

Snake-Handling Pentecostals Take Center Stage at the Kennedy Center

Snake-handling Pentecostals may be on the fringe of American religious culture, but a new opera brings their exuberant worship and rockabilly-inspired music to center stage this week.

“Taking Up Serpents,” a 60-minute work by composer Kamala Sankaram and librettist Jerre Dye, debuted Jan. 11 and 13 at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Set in Gulf Shores, Ala., the opera tells the story of Kayla, a 25-year-old clerk in a convenience store whose father runs a serpent-handling church. Washington National Opera soprano Alexandria Shiner plays the lead role. Timothy J. Bruno plays her father, the pastor of a Pentecostal congregation called the “Church of the Lord Jesus Christ With Signs Foretold.”

The “signs” referred to in the church’s name come from Mark 16:17-18, which claims believers can speak in tongues, survive a dose of poison or a bite from a venomous snake, heal the sick and cast out demons. Most Pentecostal churches accept the first, fourth and fifth signs as normative. But only about 100 U.S. congregations, mainly in Appalachia, believe that church services should also include snake handling and the quaffing of strychnine and similar poisonous substances.

The opera traces Kayla’s journey after she learns her father is dying of a rattlesnake bite in a Birmingham hospital. Her mother wants her to come home. As she travels there, Kayla reminisces over her childhood and frayed relationships with her family. She visits her father in the hospital, then makes her way to his church.

There won't be any live snakes onstage, but during the final aria, Kayla reaches into a snake box (typically a flat wooden box with a Plexiglas cover) to pick up a serpent.

"She does choose to handle at the end," said Dye, who grew up Pentecostal and embraced "gifts" of the Holy Spirit such as speaking in tongues. Although his family didn't frequent serpent-handling churches, he knew they existed nearby.

"When I grew up, snake handling was considered the line in the sand for that culture," he said. "The most theatrical charismatics would absolutely distance themselves from snake handling. They would say, 'We don't handle snakes, but we know people who do.'"

The opera was inspired by Dye's upbringing and the 1995 book "Salvation on Sand Mountain," which features serpent handlers in Alabama's rural northeast. He calls serpent handlers one of the great hidden stories of the South. Their church services, he said, are filled with built-in drama.

"Possessing an electric testimony is built into the culture," he said. "They have to talk about how God found them. They call themselves godly and yet their lives are very messy."

Dye was also impressed with the music of serpent handlers, which is often improvised and plays a major role in church services. Congregants will sing and dance for hours during worship.

"There's a jangly, gorgeous lopsided sound to their music. It's like Johnny Cash crashes into something," Dye said. "They're all very self-taught and they use piano, tambourine, drums, whatever instruments are available."

Dye has left the beliefs of his childhood behind. Theater, he said, has taken the place of religion in his heart. Still, there are the memories.

"I try to tell this human story of this search, this longing," he said.

The use of snakes in worship services is a solely American phenomenon, beginning around 1910 after George Hensley, a preacher from Chattanooga, Tenn., began teaching that the Mark 16 verses mandated the practice. The practice spread to the point that several states in the region outlawed serpent handling because of the many deaths that resulted.

About 100 people have died of snake bite or poison intake during such services over the last century. One of the most recent deaths occurred Feb. 15, 2014. The Rev. Jamie Coots, 42, the co-star of "Snake Salvation," a 2013 reality show on serpent handling aired by the National Geographic Channel, was fatally bitten while holding three rattlesnakes at a church service in Middlesboro, Ky.

Serpent handling is not a practice associated with the arts world, as it's typically represented in documentaries or photo exhibits. As for fiction, Ralph Hood, a psychology professor at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga who's considered the world expert on the practice, said there had been a few novels about the snake handlers, although "none of any real merit," he added.

Robert Ainsley, director of the American Opera Initiative program sponsoring "Taking Up Serpents," said religion is not an alien theme for opera.

"'Samson and Delilah' have huge elements of that," he said. "This opera is more about a dysfunctional family than about serpent handling, but religion is fundamental to the plot. Faith is a constant and a given and it flows in some form through everyone's life. I think that (Dye) has nailed that fact."

