23</sup> John 11:11–14.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52.

<sup>25</sup> John 5:28, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Revelation 20:4–6.

<sup>27</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 80.

<sup>28</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1958).

<sup>29</sup> Leviticus 19:31; 20:6, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Deuteronomy 18:9–14.

<sup>31</sup> Isaiah 8:19, 20.

<sup>32</sup> 1 Samuel 28:3, 9.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Samuel 28:6, 7, 15.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Samuel 28:13–19.

<sup>35</sup> 1 Samuel 28:19.

<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. by Robin Waterfield, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 371–375 (pars. 614a–621b).

<sup>37</sup> Raymond A. Moody, Jr., *Life After Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon—Survival of Bodily Death* (Atlanta, GA: Mockingbird, 1975), back cover.

<sup>38</sup> Raymond Moody with Paul Perry, *Reunions: Visionary Encounters with Departed Loved Ones* (New York: IVY Books, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Doukan, ed., *Through the Valley of the Shadow: The Near-Death Experience under Scientific, Philosophical and Biblical Scrutiny* (Madrid: Safeliz, 2019).

<sup>40</sup> Jeffrey Long with Paul Perry, *Evidence of the Afterlife: The Science of Near-Death Experiences* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 51, 189.

<sup>41</sup> Genesis 3:4.

<sup>42</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:14.

<sup>43</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), 557, 624.



# AN OUTSIDER'S JOURNEY



**By Stephen Wilson, Chaplain,**  
Mater Misericordiae University Hospital,  
Dublin, Ireland, with Deena Bartel-Wagner,  
Editor, Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries—  
General Conference

“Although my community was very supportive, I had to learn for myself how to explain my beliefs and what being an Adventist meant,” says Stephen. “Participating in my local church instilled a strong call to ministry by the time I was 17 or 18. I’d considered something in the medical profession believed I needed to study to become a pastor.”

## FINDING COMMUNITY IN ALBANIA

After completing his degree at Newbold College, Stephen decided he needed some additional life experience before entering pastoral ministry. “I took two years to be a missionary in Albania,” says Stephen. “Again, I was an outsider in a completely unreligious society in the city where I lived. It previously had such strict communism there was essentially no religious memory, no faith, and no knowledge of any sort of spirituality or religion. However, at the same time, whatever religion would be in the community was going to be mainly Muslim.”

Being an outsider too often comes with negative connotations. Yet, Stephen Wilson has utilized outsider experiences to grow his faith, minister to others, and share hope with people who he’s encountered through life experiences.

“I grew up in a small rural community in Ireland,” says Stephen. “There were very few Seventh-day Adventists in the country and our denomination wasn’t well known.”

There were times as a child he felt like an outsider. But the environment helped him to internalize his faith and what that meant to him.

The Wilson family have found their church family among the members of the Ballinacrow Adventist church.

Getting to know the community, the cultural practices, and making friends became Stephen's priority. He realized he couldn't just arrive in the community and start preaching sermons. "I couldn't just show up and say, 'I'm a Christian, and I'm starting a new community in your neighborhood,'" says Stephen. "No one would come to hear me preach when they don't have a knowledge of even the basics of the Bible or faith."

Fitting into the community's daily rhythms gave Stephen insights into those around him. "Every morning, I went to a local cafe where the men would have their coffee and a cigarette before they went to work. And I'd do the crossword. That's how I learned to speak the language. So, every day, I immersed myself in what their issues were," says Stephen. "During this time, I also thought about my beliefs and how to share them in this context."

As Stephen grew close to the people, they began to trust him. They'd invite them for meals in their homes which helped immerse him more in their life experiences. "Immersing myself in the culture made everything flow smoothly into teaching English, giving Bible studies, and holding VBS-type programs," says Stephen. "By the end of my two years in Albania, our little church community numbered around 14 or 15. But the network of relationships was much larger. When we organized events like concerts or a trip to the beach, two or three hundred people would attend. We built friendships on respect and trust and became a close-knit group."



