

## SERMON: IN THE COMMUNITY

### TOPIC: RIVER CHURCH!

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#### I. Introduction [**Replace paragraph below with your own illustration if you wish.**]

Floods cause a lot of trauma to our planet. At the end of August, 2011, Hurricane Irene traveled up the east coast in the United States, resulting in many rivers overflowing their banks. Levees couldn't control the water that rushed over people's homes and property. Vermont experienced the worst flooding the state had seen in 84 years. In 2008, the Cyclone Nargis overwhelmed Myanmar, and floods brought widespread devastation, killing more than 180,000 people. In that same year flood waters covered thousands of homes in Ukraine. All over the earth rivers can bring either trouble or blessing.

We find river stories in the Bible too. We find one such story is the beginning of Ezekiel 47. This river brought blessing instead of trouble. Healing instead of hurt. Life instead of death. When *this* river flooded, it healed the damage and destruction done by Satan.

#### II. God's Church: Source of a River of Life and Healing

Open your Bible to Ezekiel 47. In vision, Ezekiel saw God's temple in Jerusalem. It appeared to have sprung a leak: "The man brought me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east)" (Ezek. 47:1).<sup>1</sup>

What's wrong with the temple? Did a pipe break, or what? If I saw water coming from the threshold or porch of my house or church, I would be worried. This time, however, it's a good thing. How do I know? As we continue to read the chapter, it will become obvious.

This water leaking out of the temple was going "toward the east." If you look at a map of Ezekiel's part of the world, you will see that east of Jerusalem is the Salt Sea (also known as the Dead Sea), the lowest body of water on earth. It is not called the Dead Sea for nothing, for it is so salty that nothing can live there.

Between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea is approximately 13 miles (22 km) of desert country. Ezekiel saw water flowing from under the threshold of the temple through the desert, to the Dead Sea. In contrast to the destructive rivers mentioned earlier, we will see that the river flowing from the temple (God's church) is portrayed here as the center and source of health and prosperity for the community.<sup>2</sup>

In order for God's church to be the source of health and prosperity for a community, however, it must be revived and healthy. The healing river that flows out has to come from a healthy, life-giving source within.

A revival of God's people is portrayed back a few chapters in Ezekiel 37. There Ezekiel reveals a vision of dead, dry, and scattered bones, which weren't only bones. They had been people with names. They represented God's people. When the dead, dry bones heard " 'the Word of the Lord' " (vs. 4), God reversed the process of decomposition. He performed some orthopedic surgery and "the ankle bone connected to the leg bone, and the leg bone connected to the knee bone," as the Negro spiritual puts it. The bones grew tendons, muscle, and skin. Then, after "breath came into them" (receiving the Holy Spirit), "they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army" (vs. 10). The hopeless, dry bones were healed, revived from death, saved from eternal oblivion!

But being revived—saved—is not enough. God’s people are revived for a mission! Ephesians 2 exuberantly exclaims that God, by His grace, has made us who were dead in sin *alive*. And for what purpose? A few verses down explain: “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (vs. 10).

When God’s people are revived, they change from dry to wet!<sup>3</sup> Then they become a healing, life-giving river—like a “spring whose waters never fail,” as described by Isaiah in chapter 58, verse 11. Spring waters are not stagnant, but clear and cool because there is action.

Let’s continue reading in Ezekiel 47:

“As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was *ankle-deep*” (vs. 3, emphasis supplied).

By the way, what is a cubit? It is the first recorded unit of measurement and was used back when people used their bodies as measuring devices. A cubit is generally the distance from the tips of one’s fingers to the elbow—in other words, the forearm.

One thousand forearms from the temple, the water from the “leak” under its threshold had become ankle deep. This little brook can be likened to the Zambezi River in Zambia—the river that flows into Victoria Falls. **[Or, use in this illustration the name of a river in your country that begins shallow and becomes deep and wide.]** At its source it is a shallow brook that comes from under a tree. If you’re interested, the source of the Zambezi River lies at about 1,500 meters (4,900 feet) above sea level—very close to the border where Zambia, Angola and the Congo meet.

Let’s continue to follow the Divine Being as He moves out from the temple: “He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep” (vs. 4).

The little brook flowing out of the temple is getting deeper and is now knee deep as it becomes a river that makes its way into the desert east of the temple, just as the Zambezi River is knee deep in places. This river also eventually flows east as it continues downstream.

“He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was *up to the waist*” (vs. 4, emphasis supplied).

The temple river is now up to the waist— like the Zambezi River as it continues toward Victoria Falls.