The performance, which has a cast of five (playing multiple characters) and a 13-piece orchestra, heads up a quartet of

short operas sponsored by the American Opera Initiative Festival. The festival, which seeks to bring new talent for the opera stage, commissions pieces that reflect American society.

Sankaram, the composer, had worked with music in Episcopal and Catholic settings but wasn't familiar with immersive music that dominates in Appalachia. Because the freewheeling rockabilly style of serpent-handling churches was foreign to her, she watched a lot of videos to get a feel for the four-to five-hour services. The music typically includes bluesy keyboards, electric guitars, drums and tambourines.

It took her five months to come up with a score for a wind quintet, string quintet, piano, percussion and guitar that mixes a contemporary Christian style with shape notes, a type of singing that's popular in the Great Smoky Mountain region of Appalachia.

"I wanted something in stark contrast to the classical vibrato style of singing," she said. "It was difficult. I am not from the South. I am from California. While I have friends who are Pentecostal there, this was not the same at all."

Because of union regulations, the Kennedy Center performances will not be broadcast.

Its creators hope to restage it somewhere closer to the culture, such as Memphis or Nashville, Tenn. Dye believes this first-of-its-kind opera is a story waiting to be told about a group often mocked for its beliefs.

"'Taking Up Serpents' was written to honor the spirit of this ecstatic, religious universe and the extraordinary people who inhabit it," he said. "It was also written to lift the veil a little and serve up some modern-day ecclesiastical redemption." {eoa}

An Epic of Faith

In Disney's new film Prince Caspian, C.S. Lewis' unique vision of Christian redemption comes alive on the screen.

Inside Buddha's Jade Fortress

In Thailand, where people visit temples to appease thousands of gods, pentecostals are aggressively winning converts.

A Gateway for the Gospel in Jordan

In spite of Muslim tensions, Jordan has displayed unusual openness to the gospel as Christian tourists visit this 'other Holy Land.'

They call it the home of the sunrise of Christianity, on the right side of the Jordan River—a country of 150 biblical sites. Often overlooked in the scheme of Middle East politics and prophecy, Jordan is clamoring to become every American's experience of the Holy Land.

A country of 4.6 million people, it is ruled by a Muslim royal family that shows enormous sympathy toward Christianity to the

point of paying for visits by evangelists such as Benny Hinn, David Yonggi Cho, Morris Cerullo and Ulf Ekman of Sweden. Such ministers come with hundreds of paying visitors in their tow, but it is only in the last decade that Jordanians have seen Christian visitors as beneficial to their economy.

The March 2000 visit of Pope John Paul II made Jordanians realize it was time to boost Christian tourism. The country increased its hotel rooms by 40 percent after it signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994. However, Jordan's Christian population of 180,000 souls is shrinking. The bulk are Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians.

Among the 5,000 Protestants, there are five major denominations: Southern Baptist, Assemblies of God, Church of the Nazarene, Christian Missionary Alliance and Evangelical Free. There also is a Oneness Pentecostal church.

Perhaps the best known spokesman for Jordan's seven Assemblies of God churches is Dikran Salbashian, 48, co-pastor of Weibdeh Assembly of God in downtown Amman. He has served as translator for Benny Hinn since 1995, when the healing evangelist made the first of seven evangelistic trips to Jordan.

"There is not much openness" to the Pentecostal message among Jordanian Christians, Salbashian says, "but we are building bridges with other denominations. Some of the pastors are open to it, but they are afraid of some of the wrong doctrines, such as you must speak in tongues in order to be saved."

He was encouraged that five of the Protestant groups united in May to sponsor Cho's visit at the Amman University arena. Some 10,000 people attended over two nights, and organizers recorded more than 400 conversions.

Salbashian's dreams for his city include a "Middle East Harvest Training Center" that would include a 2,500-seat auditorium (his current church seats 330) and would be the largest evangelical church building in the Middle East. No

longer would his church have to get permits for large gatherings or have to rent government-owned meeting halls.