## PARISH MINISTRY PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES

At the close of the two years, Stephen returned to Ireland and felt ready to begin his pastoral ministry. Several years into parish ministry, the opportunity to move to New Zealand meant entering unfamiliar territory once again. "In 2015, I thought it would be good to minister in a country where the Adventist church is institutionalized. In Ireland it's very new and vibrant and constantly changing," says Stephen. "I wanted to go somewhere where they had schools, hospitals, and food companies. I had the opportunity to go to New Zealand. In addition to serving as a pastor and school chaplain, I also was the regional pastor, which was a mentoring role. I was responsible for providing pastoral support for all the pastors in the Christchurch metro area."

Again, Stephen found himself in a role of building relationships

Stephen and Lindita enjoy exploring their home country of Ireland with their children.



through meals together, listening to the burdens of his fellow pastors, and allowing them to tell their stories and then pray for them. Little did he know his methods in Albania and New Zealand honed his chaplaincy skills.

And then, one day, as Stephen and his family returned from a holiday, they encountered an unusual amount of traffic. They would soon learn that an event had created one of New Zealand's darkest days. The March 2019 Mosque shootings in Christchurch occurred during the early afternoon hours that day.

As residents across the city rallied in support, clergy also began asking how they could best reach out. "Out of the 250 Christian leaders in the city, only two of us had any experience working with the Muslim community. And it happened both of us are Adventists," says Stephen. "During the next six months, we worked within the Muslim community and provided opportunities for them to talk. There was a lot of pain and practical issues that had to be dealt with. People within the community were in such a

tense moment of their lives, dealing with grief and a lot of scrutiny because the whole world was looking at how they were responding. Thank God that in that environment, the community pulled together and overcame prejudice, and found a common ground of love, compassion, and grief.

## WIDENING THE BORDERS

As his time in New Zealand ended, Stephen returned to Ireland, but there was no pastoral opening within the mission. "A friend suggested that I consider chaplaincy," says Stephen. "I liked the idea that not only would it be a ministry and a career, but that it would be something that would be of service to my country. Moreover, it would be beyond the borders of my own church. I've long felt the calling to serve the wider community."

He enrolled in Clinical Pastoral Education and began the process of becoming a chaplain. "Very quickly, I became comfortable with CPE. I realized that my life experience, personality, and temperament seemed to match very well with what is needed to be a professional chaplain," says Stephen.

During a year of training at Mater Misericordiae University Hospital in Dublin, Ireland, Stephen completed his Clinical Pastoral Education training.

After completing the required CPE units, Stephen began work as a hospice chaplain at Our Lady's Hospice and Care Service, one of Ireland's main hospice facilities. "We have around 200 inpatients at any one time," says Stephen. "There is a very diverse cohort of residents and patients. I worked with people who were on long-term palliative care, and many of them have dementia issues."

Recently, Stephen started a new position as a chaplain at Mater Misericordiae University Hospital, one of Dublin's leading acute care hospitals.

## USE YOUR CAPACITY

Stephen enjoys working outside the Adventist cocoon and with people of other faiths. "In the acute care setting, you often go into a situation blind. You have little knowledge of what is going on in a patient's life. So, you enter the room, introduce yourself and begin the conversation," says Stephen. "In the hospice setting, you have time to develop relationships, and you're part of a multi-disciplinary team where you can learn more about the issues that are going on."

Chaplains in Ireland are paid from the public purse, and the chaplain's work is highly respected. Job descriptions, proficiencies, and pay grades are like other health care professionals, which makes it well enmeshed in the health care system.

"As our faith and spiritual experiences become more



diverse, there's more need for the professional chaplain. I think it is a great privilege in a Roman Catholic majority country to be part of the pastoral care team as a member of a minority religious group. As Adventists, we have a lot to give," says Stephen. "We have a great capacity to understand people's diverse experiences, partly because we are a global church and partly because we are a minority. I can sit with someone and talk about their faith, rituals, and beliefs openly and honestly because it touches part of my experience of what it meant to be an outsider and not understood. I've met many people of peace in my pastoral and chaplaincy journey who have blessed and guided me. I'm grateful for their modelling of faith and compassion and I try to emulate these characteristics in my role as a chaplain."



A black and white photograph of a prison window. The window is made of many small panes held together by a metal grid. A single pane on the right side is slightly ajar, revealing a keyhole. Bright light is streaming through the window, creating a strong contrast with the dark interior. The overall mood is somber and institutional.

