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# Ellen G. White on City Missions

## Introduction

On May 16, 1913, the General Conference opened its 38th session at Takoma Park, Washington, DC. Ellen White who lived at Elmshaven in California at that time could not attend the session due to her advancing age. However, she sent two communications addressed to the General Conference attendees. In the first, she welcomed those who “have labored in distant lands and in the home land” encouraging and assuring them of God’s sustaining grace. Near the end of this first message, she wrote:

I have been deeply impressed by scenes that have recently passed before me in the night season. There seemed to be a great movement—a work of revival—going forward in many places. Our people were moving into line, responding to God’s call. My brethren, the Lord is speaking to us. Shall we not heed his voice? Shall we not trim our lamps, and act like men who look for their Lord to come? (1913a:34)

Pastor A. G. Daniells, president of the General Conference, read Ellen White’s second message on the morning of May 27, 1913. In this communication, she narrated her travel following the General Conference of 1909 attending camp meetings and other gatherings in New England, the Central States, and the Middle West. She encouraged the pioneers and laborers in their ministry. Ellen White assured the delegates that “God of Israel is still guiding his people, and that he will continue to be with them, even to the end.” Then she challenged the church leaders and members to move forward.

Christ is opening the hearts and minds of many in our large cities. . . . The large and small cities, and places nigh and afar off, are to be worked, and worked intelligently. Never draw back. The Lord will

make the right impressions upon hearts, if we will work in unison with his Spirit. (White 1913b:164)

Ellen White wrote extensively on evangelism, and in particular, on various areas related to work in the cities.<sup>1</sup> This paper is a review of her ideas on the work in the cities.<sup>2</sup> It will investigate Ellen White's statements on three aspects of city work: God as the author of work in the cities, those who carry out that work, and the methods to be used. The final section will contain observations and a conclusion regarding work in the cities.

### **God—the Author of Work in the Cities**

The Bible and the writings of Ellen White point to God as the source of the message and the author of city work. The divine mandate is clearly stated in the gospel commission (Matt 28:18; Rev 14:6-7). Ellen White portrayed God as one who closely followed the church leaders' planning and deliberation regarding God's work.

One of dignity and authority—One who is present in all our council meetings—was listening with deepest interest to every word. He spoke with deliberation and perfect assurance. "The whole world," He said, "is God's great vineyard. The cities and villages constitute a part of that vineyard. These must be worked." (1948a:34-35)

The context of the above statement, written on April 1, 1874, was a dream she had of church leaders planning. Due to limited financial resources and small number of ministers, the leaders thought of beginning work in small places rather than entering large cities. James White, however, urged the leaders "to make broader plans without delay and put forth, in our large cities, extended and thorough effort that would better correspond to the character of our message" (1948a:34). Ellen White also counseled the church leaders that God wanted them to move forward in faith.

It was also God's desire that the church leaders would view the task in a broader perspective.

The heavenly Messenger who was with us said: "Never lose sight of the fact that the message you are bearing is a world-wide message. It is to be given to all cities, to all villages; it is to be proclaimed in the highways and the byways. You are not to localize the proclamation of the message." (1948a:35-36)

In 1874, when Ellen White had a dream regarding evangelizing the cities, was also the same year when the General Conference officially sent

John Nevins Andrews and his children Charles and Mary as the first official missionaries to Europe. God intended the proclamation of the gospel to be a global movement “to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people” (Rev 14:6 NIV).

### Laborers in the Cities

Before Christ ascended to heaven, he said to his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:18-19). And before Christ returns, he said, “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt 24:14). Between Jesus’ ascension and his return, god’s people are tasked to proclaim the gospel to the world.

The worldwide proclamation of the gospel in the cities and elsewhere can only be accomplished when all church members, not just ministers, are involved in the work. Thus, Ellen White wrote the following:

The work of God in this earth can never be finished until the men and women, comprising our church membership rally to the work and unite their efforts with those of ministers and church officers. (1948b:117)

The Lord desires His people to arise and do their appointed work. The responsibility of warning the world rests not upon the ministry alone. The lay members of the church are to share in the work of soul saving. By means of missionary visits and by a wise distribution of our literature, many who have never been warned may be reached. (1963:313)

To the church members already located in the cities, Ellen White urged them to do their part in bearing their share of the work.<sup>3</sup> When Stephen Haskell and others were conducting Bible training-school and evening services in New York City in 1902, Ellen White wrote the following: “Let the believers living near the place where you are holding meetings, share the burden of the work. . . . He [God] desires every church-member to labor as his helping hand, seeking by loving ministry to win souls to Christ” (1906:7).