“He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross” (vs. 5).

As the Zambezi River continues its journey from its source, it becomes wide and deep enough to swim in, just as the temple river starts very small and becomes colossal.

When you read verses 6-9 you see a very exciting picture indeed:

“He asked me, ‘Son of man, do you see this?’ Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. He said to me, ‘This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah [a depression in the desert], where it enters the Sea. When it empties into the Sea, the water there becomes fresh.

Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live’ ” (vss. 6-9).

Did you hear that? “ ‘Where the river flows *everything will live*’ ”! (vs. 9, emphasis supplied).

The river from the sanctuary flowed to the lowest spot on planet earth. Do you sometimes feel as though you live on the lowest spot on planet earth? Does sickness, financial struggles, divorce, or other woes bring you or a loved one down low? The healing river goes there.

Wherever the river that comes from God's church flows, there is life—and the river becomes deeper and wider. Maybe a compassionate project or ministry to your community seems small and insignificant at the beginning, but, by God's grace, it will grow, until it transforms the area where you are serving—and floods it with compassion, healing, and new life!

“The sea will teem with fish of all kinds” (vs. 10, MSG).

You say, “That's impossible! Nothing can live in the Salt (Dead) Sea!” But nothing is beyond the reach of God's grace. Where God is at work, there is no hopeless situation, no group of people who are beyond redemption, no heritage from an unhappy past that need condemn us to a future delivered over to despair.

Here we have the message of the Gospel, the result of the compassionate ministry of Jesus to which He has called us as His partners. He, through us, can achieve the impossible, giving abundant life to those who are discouraged, despondent, dry, and dying—or outright dead!

Ezekiel 47:7 points out that there were lots of trees by the temple river. Open your Bibles to Psalm 1:3. Godly, revived people are compared to trees planted by streams of water, which yield fruit in season, whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he or she does prospers.

Ezekiel describes the surroundings of the temple river in similar language to Psalm 1:3: “ ‘Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing’ ” (Ezek. 47:12).

The trees that are sustained by the river will become nurturers and healers too.

Someday, community members whom God has healed and made alive will be transferred with you to the Place where there is another River—the ultimate River flowing from the Throne of God. There will be no deserts—no dryness, no death there. This is Eden restored, which also had a River of Life in the beginning (Gen. 2:10).

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:1, 2).

The inhabitants of that Fair Land are described in Revelation 7:16, 17: “ ‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’ ”

In the meantime—while we wait for that blessed reality—God wants our churches to be “river churches” from which flow healing and life—abundant life—to the community around us. He wants to work through us to revitalize and transform the deserts and Dead Seas in our territory. Jesus, through us, will come to the people we meet and bring them abundant life (John 10:10) — which is the holistic Adventist message in a nutshell!

### III. Conclusion

**[Insert your own illustration.]** In Baltimore, Maryland, USA, there is a church known as the New Song Community Church, a “river church” in the Sandtown section of Baltimore. This church emerged from the devastation caused by the flood of racial riots of the late 1960's and early 1970's. From this church a healing river “leaked” out into the community around it.

Sandtown was a flourishing community in the 1950s and early 60s, vibrant with life. But it had become a like a desert wasteland. The majority of the families in Sandtown moved away in search of “better” neighborhoods, leaving behind a trail of abandoned, rundown tenements. Businesses moved out and drugs and crime moved in, further making Sandtown a very undesirable place to live.

In 1986 Pastor Mark Gornik and Allan and Susan Tibbels and their two daughters arrived in Sandtown. (Allan is a quadriplegic.) They rehabbed vacant houses and moved in. Pastor Mark and the Tibbels became “comic relief” as they hung out on the streets, attended community meetings, and caringly mingled with the remaining folks who hadn’t fled from Sandtown. You see, they were Caucasian and the people in Sandtown were mostly African American. The residents of the community wondered what these “whites” were trying to do in their neighborhood.

As Pastor Mark and the Tibbels continued to show their deep love for the community, they established a house church with families from the neighborhood—which eventually became New Song Community Church. The members of this new church prayed that God would show them how to transform their neighborhood’s seemingly hopeless situation. Because they desired to “satisfy the needs of the oppressed” (Isa. 58:10), the Lord guided them continually, strengthened them, and enabled them to be “like a spring whose waters never fail” (vs. 11). He guided them to begin working on a very obvious need—housing. They partnered with Habitat for Humanity and began recruiting volunteers to join them in restoring the rundown tenements all around them. From the “spring” within their small faith community, a river of healing started to flow out into their neighborhood.