The church has already raised \$1.1 million for the facility (70 percent from Jordanians), but it needs an additional \$4 million to \$5 million more before construction on the 66,000-square-foot lot can begin. This is a huge sum, considering that most Jordanians earn an average monthly income of \$125.

“The mentality in the Middle East is that small is good,” Salbashian says. “I like the American mentality: Big is good.”

Fields White for Harvest

To say that Jordan is a strategic country is an understatement. It fronts Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Israel and is a short plane ride from Lebanon and Egypt. Most Arabs, who might have problems obtaining visas into some Western countries, have no problems entering Jordan. One little-publicized factor is the 500,000 Iraqi refugees in Jordan, among whom conversions have been made. Jordanians are willing to evangelize their own people, but lack of funds holds them back, says Isam Ghattas, 59, founder of Manara (Lighthouse) Ministries in Amman.

“American missionaries spend \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year to learn Arabic,” he says. “And then they go back to the United States after two years. Christianity in Jordan is not a business. It is a relationship.”

Ghattas took a hit three years ago when someone—he suspects Muslim fundamentalists—burned down his Christian bookstore in central Amman. A Christian camp he operates just west of the city of Salt (Job’s birthplace) and 27 miles northwest of Amman was also hit with arson.

Camp Gilead, now repaired, overlooks the Zarqa River valley. Its hills are covered with wheat, and Ghattas’ 2.5 acres

facing due west are filled with children ages 7 to 18 during the summer. Organizers hope to raise \$250,000 for a three-story, 4,000-square-foot conference center on the property.

But Ghattas and Christians like him must be careful. Muslims are forbidden to change their religion, and people are marked for life with an M or a C on their identity cards. Muslims who are baptized secretly do so without informing their families, who may kill them for dishonoring the tribe.

Yet people here say the harvest is white in Jordan. "This is the key to the Middle East: power evangelism," Salbashian says. "I believe Benny [Hinn] opened Jordan to the West. He was the first one who embraced loving the Arab and Jew at the same time."

Hinn has said that evangelicals had "put one arm around the Jews in Israel, and now it was time to put the other arm around the Arabs, since they are God's children too." Jordan's King Abdullah is the member of the royal family who spotted the evangelist's TV programs and showed them to his father, the late King Hussein. Before he died in 1999, Hussein met with Hinn. His backing was instrumental in encouraging the government Ministry of Tourism not only to allow visits by Hinn and other foreign evangelists, but also to pay for the venues.

When Cerullo held a three-day ministry school in Amman in September 2000, the government hosted him and his 2,000 conferees at the Royal Cultural Center. Public places are not open for religious purposes, especially Christian ones, but everything changes when a Western evangelist shows up with paying tourists in tow.

Sometimes evangelists leave goodies behind, such as the \$22,000 Samsung four-wheel drive Cho donated after his May crusade in Amman. The Samsung will help transport tourists at Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan, the site on the Jordan River where

Jordanians believe Jesus was baptized.

The 'Other Holy Land'

Unlike Israel, Jordan does not have the money or contacts among American Christians to push itself as a destination site. But the Holy Land, Jordanians are quick to say, is on both sides of the river. A year ago, its tourism board retained a Dallas-based Christian public relations firm, A. Larry Ross & Associates, to boost its image among America's rich mother lode of Christian travelers. Ross, who has represented evangelists Billy Graham and T.D. Jakes, has extensive contacts among evangelicals.

Ross had previously arranged a meeting between Jakes and Akel Biltaji, who was Jordanian minister of tourism until last June. The two men visited Mount Nebo, the famous wind-swept promontory overlooking the Dead Sea, where Moses viewed the promised land.

While visiting the United States last year, Biltaji was invited by Hinn to accompany him during a crusade in Las Vegas. He also put in an appearance in February 2001 at a Jordanian-sponsored reception at the National Religious Broadcasters' convention in Dallas. Clearly, relationships were being formed.

But in an unusual dinner reception for a group of American clergy and journalists last May, Biltaji was challenged as to why Muslims who converted to Christianity were persecuted in his country. His chilling response: Early Christians were persecuted because they followed Jesus, and present-day converts should expect the same treatment.