While it is in the order of God that chosen workers of consecration and talent should be stationed in important centers of population to lead out in public efforts, it is also His purpose that the church members living in these cities shall use their God-given talents in working for souls. (White 1911:158)

In connection with Ellen White's call for involvement of church members in working the cities, she wrote about the varied gifts of the church members and the need for training.

### Diversity of Gifts

The apostle Paul used the human body to illustrate diversity of spiritual gifts in his epistles (Eph 4:11-13; 1 Cor 12:4-11; Rom 12:4-8). God endowed the believers with a variety of gifts, and designed that they were to work harmoniously. The challenges in evangelizing the cities called for a variety of approaches. Ellen White articulately the same concept in this way:

In connection with the proclamation of the message in large cities, there are many kinds of work to be done by laborers with varied gifts. Some are to labor in one way, some in another. The Lord desires that the cities shall be worked by the united efforts of different capabilities. (1948b:109)

One worker may be a ready speaker, another a ready writer, another may have the gift of sincere, earnest, fervent prayer, another the gift of singing. Another may have special power to explain the Word of God with clearness. And each gift is to become a power for God because He works with the laborer. To one God gives the word of wisdom, to another knowledge, to another faith. But all are to work under the same Head. The diversity of gifts leads to a diversity of operations, "but it is the same God which worketh all in all" (1 Cor 12:6). (1990:223)

Let not one man feel that his gift alone is sufficient for the work of God; that he alone can carry through a series of meetings, and give perfection to the work. His methods may be good, and yet varied gifts are essential; one man's mind is not to mold and fashion the work according to his special ideas. In order for the work to be built up strong and symmetrical, there is a need for varied gifts and different agencies, all under the Lord's direction; he will instruct the workers according to their several abilities. (White 1874:14)

From the same manuscript Ellen White wrote that the truth must not be hidden. Rather, "it must be shone in our large cities. . . . The message you are bearing is a world-wide message. It is to be given to all cities, to all villages; it is to be proclaimed in the highways and the byways" (1874:3).

Ellen White was aware of the difference between laboring in rural areas and the cities. Challenges include the presence of different classes of people in the cities (1948b:113), different nationalities (1948b:121), business

people (1990:217) and tourists (1948b:122). Work in the cities was difficult, she acknowledged, but vitally important. “We feel intensely regarding the work in our cities. There are few ready to engage in the work waiting to be done. There are people of all classes to be met; and the work is difficult” (1946:36).

During her time, preaching was the primary means of evangelism especially in rural areas. Many preachers travelled from place to place as invitations arrived. They stayed where people offered to put them up for the night, and were often called circuit riders.<sup>4</sup> However, in urging the involvement of all church members and the use of the various gifts or talents in the work in the cities, Ellen White’s view on city evangelism was unique in that she moved beyond preaching and focused on reaching the different classes of people through the involvement of church members and the use of their diverse gifts.<sup>5</sup>

### Training

In a letter to J. H. Kellogg and his wife Ella in 1892, Ellen White noted a problem in city work and emphasized the need for training.

I have been shown that in our labor for the enlightenment of the people in the large cities the work has not been as well organized or the methods of labor as efficient as in other churches that have not the great light we regard as so essential. Why is this? Because so many of our laborers have been those who love to preach (and many who were not thoroughly qualified to preach were set at work) and a large share of the labor has been put forth in preaching. More attention should be given to training and educating missionaries with a special reference to work in the cities. (1892:3)

Ellen White expected church leaders to lead out in training church members specifically for work in the cities.

It is the duty of those who stand as leaders and teachers of the people to instruct church members how to labor in missionary lines, and then to see in operation the great, grand work of proclaiming widely this message which must arouse every unworked city. . . . God requires that we shall give the message of present truth to every city, and not keep the work bound up in a few places. (1990:215)

In a letter to Stephen Haskell and his wife Hetty who were doing city work in New York City, Ellen White underscored the importance and need of training laborers in the work of the cities.