# COMING ALONGSIDE THE PRISONERS

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**By Miguel Ramos, Corrections Chaplain II,**  
Texas Department of Criminal Justice Abilene, Texas with Deena Bartel-Wagner,  
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Imagine you are in the middle of your pastoral career and serve as a senior chaplain in a state institution. With growing dismay, you realize that you can no longer remain a member of the denomination you've ministered in for years. Everything is at stake—the possibility of your family's rejection of such a move, your chaplaincy endorsement, your ministerial credentials, and more. And yet, the Holy Spirit is directing your thoughts.

This wasn't a hypothetical situation in Miguel Ramos' life. Instead, it became a defining moment when he chose to follow truth. "During my seminary studies, I was required to write a thesis paper that focused on a type of ministry in the church," says Miguel. "Many of the students chose to write on topics such as 'congregational pastor,' 'evangelism,' 'music ministry,' 'Bible teacher,' and 'youth minister.' So, when the professor asked me for my topic, I asked if I could respond the next day, and he granted me the extension."

Later that day, Miguel went to the Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS) library and did a search on "ministries for God." His curiosity was piqued when he saw the topic of chaplain ministry. He'd never heard about this type of ministry. Continuing his search, he didn't find much information until he ran across a dissertation written by a DTS seminary student titled "Jesus, The Chaplain."

"As I read the title, my excitement grew," says Miguel. "Jesus is my role model in ministry. So, as I read the dissertation and learned about chaplaincy, I began investigating whether my church denomination had anything in chaplaincy ministry. When I learned of the Chaplain Commission Ministry, I called and



His curiosity was piqued when he saw the topic of chaplain ministry.

explained my need for materials on chaplaincy. Within a few days, I received a package with resources and lectures about chaplaincy."

Immediately Miguel began to dig into the materials. "As I wrote and compared Jesus' ministry to chaplaincy, God spoke to me and said, 'This is what I want you to do,'" says Miguel.

Miguel completed his seminary studies and enrolled in Clinical Pastoral Education training. Today he's served more than two decades as a chaplain and worked in both hospital and hospice settings, as well as presently working as a correctional chaplain. He also completed a doctoral degree in

He models a Christ-like relationship and comes alongside the prisoners but must never forget the boundaries for safety and security reasons.

education specializing in Pastoral Community Counseling.

Miguel's also a Board Certified Chaplain with the Adventist Chaplaincy Institute (ACI), the American Corrections Chaplain Association, and the College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychotherapy (CPSP). He's currently working towards certification as a Diplomat CPE Supervisor with (CPSP).

Today, he serves as a Corrections Chaplain with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice in Abilene, Texas.

## GOING THROUGH THE LOCKED DOORS

Miguel never imagined that he'd become a corrections chaplain. "I was working in a hospice setting, but eventually became convicted to resign from my position because of unethical behaviour on the part of the organization," says Miguel. "About three months later, the secretary at the hospice office called me and told me she'd learned about an opening for a correctional chaplain at the state prison in Arizona. But, again, I'd never dreamed of going into corrections chaplaincy. Still, I'd been without work and a salary for three months, so I decided to apply."