All is not paradise in this relatively liberal Islamic state. Jordan has one evangelical seminary, the 150-student Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS) founded in 1995. With 270 million people in the Middle East and 19 Arabic-speaking countries, JETS is in a strategic place. President Imad

Shehadeh, a Greek Orthodox Palestinian who became born again in the 1970s while a student at the University of California in San Diego, wishes the government allowed the seminary to grow.

“Muslims were once allowed to come,” he says. But he adds that because of the high interest in merely studying Christianity, they now are not allowed to do this. “Muslims could be the majority of students because they are that interested. We could easily have 500 students,” he told Charisma.

The government started cracking down two years ago, first by ejecting seven converts from Islam who were studying at the seminary. Then three students from Iraq, Sudan and Egypt were jailed for several weeks where they slept on concrete with no blankets and were poorly fed. One was beaten so badly he could not move for weeks after leaving prison.

More recently, the government informed JETS that it must approve all appointments for faculty and president, select the seminary’s board of directors, and compel it to hold classes on Sundays. If JETS refuses to accept these dicta, it cannot issue degrees or obtain residential visas for foreign faculty. Visa restrictions are already limiting the foreign student body to Syrians, Iraqis and Egyptians, hardly the broad base the seminary was designed to reach.

“They say persecution is good for the church; well, we’ve had our share of it,” says Shehadeh, who earned his doctorate at Dallas Theological Seminary. “We’re a long way from where we would like to be in terms of human rights.”

Some of the worst opposition, he says, comes from nonevangelicals who petition the government to not accredit the school. By forbidding Muslim evangelism, the government confines Christians to one pen, where they are obliged to steal sheep from one another. This has sewn discord in their ranks.

One of the few gestures of unity among Christians in Jordan was a decision to celebrate their religious holidays on the same day. And the pope's visit did put the Christian community on the map. "For three days," said Ghaleb Bader, the Catholic priest who heads the church's ecclesiastical court in Amman, "Christians in Jordan were at the center of attention for everybody."

Now is a critical time for Jordan, say all the evangelists who work there. With tourism down since the September 11 terrorist attacks, Jordan's economy is in a free fall. In addition, the current drought in Israel is a threat to Jordan as well. What would help, Ghattas says, is if Western Christians would pay them a visit.

"We ask Christians to not come here to visit dead stones," referring to the country's 30,000 archaeological sites, "but living stones," referring to Christian believers.

Even Biltaji, the Muslim cabinet member, pleads for visitors: "We're not begging; we are going even further. We are on our knees asking people to come and see us."

"Pray for Jordan," Salbashian says. "Pray that more signs and wonders are released and that Christianity in the Middle East is authentic and not a copy of America."

Julia Duin, *an assistant national editor for The Washington Times, traveled to Jordan in May.*

Regional Statistics: Middle East

Country with largest percentage Christian population: Cyprus (91.8 percent)

Country with smallest Christian population: Sahara (1,000)

Country with smallest percentage of Christians in population:Algeria (0.1 percent)

Largest denomination:Coptic Orthodox Church, Egypt (86.8 million)

Largest Protestant or independent denomination:Coptic Evangelical Church (300,000)

Country with largest Christian growth over last five years:Armenia (from 76 percent to 83 percent)

Fastest growing denomination or movement:Catholic Church, Oman (35 percent)

Percentage of Pentecostals and charismatics in Christian population:0.8 percent (3 million)

Largest non-Christian population:Muslims (308.9 million)

Most dangerous country for Christians:Sudan

Country with most evangelistic efforts per person:Cyprus

Country with most evangelistic efforts for size of population:Egypt

Country with highest Christian income:Egypt

Country with lowest Christian income: Yemen

When God Speaks in a Whisper

Since his voice was ruined by surgery, worship leader Bob Sorge has been speaking with quiet authority about faith in the face of frustration.

Why do bad things happen to obedient, faithful Christians? If God allows evil to afflict the believer, is it for punishment or promotion? Does God intend to deliver us out of our troubles?