To start with, the church focused on 15 of Sandtown’s 72 blocks. Street by street, they rebuilt the ruins, leaving a trail of lovely affordable, restored homes and happy new home owners. The new owners of these homes worked with the volunteers (providing “sweat equity”) and were given the keys to their new home in a community-wide ceremony when each home was completed.

The river of healing continued to flow out into the community around this congregation, growing deeper and deeper. They raised money and built a new \$5 million school for the children of the revived community. The healing river deepened as they started a health center, a job development program, and a drug rehab center. The Sandtown Children’s Choir became nationally famous, traveling far and near to share their experience of hope revived in a community that flourishes once again.

“Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings” (vs. 12).

God continues to use New Song Community Church (also known as New Song Worship and Arts Center)—a church from where a river of healing flowed and transformed a dead community. Wherever the river flows, everything lives (Ezek. 47:9).<sup>4</sup>

Is our church a river church? Does a *healing* river flow from our church? Is this river growing deeper or shallower as time advances? Is our church revived and healthy within, having “a spring whose waters never fail” (Isa. 58:11), so a healing river can flow outward?

Let’s earnestly ask God to continuously guide our church as we seek to discover and meet the holistic needs in our community. By His grace, let’s pray that our community will be a better place because our church is in it. May they see Jesus in us and know Him because we know Him.

There are “deserts” (literally in some parts of the world) outside our church. There are deserts outside of every church—in poor, middle class, or rich communities.

When we encounter the deserts of:

Poverty—is our church a life-giving river?

Hunger— is our church a life-giving river?

Broken families— is our church a life-giving river?

HIV/AIDS— is our church a life-giving river?

Sickness and poor health— is our church a life-giving river?

Domestic violence— is our church a life-giving river?

Alcohol & drug abuse— is our church a life-giving river?

Racial tension— is our church a life-giving river?

Rich people who are dead on the inside— is our church a life-giving river?

Spiritual thirst— is our church a life-giving river?

\_\_\_\_\_ is our church a life-giving river?

This time it will be good for the river to flow over the banks, levees, or other barriers that would hold it back. Are there any barriers/levees that are holding back our life-giving river to our community?

For example:

Remove the levee/the barrier of being too busy to spend time with Jesus and His Word!

Remove the levee/the barrier of church being all about us!

Remove the levee/the barrier of politics!

Remove the levee/the barrier of disunity!

Remove the levee/the barrier of unwillingness to mingle with our community!

Remove the levee/the barrier of a critical spirit!

Remove the levee/the barrier of unwillingness to change methods when change is needed!

Remove the levee/the barrier of spiritual pride!

Remove the levee/the barrier of prejudice!

Remove the levee/the barrier of an indifferent heart to the needs of those in our community!

Remove the levee/the barrier of \_\_\_\_\_!

Go and flow—in Jesus’ name!

Appeal:

How many of you want to be part of the healing, transforming river of Ezekiel 47— making our church a healing river church? (Raise hands.)

How many of you want, by God’s grace, to remove the barriers, to breach the levees that prevent the healing flow? (Stand.)

Shall we pray:

Lord, we dedicate ourselves to discover and meet the needs around us. Help us to remove any barriers that block the healing flow from our church into our community. By your grace, and through your life-giving Spirit, may our community be a better place because Your Church is in it. Please use us mightily to transform our community and bring Your abundant life to it, in Your name. Amen.

### **Music Suggestions:**

“Deep and Wide” (A chorus known in some parts of the world)

Deep and wide (repeat)  
There's a fountain flowing deep and wide.  
Deep and wide (repeat)  
There's a fountain flowing deep and wide.

*Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*  
74—"Like a River Glorious"

Below is an optional verse that can be sung to the tune of "Like a River Glorious":

Like a river glorious is a caring church.  
Bringing life abundant to people who search.  
Jesus is within her showing her the way.  
Filling with His Spirit, fuller every day.

*Refrain:*

Serving with His power, deserts are revived,  
Sharing His compassion that flows to outside.

--Words by May-Ellen Colón

Optional PowerPoint slides to illustrate this sermon can be downloaded from  
<<http://www.sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org/acsi>>. Click on "May 12, 2012, Community Services Sermon PowerPoint Slides."

For more information on community outreach go to

<<http://www.sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org/acsi>>. Click on "Resources" and then "ACSI Curriculum."