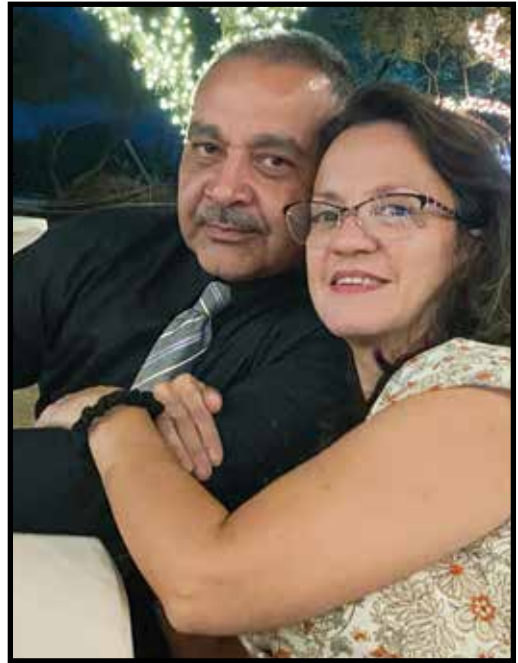
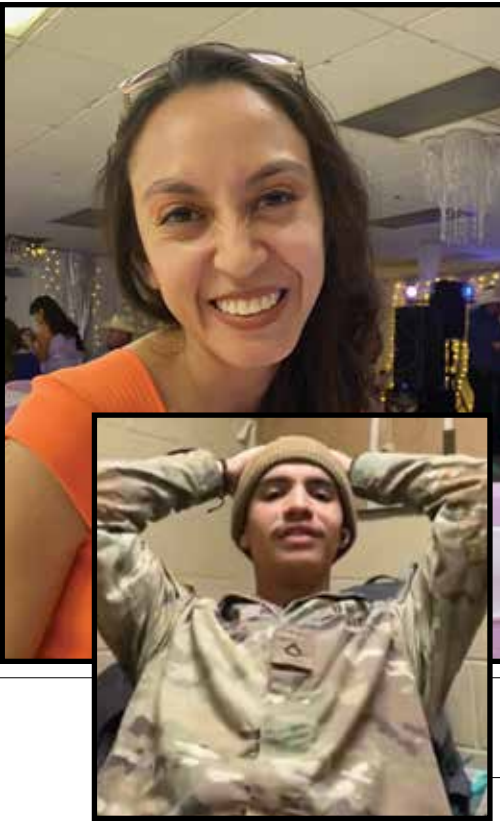
His application was successful, and Miguel reported for work. "I'd never been in a prison, and my emotions were all over the place on that first day," admits Miguel. "I'd been assigned to a unit with about 150 inmates. Even though I'd been a New York City police officer, my stomach clenched as each clanged shut as I made my way through all the locked doors to the unit. My thoughts were, 'What am I doing in here?'"

## LEAVING THE CARTEL

Working as a prison chaplain is a significantly different type of ministry. "Being called into the correctional ministry is tough," says Miguel. "A prison is not built on trust. It's built on expecting the worst and probably getting it. So correctional chaplains need to be able to apply pastoral skills in an environment that is hugely different from what we learned when we were in seminary or as a chaplain in another institution."

And yet, Miguel must talk with prisoners no matter their crime. He models a Christ-like relationship and comes alongside the prisoners but





Daughter Samantha, son Aaron, and Miguel and Brenda Ramos.

must never forget the boundaries for safety and security reasons.

Miguel's first year in the prison brought him in contact with Enrico,\* an inmate serving a life sentence for murder. Enrico had already been in prison for 35 years. "I learned he'd been in a high-level position in a Mexican Mafia cartel," Miguel says. "One day, as I walked the yard, he passed by me, and I was impressed to say, "God bless you."

Whenever Miguel had the opportunity, he'd repeat that phrase to Enrico when he saw him. Then, about two months later, a corrections officer called Miguel on the radio, reporting that an inmate wanted to speak with the chaplain.

"I told the officer I was on my way. When I arrived, I was surprised to

see Enrico, whom I'd been repeating the phrase to when I saw him," says Miguel. "I invited him into my office, and my pastoral care sessions began."

Enrico accepted Jesus as his Lord and Saviour within a couple of months. But Miguel didn't encourage him to join a Bible study group or worship. "He was still a part of the Mexican Mafia, and in that culture being in Christ is disrespectful to the organization," says Miguel. "Their religious preference is Nuestra Señora de la Santa Muerte, often shortened to Santa Muerte. This is a cult image, female deity, and folk saint in folk Catholicism and Mexican Neopaganism."

I invited him in and asked how I could help," says Miguel. "I couldn't believe what I heard next. Enrico

Miguel asked many questions about Adventist beliefs and teachings. As the conversation progressed, he discovered much common ground with his beliefs.