From the days of Job to today, such questions have plagued millions of people. Rare is the pastor who has a sermon series on unanswered prayer. Charismatic Christians are especially known for expounding on the triumphal life but not dwelling on its perplexities.

Yet the body of Christ is consumed with perplexity and weary of platitudes, says one Missouri pastor, who may be producing some of the most intriguing work available in the United States today on the subject of suffering. Bob Sorge—whose bout with a surgeon's knife nine years ago left him nearly voiceless—has weighed in on the dealings of God with man to a growing audience of listeners around the world.

Now 44, Sorge was pastor of an upstate New York charismatic church in the spring of 1992 when disaster struck. Formerly the director of music at Elim Bible Institute in Lima, New York, he was developing a nationwide worship ministry and had already written a charismatic textbook titled *Exploring Worship*. He had built up his nondenominational congregation from 35 members to several hundred people.

Just before setting out to Singapore for an international worship convention, he noticed a mysterious soreness near his vocal chords. By the time he returned from overseas 10 days later, "It felt," he remembers, "like a marble was lodged in my throat."

Doctors said Sorge had an arytenoid granuloma: an ulcer easily removed by laser treatment. Just before undergoing surgery that August, he was told he would be back in the pulpit within three weeks.

When extreme pain persisted even after the surgery, however,

Sorge realized something was terribly wrong: The surgeon's laser work had singed his throat, causing a permanent rawness.

He could only speak an hour a day—and that at a whisper—before pain took over. For a pastor in his prime, whose living depended on his being able to preach and lead worship, the surgical mishap was calamitous.

Thus started Sorge's wrestlings with God, what his wife, Marci, calls "the longest valley of our lives."

"The first year, you walk in denial," Marci says. "The second year, you realize it is not going to go away. It is total blackness. Then, you have to go deep. You have to have answers.

"He has not had an answer of 'Why?' yet," she continues. "It has changed us on how we relate to people who are weak and broken."

When Heaven Is Silent

In 1994 Sorge came out with *In His Face*, a book about the silence of God and why He sometimes delays in answering prayer.

"The first sign that you've been pruned is this: God stops talking to you," he candidly writes. "As frantically as you might beseech heaven, heaven is not talking to you right now."

Instead, he says, if God does speak, it is on an unrelated matter. "Although God may be silent regarding the things you want Him to talk about, He will be speaking to you the things that are on His heart."

Before the tragedy, Sorge had borne the attitude, held by many Christians, that suffering was somehow the sufferer's fault. The common teaching in many circles is that sickness is caused by a lack of faith or a lack of trust in God. But after two years of pain, Sorge says his viewpoint changed.

“God brought me to a new realization that calamity and tragedy come alike to saints and sinners,” he writes. “Just because you’re having troubles doesn’t necessarily mean you’re doing something wrong. Joseph made all the right decisions and still ended up in the blackness of prison.”

Too many Christians, he says, are like Job’s three unhelpful friends: They misdiagnose why a person is suffering and dump more guilt on the sufferer. And charismatics typically espouse a set reason for suffering: “God is disciplining you, and it’s your fault.”

But the disciplines of God are for promotion, not punishment, he explains. The means God uses to perfect His saints are the same means He uses to punish the disobedient. To the undiscerning, it appears to be punishment.

Naturally, Sorge himself had wondered if he was being punished. He had prayed: “Lord, I’ve done everything I know to do: I’ve prayed, I’ve praised, I’ve repented, I’ve fasted, I’ve rebuked, I’ve surrendered.

“I’ve read books, I’ve quoted Scripture, I’ve spent time in Your presence, I’ve reconciled with everyone I could conceive had a problem with me, I’ve gone on an extended personal retreat in solitude.”

The only response he received was Ephesians 6:13: “Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand” (NKJV).

“Some victories are gained, not through an aggressive posturing of faith, but by simply standing,” Sorge says. “God didn’t deliver Joseph from prison because Joseph had a dynamic stance of faith, but because he kept his gaze fixed upon God. get powerful revelations for other when it came to his own life, he could see nothing.”

