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Interview with Chester Stanley and Grenville Kent

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But their successors have not always excelled in presenting the evidence for God's existence, the historicity of Scripture, creation, and other hot topics that are on the minds and hearts of secular or open-minded (or quasi-religious) people all around the globe.³ More often than not, our mission strategy takes for granted some type of Christian know-how. However, the world has changed. People have changed, and in a postmodern world with its latent relativism, many people ask questions that need good answers. *Big Questions* is talking to these people around us at this basic level.

God Is Opening Doors

Both Stanley and Kent clearly see God's hand in this project. If you have ever had the chance to visit Australia you would know that Qantas, the national airline, is a

major iconic brand name in that country. It is impossible to get Qantas to open its planes and hangars for TV crews—even crews from the major networks. However, the *Big Questions* team wanted to include the Airbus A380 and Qantas received one of the first planes of this type. After polite but firm official refusal, Kent met the director for maintenance of Qantas who—after hearing about the project—invited the crew to film the A380. This, in turn, opened the doors to visit the main Airbus production facility near Paris. God did the borderline-impossible—and, while doing so, also guarded the production budget.

A similar experience helped also with the extensive market research—most likely one of the most wide-ranging market research endeavors ever done for a specific outreach project of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Through a number of divine interventions the team was

Interview with Chester Stanley AND Grenville Kent

BY GERALD A. KLINGBEIL



Adventist World associate editor Gerald A. Klingbeil spoke with Chester Stanley, president of the Australian Union Conference, and Grenville Kent, producer of the *Big Questions* project in Melbourne, Australia, about secular mind-sets, effective outreach, and the power of communicating the Adventist message in a language that can be understood.

It's always good to start with history. Tell me a little bit how this project developed.

CS: Grenville is passionate about reaching postmodern and secular people here in the context of this society. The idea made sense. I thought that it was something that we needed. A lot of our evangelistic strategies and products assume the basics of Christianity, but this one presented evidence. I felt it had real legitimacy, especially in our context here, with the challenges of an increasingly secular society. The media is often very critical, with scathing views of Christianity. Some of the fundamentals of the Christian faith are challenged again and again, and so to a lot of Australians the Bible is essentially a book of folklore and fairy tales.

Producing a film series for secular people is great—but how

do you intend to use the films?

GK: Chester was clear from the start: Give our people, especially our pastors, a program they'd be proud to hand to friends and neighbors. If it goes onto TV that's a bonus (and since then we have had interest from a national channel), but, he emphasized, give our people tools for mission. We're planning to make it affordable for people to hand out hundreds and thousands of these, by charging just the cost of a DVD. We also want to develop resources for the Web, and a book.

CS: If I were a local pastor and I had access to a series like this, I would actually run the series at the time of the church service and challenge people to bring their friends.


Grenville, you mentioned earlier that your production team includes an atheist friend of yours.

GK: If you're a fisherman, wouldn't you love to have a trout designing your lures for you? I met Marcus at university. In a film class he launched an attack on the idea of God, and I thought, *I like this guy. He has brains and charisma and he's asking the right questions.* We clicked, and we've worked on films together, some for the Adventist Church, over a decade.

able to secure the services of McCrindle Research, one of the leading Australian market research companies (with huge corporate clients such as Pepsi, McDonalds, etc.), for a special price and received immensely helpful feedback. In the final report McCrindle stated that almost half of the respondents indicated that watching *Big Questions* influenced their worldview or beliefs. Further research regarding the state of Australian spirituality was done by another research firm, Windshift, whose results will not only benefit this project but impact the design of future outreach strategies of the AUC in a major way.

When Kent is asked about this project, he has a hard time containing himself, bubbling over with more stories of intervention by the “Invisible Producer.” What drives him is the knowledge that, through big or small miracles, God has made a way for this to become a reality.

Home Run

As the team gets ready to produce and shoot future episodes, they are aware of great opportunities—not just in Australia, but worldwide—to reach people without any Christian background whatsoever. They are excited to see translated versions of the films reaching European or Asian or Middle Eastern minds. *Big Questions* provides helpful answers, inviting people to consider the possibility that we are not alone, that life is not an accident, and that the hole in our soul can be filled by One who was ready to go the second mile, who loves colors, oceans, people—and yes—questions. 

¹ Quoted in Peter Gregory, “Violent Youths ‘Can Be Changed,’” *The Age*, Oct. 1, 2009, p. 3.

² Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 624–626; vol. 3, pp. 212–221, 424–428.

³ See, for example, the excellent volumes of C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Josh McDowell, Lee Strobel, or William Lane Craig.

Marcus is a great asset to this project. He is a first-class producer. We endlessly argue about the film and the ideas in it. “This is a weak argument. This bit is unclear. Recut this.” Bang, bang, bang, but a friend can get away with that—especially if he’s so often right! He always pushes me.

You did an amazing amount of market research for the pilot project. How does all this feedback flow back into the project design?

CS: In the past we haven’t always done this type of homework. Because this is a significant sum of money, obviously we need to be clear that it would hit the target and be a wise investment. So consequently we made the decision to go ahead with a pilot episode and do continuing audience research on both concept and execution.

Did the market research drive the content? Was there not the danger of presenting what people “liked” to hear?

GK: Good question. No, they’re not telling us what our message is, but their feedback helps us to see how we can best present it, what approaches work, and what would get people’s backs up. It has

really pushed my thinking. Plus, it’s been very encouraging when they say they get it, or say it’s entertaining and convincing.

This is a project that costs more than 2 million Australian dollars. Do you think that sum is justified?

CS: Well, I think any money wisely spent on mission is more than justified. It should always be our number one priority. Sometimes we don’t blink an eye at the amounts we throw to computer people, etc. [laughter]. But this is mission stuff, you know. So it’s really, really important. We also have backing from our nine conferences, and we are also pursuing private funding for this.

So far, this is an exclusively Australian project. I know that you try to include an international perspective in your scripts. Do you see something for the world church in this?

CS: Well, Gerald, as you know, secularism is one of the greatest challenges facing the church and its mission globally, whether in Amsterdam, in Singapore, in Cape Town, in Rio—most world fields have increasingly large secular people groups, so, yeah, I think we can help each other. Historically, our evangelism has targeted

people with Christian backgrounds, but this project fishes in deeper waters, because right around the world, people are dispensing with the divine. It’s a universal phenomenon. We need to do more to reach that group: with tools, training, and intentional strategies.

GK: We’ve made it global with the idea that it can travel and be translated, and we’ve sought feedback from people on all continents. Oh, except Antarctica—but we’re planning to shoot an episode there! If a local evangelist wants to knock me off the front end of it and be the presenter, they can do it. Marcus and I would become their reporters and they would be the anchor. English is fairly universal, but if a division wants to translate it, it can be done easily.

You use a lot of arguments that are presented in a contemporary way. Are postmodern people still listening to arguments?

GK: Not arrogant, aggressive arguments—but that’s OK. They respond to reason, and they enjoy questions and mysteries and humble truths. They value ideas that fit with their experience and intuition, the things they already sense about the universe, and ideas that make a positive difference in people’s lives.