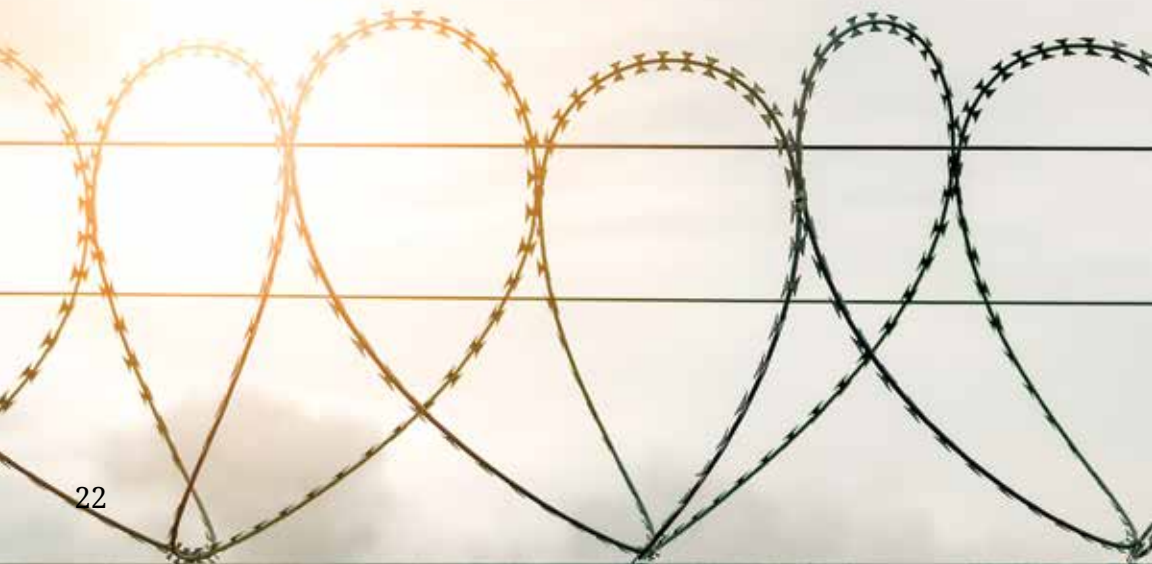
told me that he'd spoken with the cartel leadership and told them he wanted out of the organization," says Miguel. "Typically, once you are in the organization, you are in it for life. So, I asked him to explain what he meant. He described telling the leaders that he'd found Jesus and wanted to introduce other inmates to Jesus. Initially, the cartel leadership hesitated, but they finally released him from the cartel."

Enrico joined a Bible class and began attending worship services. In addition, Miguel met with him weekly for pastoral care and counseling. "After about two years on this unit, I was transferred to another unit," says Miguel. "Just after I transferred, another inmate approached me and reported that Enrico had been called by his case manager for a parole hearing in two weeks. I couldn't believe this news. With a life sentence, Enrico was a lifer and would die in prison."

When Miguel visited Enrico, he learned he hadn't requested the parole hearing. "I told him maybe he hadn't, but maybe God did," says Miguel. "Enrico's hearing went well, and within 24 hours, he learned that he'd be released the following Friday. Today, he's married, preaches the Word of God, is an elder in his church, and is the president of a rehabilitation home for former inmates in California."

### **FOLLOWING GOD'S PROMPTINGS**

Just as Miguel hadn't expected to become a corrections chaplain, he never dreamed he'd change the church denomination he'd been





affiliated with for more than 20 years. “My denomination began to move towards charismatic teachings along with other changes. I began praying to God, telling him that I felt uncomfortable with the changes in fundamental Pentecostal teachings and moving to become increasingly charismatic,” says Miguel. “I told my family about my concerns and began visiting different churches of various denominations.”