Your work in New York has been started in right lines. You are to make in New York a center for missionary effort, from which work can be carried forward successfully. The Lord desires this center to be a training-school for workers, and nothing is to be allowed to interrupt the work. (1901:2)

Proper training is indispensable in any plan to work in the large cities. "There should be no delay in this well-planned effort to educate the church members. Persons should be chosen to labor in the large cities who are fully consecrated. . . . Do not send those who are not qualified in these respects" (1948b:119).

### **Methods of Labor**

The early years of the Adventist Church benefited much from preaching and tent evangelism as methods in God's work. But when Ellen White urged the church leaders to evangelize the large cities, she clearly counseled the church to move beyond those methods and explore other ways. "New methods must be introduced. God's people must awake to the necessities of the time in which they are living. . . . Some of the methods used in this work will be different from the methods used in the past; but let no one, because of this, block the way by criticism" (1902:7).

The challenges church workers faced in the cities were greater than those in rural areas. She acknowledged that work in the cities was not easy. "In the cities of today, where there is so much to attract and please, the people can be interested by no ordinary efforts" (1948b:109). This called for extraordinary or innovative efforts in reaching the city people.

They must make use of every means that can possibly be devised for causing the truth to stand out clearly and distinctly. . . . While they are to labor earnestly to interest the hearers and to hold this interest, yet at the same time they must carefully guard against anything that borders on sensationalism. (White 1948b:110)

In her counsel on involvement of church members, Ellen White pointed to the personal approach of Christ during his earthly ministry as a model in approaching the masses in the large cities.

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, "Follow me." (1942:143)

This personal approach is best accomplished when church members

are mobilized and properly trained to accomplish their tasks. Every person the church members meet is an opportunity for missionary work.

The Lord has presented before me the work that is to be done in our cities. The believers in these cities are to work for God in the neighborhood of their homes. They are to labor quietly and in humility, carrying with them wherever they go the atmosphere of heaven. If they keep self out of sight, pointing always to Christ, the power of their influence will be felt. (1948b:128)

Church members who follow the approach of Christ in reaching people by using different ways of work will be effective in reaching the populations of large cities. The different lines of city work include house-to-house work (1948b:111), medical evangelism (1948a:111), cooking schools (1948a:113), restaurant work (1948a:115-117; 1990:211), tourist centers and centers of commerce (1948b:121). All these approaches provide avenues for personal contact.<sup>6</sup>

An example is the work of Stephen Haskell. On October 2, 1901, Ellen White wrote a letter to Stephen Haskell.

Brother Haskell, the Lord has given you an opening in New York City, and your mission work there is to be an example of what mission work in other cities should be. . . . You are to make in New York a center for missionary effort, from which work can be carried forward successfully. The Lord desires this center to be a training school for workers, and nothing is to be allowed to interrupt the work. (1901:2)

Stephen and Hetty Haskell “rented a sixth-floor suite of rooms and began giving Bible readings to their neighbors in the same apartment house” (Moon 2013:404). The Haskell team included 20 workers—nurses, Bible instructors, cooking school instructors, and young people who sold books and magazines on the streets. They employed different methods in their work in the city. Ellen White commended Haskell’s work which she saw as “an example of what mission work in other cities should be”<sup>7</sup> (1901:1).

### Visual Aids

Ellen White did not originate the various methods of work in the cities. Rather, she kept an open mind and was keen in observing the effective work of others. Such was the case of William W. Simpson who became successful in using three-dimensional visual aids in his preaching in the cities of California. Simpson used papier-maché beasts to illustrate his lectures from the books of Daniel and Revelation which he had rolled out onto the stage at appropriate moment during his preaching. Ellen White

commended this method which proved effective in captivating the attention of the audience in her day (Fortin 2013:511).

### Medical Missionary Work

Ellen White also pointed to medical missionary work as an effective entering wedge. “Doors that have been closed to him who merely preaches the gospel will be opened to the intelligent medical missionary” (1946:513). In using Christ as an example of a medical missionary worker, Ellen White wrote that during his ministry “Jesus devoted more time to healing the sick than to preaching” (1940:350). He stands before us “the pattern Man, the great Medical Missionary—an example for all who should come after” (1963:20). She strongly urged workers to use medical missionary work in the cities.