### **Optional background material from Ellen G. White regarding Ezekiel 47:1-12:**

"Our work has been presented to me as, in its beginning, a small, very small, rivulet. To the prophet Ezekiel was given the representation of waters issuing 'from under the threshold of the house eastward,' at the south side of the altar.' Read Ezekiel 47. Especially mark verse 8: 'Then said he unto me, These waters issue out toward the east country, and go down into the desert, and go into the sea: which being brought forth into the sea, the waters shall be healed.' So our work was presented to me as extending to the east and to the west, to the islands of the sea, and to all parts of the world. As the work extends, there will be great interests to be managed."<sup>5</sup>

"Wonderful is the work which the Lord designs to accomplish through His church, that His name may be glorified. A picture of this work is given in Ezekiel's vision of the river of healing: 'These waters issue out toward the east country, and go down into the desert, and go into the sea: which being brought forth into the sea, the waters shall be healed. And it shall come to pass, that everything that liveth, which moveth, whithersoever the rivers shall come, shall live: . . . and by the river upon the bank thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow all trees for meat, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed: it shall bring forth

new fruit according to his months, because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary: and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the leaf thereof for medicine.’ Ezekiel 47:8-12.

“From the beginning God has wrought through His people to bring blessing to the world. To the ancient Egyptian nation God made Joseph a fountain of life. Through the integrity of Joseph the life of that whole people was preserved. Through Daniel God saved the life of all the wise men of Babylon. And these deliverances are as object lessons; they illustrate the spiritual blessings offered to the world through connection with the God whom Joseph and Daniel worshiped. Everyone in whose heart Christ abides, everyone who will show forth His love to the world, is a worker together with God for the blessing of humanity. As he receives from the Saviour grace to impart to others, from his whole being flows forth the tide of spiritual life.

“God chose Israel to reveal His character to men. He desired them to be as wells of salvation in the world. To them were committed the oracles of heaven, the revelation of God’s will. In the early days of Israel the nations of the world, through corrupt practices, had lost the knowledge of God. They had once known Him; but because ‘they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, . . . their foolish heart was darkened.’ Romans 1:21. Yet in His mercy God did not blot them out of existence. He purposed to give them an opportunity of again becoming acquainted with Him through His chosen people.”<sup>6</sup>

“Every worker in whose heart Christ abides, everyone who will show forth His love to the world, is a worker together with God for the blessing of humanity. As he receives from the Saviour grace to impart to others, from his whole being flows forth the tide of spiritual life. Christ came as the Great Physician to heal the wounds that sin has made in the human family; and His Spirit, working through His servants, imparts to sin-sick, suffering human beings a mighty healing power that is efficacious for the body and the soul. ‘In that day,’ says the Scriptures, ‘there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.’ Zechariah 13:1. The waters of this fountain contain medicinal properties that will heal both physical and spiritual infirmities.

“From this fountain flows the mighty river seen in Ezekiel’s vision. ‘These waters issue out toward the east country, and go down into the desert, and go into the sea: which being brought forth into the sea, the waters shall be healed. And it shall come to pass, that everything that liveth, which moveth, whithersoever the rivers shall come, shall live. . . . And by the river upon the bank thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow all trees for meat, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed: it shall bring forth new fruit according to his months, because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary: and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the leaf thereof for medicine.’ Ezekiel 47:8-12.

“Such a river of life and healing God designs that, by His power working through them, our sanitariums shall be.

“Our sanitariums are to show forth to the world the benevolence of heaven; and though Christ’s visible presence is not discerned in the building, yet the workers may claim the promise: ‘Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.’

“The promises of God to Israel are also for the institutions established today for the glory of His name: ‘Thus saith the Lord the maker thereof, the Lord that formed it, to establish it; the Lord is His name; Call unto Me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not. For thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning . . . this city. Behold, I will bring it health and cure, and I will cure them, and will reveal unto them the

abundance of peace and truth. . . . And I will cleanse them from all their iniquity. . . . And it shall be to Me a name of joy, a praise and an honor before all the nations of the earth, which shall hear all the good that I do unto them.' 'In those days shall Judah be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell safely: and this is the name wherewith she shall be called, The Lord our Righteousness.'" Jeremiah 33:2-9, 16.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references in this sermon are from *The New International Version of the Bible*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Interpreter's Bible*, (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1956), vol. 6, p. 328.

<sup>3</sup> Optional text regarding the revival/healing of God's people: "On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity" (Zechariah 13:1).

<sup>4</sup> See Mark Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, pp. 171, 172.

<sup>6</sup> *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 13, 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, pp. 227, 228.