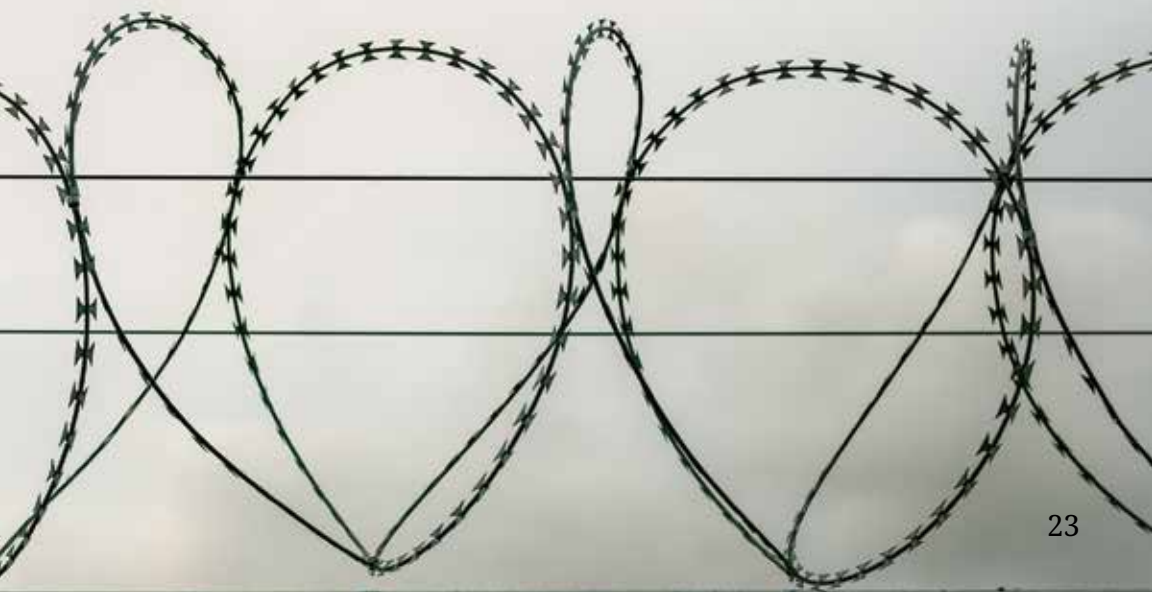
When he visited a Seventh-day Adventist church, Miguel remembered he had a friend who was a chaplain and a Seventh-day Adventist. “We’d taken CPE together, and I had previously invited him to preach in the church I was pastoring,” says Miguel. “I called him and asked what he could tell me about Seventh-day Adventists.”

This led to a meeting with administrative leadership at the Arizona Conference. Miguel asked many questions about Adventist beliefs and teachings. As the conversation progressed, he discovered much common ground with his beliefs. “Samantha, my daughter, joined us in the meeting and listened carefully to everything said,” says Miguel. “She surprised me

when she asked what would happen to my credentials and endorsements if I joined the Adventist Church.”

Miguel continued to visit churches and seek God’s will for his family, and he continued to pray about a decision. “I was invited to attend meetings on the topic of the book of Revelation being led by John Bradshaw,” says Miguel. “My wife told me that the teachings were clearly presented and that she understood and enjoyed them.” Following those meetings, Miguel and his family decided to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

His ministry in Corrections Chaplaincy continues to draw on Jesus’ model as a chaplain. “The work of Jesus was radical in its love, inclusion, disregard for unfounded rules, and in the relationships, he willingly started,” says Miguel. “Jesus sought out the powerless, the left-out, the ignored, and the hurting, to create a system of relationship which showed that all people are of value in the eyes of God. Likewise, I have discovered Jesus through understanding his motivation for acts of compassionate love.”





# ADVENTIST CHAPLAINCY MINISTRIES WORLDWIDE

## ACM—GENERAL CONFERENCE

### 2022 GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSION

The 2022 General Conference Session in St. Louis Missouri brought changes to the ACM—GC office. Dr. Mario E. Ceballos celebrated his years of ministry for the world church and began his retirement. Dr. Ivan H. Omaña was elected as the new ACM Director.

### ACM WORLD ADVISORY BY ZOOM

Following the General Conference session, a departmental advisory was held to introduce new personnel, provide updates on the ACM vision and plans for 2022—2025, and listen to needs and requests from the various world divisions.



Mario Ceballos retires at 2022 GC Session



## INTER-AMERICAN DIVISION

### CENTRAL MEXICAN UNION MISSION

During training in the Central Mexico Union, Dr. Ivan Omaña, Director, Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries—General Conference (far left) and Pastor Abimiel Vasquez, Director, Adventist



Ivan Omaña named ACM director.



Reviewing the guide, 'Faith by Design,' was a part of the ACM meetings in the Central Mexican Union.

Chaplaincy Ministries—Central Mexico Union (far right), led participants in training on the use of Faith by Design—A Guide for Creating and Implementing a Spiritual Master Plan for Seventh-day Adventist Colleges and Universities.