Medical missionary work must have its representatives in our cities. Centers must be made and missions established in right lines. Ministers of the gospel are to unite with the medical missionary work, which has ever been presented to me as the work which is to break down the prejudice which exists in our world against the truth. The medical missionary work is growing in importance, and claims the attention of the churches. It is a part of the gospel message, and must receive recognition. (1963:241)

Medical missions work as the “right, helping hand of the gospel to open the door for the proclamation of the gospel” (1946:513). Ellen White saw the health message as an effective method in reaching some groups of city residents who might not be reached by other means.

Medical missionary evangelists will be able to do excellent pioneer work. The work of the minister should blend fully with that of the medical missionary evangelist. The Christian physician should regard his work as exalted as that of the ministry. Physicians whose professional abilities are above those of the ordinary doctor should engage in the service of God in the large cities. They should seek to reach the higher classes. (1948a:111)

### Observations

Ellen White wrote extensively regarding work in the cities. She addressed many aspects of city missions. This paper discussed Ellen White’s views on three areas: God as the author of the work in the cities, the laborers who would do city missions, and methods of labor. The overall general observation is that though the writings of Ellen White on city missions

were written more than 100 years ago, their relevance and significance have not diminished. On the contrary, the growing challenges encountered in city missions showed the currency of her counsels. The timeliness of her views is so striking that one might think Ellen White wrote them for our times. I offer five observations on specific aspects of her ideas on city missions.

1. In Ellen White's first communication to the 38th General Conference Session, she stated, "There seemed to be a great movement—a work of revival—going forward in many places. Our people were moving into line, responding to God's call" (1913a:34). Then in the second communication which A. G. Daniells read before the delegates in the same General Conference session, she wrote, "Christ is opening the hearts and minds of many in our large cities. . . . The large and small cities, and places nigh and afar off, are to be worked, and worked intelligently" (1913b:164).

The two messages were separate and different. However, these ideas were related. The work in the cities is to be Spirit-led, and the success in presenting the gospel message to the millions of inhabitants in the cities is connected with the leading of the Holy Spirit. The Pentecost experience in the book of Acts illustrates this. After a season of soul-searching prayer, the Holy Spirit empowered the early Christian believers to preach the Gospel in Jerusalem with amazing results. Those who listened were "Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs" (Acts 2:9).

The relationship between revival and the call for work in the cities from the two messages of Ellen White to the General Conference in her day should serve as a blueprint for the Seventh-day Adventist city work in our time. In 2011, Ted Wilson, president of the General Conference, called for renewed revival and reformation. This was followed by a global call to work in the cities. The need for personal and corporate revival is indispensable in the planning and preparation for work in the cities.

2. The centrality of Christ is evident in the writings of Ellen White regarding city missions. This is a significant aspect of Ellen White's views. She always referred to Christ as an example when discussing city missions. She wrote that "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good" (1942:143). She lifted up Christ as the pattern and example, "the great Medical Missionary" (1963:20). She also noted that during his ministry, Jesus did more healing than preaching (1940:350). Her emphasis on a Christ-centered approach was based on a strong biblical foundation.

3. The involvement of church members in city missions is also strongly

emphasized in the writings of Ellen White. She explicitly stated that God's work on earth could only be finished when "men and women comprising our church membership rally to the work and unite their efforts with those of ministers and church officers" (1948b:117). She also wrote regarding the diversity of spiritual gifts among the members. Success in city missions involves the use of various approaches and employing the different talents of members. "The Lord desires that the cities shall be worked by the united efforts of different capabilities" (1948b:109). Ellen White saw all believers—church members and ministers—working side by side in the proclamation of the gospel to the cities.

4. Ellen White pointed to the training of laborers as a key ingredient for effective work in the cities. A laborer who was successful in rural areas might not be equally successful in the cities. "There should be no delay in this well-planned effort to educate the church members. Persons should be chosen to labor in the large cities who are fully consecrated" (1948b:119). To reach the millions in the cities with the gospel, continuous training is an essential part of city missions. Ellen White wanted to see experienced ministers working the cities while at the same time mentoring younger workers.

5. The different approaches in reaching the cities as presented by Ellen White—house to house work, restaurants, medical missionary work—all had personal contact and stressed one-to-one evangelism. The framework of Ellen White's views on methods of labor is the ministry of Jesus where he mingled with people, got to know them and their needs, showed sympathy, ministered to their specific needs, and won their confidence. It was only then that he encouraged them to follow him (1942:143).

