

IS YOUR CHURCH A RIVER CHURCH?

WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE

During 2008 many people around the world had traumatic experiences with flooded rivers. In May, rivers in Myanmar were overwhelmed by Cyclone Nargis, which caused flooding that brought widespread devastation and harm—killing more than 84,000 people. In July, tens of thousands of homes in Ukraine were covered with floodwaters. The United States experienced a springtime punctuated with overflowing rivers across America's Midwest. Wherever these rivers flowed, destruction followed.

The Bible has river stories, too. One of my favorites is found in Ezekiel 47; however, the Ezekiel 47 river does not bring destruction—it brings healing and life. When this river floods, it heals the damage and destruction done by Satan.

Ezekiel reports his river vision: "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, NIV).

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; it is so salty that nothing can live in it. Between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea is approximately 13 miles (22 km) of thirsty desert country.

Ezekiel saw water flowing from under the threshold of the temple through the desert to the Dead Sea. The temple, God's church, is portrayed here as the center and source of health and prosperity for the community.^a

"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*"^b (verse 3, NIV, emphasis supplied). This can be likened to the Colorado River in the United States that begins in the Rocky Mountains as a shallow brook.

"He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was *knee-deep*" (verse 4, NIV, emphasis supplied). The little brook is getting deeper as it becomes a river that makes its way into the desert around the temple. The Colorado River does the same thing as it continues downstream.

"He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was *up to the waist*" (verse 4, NIV, emphasis supplied). The temple river is now up to the waist. It is getting deeper and bigger, just as the Colorado River does as it continues toward the Gulf of California.

"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*" (verse 5, NIV, emphasis supplied). As the Colorado River continues its journey from the Rocky Mountains, certain parts of it become very deep, just as the temple river starts very small and becomes colossal.

When you read verses 6-10, you see a very exciting picture. The bottom line is that "where the river flows, everything will live" (verse 9, NIV).

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 Salt Sea will teem with fish" (verse 9, NIV). You say, "That's impossible! Nothing can live in the Salt 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 which need condemn us to a future of pain and despair.^c

Here we have the message of the Gospel, the result of the compassionate ministry of Jesus to which He has called us. Through us, He can achieve the impossible, giving abundant life to those who are discouraged, despondent, and dying!

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 (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; c.f., Ezek. 47:12).

In the meantime, while we wait, 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!

THE "RIVER CHURCH" IN SANDTOWN

In May 2008, I visited the New Song Community Church, a "river church" in Sandtown, a neighborhood in Baltimore, Maryland. This church emerged from the devastation caused by the flood of racial riots of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Sandtown was a flourishing community in the 1950s and early 1960s, vibrant with life. But it had become like a desert wasteland. The majority of families in Sandtown had 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. They rehabbed vacant houses and moved in. Pastor Mark and the Tibbels hung out on the streets, attended community meetings, and caringly mingled with the remaining folks who hadn't fled from Sandtown. 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 church—New Song Community Church—with families from the neighborhood. 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" (verse 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.

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 homeowners. The new owners of these homes worked with the volunteers (providing "sweat equity") and were given the keys to their new homes 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 is nationally famous, traveling far and near to share the 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 foundation; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings" (Isa. 58:12, NIV). God continues to use the New Song Community Church (also known as New Song Worship and Arts Center), a church from which a river of healing flowed and transformed a dying community. Wherever the river flows, everything lives (Ezek. 47:9).^d

IS YOUR CHURCH A RIVER CHURCH?

Does a river of healing flow from your church? Is this river growing deeper or shallower? Is your church healthy within, having "a spring whose waters never fail" (Isa. 58:11) so a healing river can flow outward?

Earnestly ask God to continually guide your church as you seek to discover and meet the needs in your community. By His grace, make your community a better place because your church is in it.

Go and flow! Be a source of a great healing flood to transform your community for Jesus' sake!^e

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^a *The Interpreter's Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 6:328.

^b All emphasis supplied.

^c *Ibid.*

^d *See To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City*, by Mark Gornik, for the rest of the story.

^e For more information on doing community-based transformational ministry with your church, see *Keys to Community Services*, available from www.adventsource.org. Click Adult/Adventist Community Services/Store.