#### EL SALVADOR UNION MISSION

A Clinical Pastoral Education orientation in El Salvador was led by Dr. Ivan H. Omaña, Director,



Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries. He reports that our Adventist brothers and sisters love the Lord and are responding to the call of "I Will Go."

Trainees included Luis Aguillón, Executive Secretary and Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries—El Salvador Union Mission, Alexis Romero, President, East El Salvador Conference, Dany Perla, President, Metropolitan El Salvador Conference, and Leonel Arteaga, President, West Salvador Conference, Osman Adolfo Maldonado, and Johnathan Peñate. The group is led by Dr. Esteban Quiyono from Montemorelos University. Hiram Ruiz, Director, Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries—Inter-American Division also attended.



Chaplains and teachers came together for training that was coordinated by Benjamin Camacho Jimenez, ACM Director for the Union.

#### INTER-OCEANIC MEXICAN UNION CONFERENCE

Chaplains and teachers of the Inter-Oceanic Mexican Union met for training and celebration. Benjamin Camacho Jimenez, Director, Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries—Inter-Oceanic Mexican Union Conference coordination of the meetings was integral

to the success of the gathering. Hiram Ruiz, Director, Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries—Inter-American Division, and Dr. Ivan Omaña, Director, Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries—General Conference, were in attendance. During the gathering, the culmination of the faithful work of these chaplains and teachers was celebrated through the baptism of 112 students who'd said, "I give my life to Jesus and I Will Go!"



A baptism of 112 students capped of the meetings.



Chaplain (Colonel) Edgardo Ortiz and family.

## NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION

### ORTIZ PROMOTED

A promotion ceremony was held for Chaplain (Colonel) Edgardo Ortiz at 1<sup>st</sup> Mission Support Command, Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico. Participating in the ceremony were Chaplain (BG) Andrew Harewood, Deputy Chief of Chaplains, U.S. Army Reserve, Dr. Ivan Omaña, Director, Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries—General Conference, Dr. Mario E. Ceballos, Director (retired), Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries—General Conference.



A spontaneous gathering of pastors from Venezuela at the 2022 CALLED Conference.

### 2022 CALLED CONFERENCE

During the 2022 Called Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, Dr. Ivan Omaña, Director, Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries—General Conference, had the opportunity to meet with chaplains from Venezuela who are now living and ministering in the North American Division. This was an opportunity to renew acquaintances and introduce the pastors to the ministry of chaplaincy.



## TRANS-EUROPEAN DIVISION

A historic trip to the Trans-European Division and to Newbold College of Higher Education took place in August. The trip was an orientation facilitating the first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education by Adventist Chaplaincy Institute in this Division. Dr. Ivan Omaña, Director, Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries—General Conference worked closely with Stephen Currow, Principal, Newbold College of Higher Education. Currow and his wife Norisa hosted Omaña during his stay there. Omaña also met with Patrick Johnson, ACM Director, Trans-European Division, to discuss chaplaincy ministries in the region.



Students of the first ACI CPE unit in TED.



Stephen and Norisa Currow with Ivan Omaña.

## THE JOYOUS TIMES OF CHAPLAINCY

*It's always a memorable occasion when a chaplain is invited to join two persons' lives in marriage. Recently, three chaplains performed ceremonies and shared their stories with ACM.*

## ABSMC TRANSFORMS REHAB GARDEN INTO SPECIAL VENUE FOR PATIENT WEDDING

**By Clayton Warren, Sutter Health—Alta Bates Summit Center, Oakland, California**

A patient at Alta Bates Summit married the love of her life in a beautiful ceremony at the Summit Campus rehab garden on June 8. Itzel Lopez was planning to marry her college sweetheart Jonatan Spahn this August, but those plans were put on hold while Itzel was admitted to the hospital to treat her metastatic cancer.

After spending two months at the hospital, Itzel and Jonatan asked if they could arrange a special wedding ceremony to take place at the Summit Campus rehabilitation garden in Oakland.

“Chaplain Stevie Stennis suggested that we could have the wedding at the hospital and Jonatan and I both agreed that it was a great idea,” says Itzel. “All the staff members were very helpful coordinating the event and Stevie went to the courthouse to sort out our marriage license.”