Certainly this was true in Sorge's own life. Hadn't he been obeying God when this happened? Hadn't he been fulfilling God's call to preach?

Bit by bit, things precious to him began to slip from his grasp. The worship ministry vanished overnight. He clung to his pastorate for six more years, preaching three times each weekend, his lips pressed to a microphone for increased volume. But he couldn't engage in casual conversations with parishioners, much less counsel people.

"The only thing I could do is lay myself out on the carpet and just say, 'I love You, Lord,'" he told listeners in a speech once. "I mean, there was no intercession in my life for years. There was nothing.

"I was pastoring at the time, and I thought: Boy, this is really bad. My poor church. The pastor doesn't even pray for them anymore. I used to pray through the whole directory—every person. I stopped all that. I would prostrate myself and say, 'I can do no warfare.'

"I felt like the stuffing was taken right out of me. All I could say was: 'I love You. If this is an attack, I'm lunch. All I can do is love You, Lord.' As I look back, I am convinced that is the most powerful warfare I could have done."

Enduring the Testing

Six years after his affliction hit and what was left of his voice grew weaker, Sorge resigned his pastorate at Zion Fellowship in Canandaigua, New York.

"It's hard to pastor a body of people when you are trying to keep your own head above water," Marci says. "It just came to a place where it became impossible at the relational end."

Chris Wood, now senior pastor at Zion Fellowship and Sorge's

assistant for six years, agrees. "It came to a point where the frustration of being a senior pastor and not doing the things his heart yearned to do was too much. He couldn't interact with his staff or congregation."

The one bright spot was a 1994 encounter at a conference featuring speakers Mike Bickle, former pastor of Metro Christian Fellowship in Kansas City, Missouri, and director of the International House of Prayer of Kansas City; and Paul Cain, who operates a prophetic ministry in the same area.

Cain's prophecies over Christian leaders, notably John Wimber, have not been without controversy, but when Tommy Reid, pastor of the host church, suggested Cain might have a word, Sorge was ready to listen.

"Paul Cain prophesied there would be a day of deliverance when [Sorge's] voice will open up," Wood recalls. "We don't know when that day will be, but we're standing with him."

Two years ago, the Sorges moved to the Kansas City area, where Marci volunteers as personnel director for the International House of Prayer, and the family attends Metro Christian Fellowship. By this time, Bob had come out with several books, such as *The Fire of Delayed Answers* and *The Fire of God's Love*, and word had started to get out about his unusual insights.

"People really do listen to him," says Art Cole, a staff pastor at Grace Chapel, a Foursquare church in Tucson, Arizona, where Sorge has been invited to speak twice. "He speaks to issues most Christians have and about which most don't have answers for."

In fact, Cole adds, inviting Sorge to speak is a bit "like open-heart surgery. It's uncomfortable, but there's healing." Sorge had wryly noted to him that he gets people's attention more without a voice than in the days when he had one.

An old friend of his, Wayne Clarke, who pastors Sabre Springs Foursquare Church north of San Diego, says Sorge galvanized his small congregation when he came there in February 2000.

“God tests our love,” Sorge told the Sabre Springs church. “He says, ‘Do you love Me?’ I said: ‘Yes, Lord, I love You. I am crazy about You.’ He says: ‘What will you do when I offend you? If you hang out with Me long enough, I will offend you.’”

“Because the fact is,” Sorge continued, whispering into the microphone the way he has since the botched surgery, “He offends everybody, if you stick with Him long enough. He offended the disciples. He offended the Pharisees. He offended everybody. Finally, Jesus said, ‘Are you guys going to leave, too?’”

“And Peter had to admit he was offended, but he said: ‘Where else do we go? What are the options? You have the words of eternal life.’ But the question He comes back to with Peter is: ‘Do you love Me?’”

“The cross is His invitation to love, how much He loved us, and how we can love Him back. Our cross becomes our marriage bed where we express our deepest love for Him. And the sight of us on our cross reminds God of His Son on His cross.”

It’s an arresting message.