Ellen White was ahead of her times when she described the ministry of Jesus as not only "mingling" with the people but "living" or "dwelling" with them. "In our work we are to remember the way in which Christ worked. He made the world. He made man. Then he came in person to the world to show its inhabitants how to live a sinless life" (1901:1). Ellen White correlated this incarnational ministry with the work of Stephen and Hetty Haskell in New York City as an example of how cities should be worked.

## Conclusion

Ellen White's writings clearly show that God was giving insight and guidance concerning work in the cities in her time. In her dream, she saw God follow with great interest the deliberations of the church leaders regarding city missions. She heard God commanding that the cities must be worked (1948a:34-35). God, who oversaw the rise and development of the

Seventh-day Adventist Church, is still interested in seeing his witnesses successfully work in the cities.

Ellen White's views came as a result of God-given instructions on city missions; however, she was not the originator of specific strategies for city work. Rather, she kept an open mind not only to the guidance of God but also to the ideas around her. Ellen White commended and encouraged workers when she learned of their new effective ideas. She commended the work of Stephen and Hetty Haskell in New York City as "an example of what mission work in other cities should be" (1901:1). She commended William Simpson for his creative use of papier mache images in a day when electronic aids were non-existent. Ellen White was innovative in that she integrated divine counsels and practical realities in her philosophy of city work. Her emphasis on the involvement of church members, their training, and the need to meet various needs of different types of people in the cities show a comprehensive approach in fulfilling the gospel commission.

Significant in her views was the centrality of Christ in city work. Ellen White looked upon the pattern of Christ's ministry as an example in city missions. Christ preached the gospel and addressed the spiritual, physical, and emotional needs of the multitude. He lived among the people he was reaching out to. Doing city missions in our time means more than preaching. It also calls for involvement in the life of the community and addressing the felt needs of city people. If Ellen White were to address the Adventist Church today, I am sure she would say, "As Jesus worked, go and do likewise."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A number of studies have been published on Ellen G. White's writings on city missions: N. C. Ted Wilson, "A Study of Ellen G. White's Theory of Urban Religious Work as It Relates to Seventh-day Adventist Work in New York City," PhD dissertation, New York University, 1981; W. A. Westerhout, *Science of Metropolitan Medical Missionary Evangelism*, 1969, an unpublished manuscript; *Lake Union Herald* published a cover article, "An Appeal to Work in Our Big Cities," June-July 2014, 14-19, a compilation of Ellen White's quotations.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen White generally used the phrase "work in the cities" in her writings to refer to city missions or city evangelism. I followed Ellen White's usage in the main section of the paper. For the title, observations, conclusion and endnotes, I used "city missions" to reflect current usage. Essentially, all phrases refer the same thing, which is the reaching out to the cities or the proclamation of the gospel to the cities.

- <sup>3</sup> George R. Knight discussed outpost evangelism and city living in his article “Living in Cities,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, 714-716. Knight pointed out that Ellen White at one time explicitly encouraged Adventist families to settle in the cities and work from within.
- <sup>4</sup> See Hampton E. Walker’s “History of Seventh-day Adventist Evangelistic Methods,” research paper, Andrews University, 1972. The evangelistic methods Walker surveyed included circuit preaching, publishing work, medical work, camp meetings, literature evangelism, papier mache images, harvest ingathering, telephone evangelism, radio broadcast, television, etc.
- <sup>5</sup> “Mobilizing the Laity for Ministry” in Monte Sahlin’s *Mission in Metropolis: The Adventist Movement in an Urban World*, Lincoln, Nebraska: Center for Creative Ministry, 2007, provided valuable information on involvement of church members. *Mission in Metropolis* is an important resource on city missions. This book is replete not only with ideas but also with clear examples and stories.
- <sup>6</sup> See also Miroslav Pujic on the methods in reaching out to the postmodern generation in “Re-imagining Evangelism in a Postmodern Culture,” *Ministry: International Journal for Pastors*, vol. 85, no. 5, May 2013: 13-16.
- <sup>7</sup> See Gary Krause for the description of the incarnational ministry of Stephen Haskell in New York City in “Treading Urban Ground Like Jesus,” *Ministry: International Journal for Pastors*, vol. 85, no. 5, May 2013: 6-9.

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