ABSMC staff members worked with the couple to create a wonderful venue for an intimate wedding to take place. The ceremony was low-key but certainly marked the special



Chaplain Stevie Stennis performed the wedding ceremony for Jonatan and Itzel.



Jonatan and Itzel Spahn

moment for the couple, with the pair able to get married in front of Itzel and Jonatan’s parents, her siblings, some PCU-7 staff nurses and Dr. Leif Hass, Hospitalist and Summit Campus Wellness Chair.

“We don’t get to see a wedding in the hospital that often, so I felt privileged to help organize Itzel’s special day,” says Olena Pimentel, R.N., Assistant Nurse Manager, PCU-7 Oncology.

#### GETTING MARRIED IN THE FRESH AIR

“I hadn’t been outside for months and I really wanted to breathe fresh air and have the best wedding day possible,” says Itzel. “It was very special to have our closest relatives attend the wedding and be there with us.”

Itzel and Jonatan met each other while attending Cal State East Bay in Hayward and they began dating in 2014. Itzel says they really hit it off after she borrowed a textbook from Jonatan, and they found out that they had quite a bit in common.

“Both of us are “dreamers” also known as DACA recipients who were brought to the U.S. as children and have lived and gone to school here most of our lives,” says Itzel. “I was born in Mexico and Jonatan was born in Argentina, so we also bonded thanks to our immigrant roots.”

Itzel was discharged from the hospital on June 22 and she’s looking forward to spending as much time outdoors doing the things she loves.

“I want to say a huge, massive thank you to the staff members at ABSMC. I will never, ever forget what they did for us, and I will always be grateful,” says Itzel. “I’m really enjoying the ability to spend time with the people I love and go on some outdoor adventures in the future.”

Special thanks to Chaplain Stevie Stennis, Olena, and all the PCU-7 staff members who went above and beyond to make sure this couple had a wedding day they will always cherish and remember.



# CHAPLAINCY MINISTRY CLASPS HANDS WITH PASTORAL MINISTRY

The marriage ceremony of Delicia and Darrell Ezell melded chaplaincy and pastoral ministry during a joyful wedding service. When the bride and groom decided to get married, they knew who they wanted to perform their wedding—Dr. Michael Chester, Dr. André Trofort (father of the bride), and Dr. Carlton P. Byrd. Dr. Byrd, president of the Southwestern Region Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, and his wife Danielle are godparents of the bride.

One of the couple’s desires was to show respect for all military personnel who took part in their wedding and asked each of them to wear their dress uniforms for the occasion.

Dr. Byrd (affectionally known as Delecia’s ‘*Uncle Buddy*’) officiated the ceremony. The service was coordinated

by her aunt, Rene’e Whiting, Associate Director of Education, Southwestern Union Conference.

Rene’e worked tirelessly alongside Chaplain Mike Chester who performed the ring ceremony and made sure it ran with “military precision.” Although Chaplain Chester no longer lives in the area, he returned and worked with the church personnel, participated in the wedding rehearsal, and updated Dr. Byrd, who was unable to attend the rehearsal, of how the ceremony roles were divided.

The wedding ceremony culminated with Delecia’s father, Chaplain Trofort offering the wedding prayer of benediction over the couple.

The wedding was a beautiful blending of ministry and military chaplaincy as the bride and groom were launched like butterflies emerging from a chrysalis ready to fly.



Delicia and Darrell (center) with ceremony officiants Chaplain André Trofort (second from left), Pastor Carlton P. Byrd (second from right), and Chaplain Michael Chester (far right).



Delicia and Darrell Ezell

IF WE LIVE, IT'S TO HONOR THE LORD.  
AND IF WE DIE, IT'S TO HONOR THE  
LORD. SO, WHETHER WE LIVE OR DIE,  
WE BELONG TO THE LORD.

*Romans 14:8, New Living Translation*



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Comments and/or articles will be considered for publication. Contact the editor at [acmeditor@gc.adventist.org](mailto:acmeditor@gc.adventist.org). Include your full name, complete mailing address, telephone, e-mail address, and current digital photos with all submissions. Items submitted by mail will not be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped return envelope.

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*Those who would stand in this time of peril must understand  
for themselves the testimony of the Scriptures.*

Ellen G. White, *The Great Hope*



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