“When Bob is speaking, even in that hushed whisper, there is an intensity that comes across that adds to his message,” Clarke says. “Of course you can’t be a worship leader or a pastor without your voice. I’m sure he’s been pulled through a knothole backward.”

“I haven’t been able to sing for 7-1/2 years,” Sorge told the Sabre Springs church. “For any of you who can lead worship, you must understand what that can be like. It’s an injury that has radically traumatized and transformed every area of my

life.

“As pastor, husband, father, teacher, conference speaker, every area of my life—everything I thought was my identity—was profoundly affected. Everything was shut down, and I found myself in an incredible crisis theologically, emotionally, physically, relationally.

“Virtually every area of my life was touched by this. It catapulted me into a desperate pursuit of God. I’ve discovered that God knows how to make us desperate.” <P > **Ministry From the Heart**

A tall, sensitive man who works out of an office in his home, Sorge takes time to bake bread for his wife and three children, who range in age from 12 to 18. His days are filled with writing, answering voluminous amounts of e-mail and managing his Web site, which lists his frequent speaking engagements.

Charismatic pioneer and teacher Judson Cornwall, who has known Sorge since his Elim Bible school days, says his protégé shows a level of spiritual passion and friendship with God rarely seen among worship leaders.

“I believe the future will reveal that Bob’s greatest ministry has been his writings,” Cornwall told Charisma. “There’s a vast difference in tone between Bob’s first and later books. The first was written from his head. The second and others have come from his heart.”

But it is a broken heart, and Sorge admits that just as many Christians are broken by suffering as are transformed by it. Or they slip into a numb resignation for the rest of their lives.

“There are casualties,” he said during an interview in his home in Lee’s Summit, Missouri, 20 miles southeast of Kansas City. “Satan is gambling he can turn you into a casualty, and

God is testing you to see if you will become a spiritual giant.

“A friend always loves. A friend of God loves God even in the toughest of times. This is the litmus test of friendship with God: Do I still love Him, even when He allows inexplicable trauma to hit my life?

“A lot of conservative evangelical slant on suffering is that God is omniscient, sovereign, and He knows best,” Sorge continues. “So we throw up our hands and just kind of cope. That particular approach doesn’t satisfy people in crisis. I’ve had to seek after answers that satisfy me in my pain.

“The key word here is purpose. God has a purpose. The invitation for us is to press violently into it. If you want to find purpose, you first have to find God. Without God, there is no purpose.

“A lot of Christians will say, ‘Just don’t ask why.’ I am not in that camp. Jesus asked why. David asked why. The Bible is full of people who had questions. God is to be wrestled with. He has unfolded purpose to me.”

God has accelerated a character change in the dark night of his soul, Sorge says. The pastor often refers to Job, the first book of the Bible to have been recorded.

“That makes it a cornerstone of Scripture,” he says. “Satan’s accusation is that you have a tyrant for a father. The cynic will look at this and be bitter at God. The saint will be transformed by this.”

That’s why Sorge doesn’t buy the theology that death will deliver him from his afflictions. The scriptural pattern shows that “there is a deliverance God intends for His beloved in this life,” he says. “The pattern of Scripture is that God’s man is eventually vindicated.

“My conviction is that God has allowed this in my life for a specific purpose,” he continues. “Basically I am ‘unto death’ on this thing. I have assurances from Him He will heal me. I am waiting on Him to fulfill His Word. The alternative is to shut down, cope and level a lawsuit against the doctor who did this to me—that is, cope until I die. But that is not God.”

Does he ever have doubts?

“Every day is a fight of faith, which is necessary to bolster myself in the assurance God has given me. The other voices scream at me, that I am delusional: ‘It’s been nine years, Bob. Wake up and smell the coffee. You are handicapped for life.’ Everywhere I turn, I am bombarded by negative unbelief.”

And so he waits.

“God is the master of suspense,” he says. “He wants to take you into a story with suspense and intrigue, mystery, finale and conclusion, and give you a testimony to His glory. If you get it all up front, it’s boring.

“He loves to deliver us out of situations where there is no possible way out. Then He sweeps in.”

Julia Duin is an assistant national editor for The Washington Times.