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# Country Versus City Tension: Historical and Socio-religious Context of the Development of Adventist Understanding of Urban Mission

## Introduction

Since 2013, with the approval of the document, *It's Time: The Urgency of Urban Mission* (2013), the Seventh-day Adventist Church's worldwide headquarters has given a new emphasis in the evangelization of global metropolises. This incentive has taken place during the presidency of Ted N. C. Wilson. Wilson began his pastoral ministry in New York City in 1974 and defended his doctoral dissertation at New York University in 1981 regarding Ellen White's view on how the church's evangelistic work should be carried out in the largest city in the United States.

However, this renewed emphasis is not only due to the efforts of Wilson, but especially to the few Adventists in many large American and European cities, as well as in the urban conglomerates emerging in Asia and Africa (Sahlin 2011).

A mapping of the Adventist presence in cities around the world that had more than one million inhabitants was published in 2014. Using the studies of demographer Thomas Brinkhoff, the authors cataloged 504 cities. The most recent survey indicated (May 2019) 575 metropolises with populations of a million or more (Brinkhoff 2019). They sought to identify how many members, congregations, and institutions the denomination had in those cities. While 23.89% of the global population was living in the cities of a million or more, only 13.3% of Adventists were located in those same urban areas (McEdward and Trim 2014:8).

In population agglomerations where the church presence was less expressive, there were 119 cities with fewer than 125 Adventists and in 42 of them there were fewer than 10 members. In Brazil, where there is a more significant Adventist presence in urban centers, 26% of Adventists were living in state capitals in October 2014 (Lima 2014).

Faced with this challenging picture, there is a new moment in Adventist urban mission in which materials are being published, conferences organized, and churches as well as projects established around the world. However, it has not always been so. The Adventist engagement in the evangelization of cities has been timid and, for many decades, even discouraged by an anti-urban attitude. This mentality of criticism and resistance to the cities was largely sustained through an incomplete and/or misreading of Ellen White's writings (Jones 2013:716). This article seeks to describe Adventist rural/urban tension, the historical and social context of its origin, and how it has been softened by a contrasting broader view of Adventist urban mission.

### **Tension Between Country and City in 19th Century America: Establishing a Historical Social Context**

Christian mistrust and prejudice against large cities are not new, especially in the religious context of the Puritan matrix in the United States of America in the second half of the 19th century (Conn 1994). From Genesis to Revelation the term "city" appears more than 1,400 times in the Bible. Because of the biblical narratives such as the building of the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:1-29), among others, cities are often portrayed in Christian and Protestant imagery as centers of opposition to God and strongholds of corruption, immorality, and violence (Ellul 2011).

Several Protestant circles recognized that cities were one of the recurring and prominent themes in the biblical narrative; however, they mainly attributed to the city negative and pejorative attributes. For most Protestants in the 19th century, the city was a symbol of everything wrong: "an alien and hostile world hopelessly steeped in rum and Romanism" (Douglass 1998:47). Between the American Civil War (1861-1865) and World War I (1914-1918), many Protestants saw the city as a theological problem, rather than a missiological opportunity. "The language of the pathologist dominated Protestant rhetoric about the city. Like historians now, Protestants then employed images of decline, decay, and denouement rather than nurture, growth, or maturity to describe their fate in the city" (Butler 1997:297).

Paul Boyer (1992) produced one of the most comprehensive studies about the understanding of the city as a source of moral problem in the United States of the 19th and early 20th century (see also Abell 1943; May 1967). During the 1900s, America underwent one of its most profound transformations, namely, the transition from an agrarian to an urban society. During this period, the process of urbanization worked as a catalyst

for both action and social speculation. “Fears about industrialization, immigration, family disruption, religious change, and deepening class divisions” were all focused on the growing cities. “Social thinkers, reformers, philanthropists, and others whose assumptions and activities seemed otherwise very different were often linked by a shared preoccupation with the city and, more specifically, by a common interest in controlling the behavior of an increasingly urbanized populace” (Boyer 1992:vii).

This growing urban population was made up not only of Protestant Americans but also by Catholics from Ireland, Italy, and other European countries. As a product of the migratory flow received by America in the first decades of the 20th century, this diversity produced cultural and religious tension in the nation. It is estimated that the population of the United States jumped from 5 million people in 1800 to 20 million in 1850, and the volume of immigration also grew from 150,000 in the 1820s to 2.5 million by the middle of the century (Douglass 1998:46).

The Protestant reaction to the moral dangers offered by urbanization was, at first, focused on punctual actions through crusades focusing on both moral and social reforms. The ineffectiveness of these events in the medium and long-term, however, convinced many religious people that more aggressive action was needed to change the urban reality. The Protestant responses to the issue of large cities were based on the idea that “the key to dealing with the urban challenge lay in re-creating in the cities the moral order of the village,” with Sunday schools and the distribution of Bibles, pamphlets, and booklets produced by the Bible Societies and religious literature of that time (Boyer 1992:2).

### Country Versus City Tensions in Adventism

As a religious movement that originated mostly among ordinary people from rural New England, Adventism inherited from the Protestant tradition both a positive view of the benefits of the countryside and a negative view of the evils of life in the cities.

Adventist sociologist Haller Schünemann, studied the beginnings of Adventism in Brazil and perceived similarities between the first Brazilian converts and the initial community of Adventists in the United States. Both groups were largely composed of small landowners with a pietistic religious background who placed a strong emphasis on a life of holiness as a preparation for the divine judgment (2003:32, 33).

Monte Sahlin (2007:16) additionally notes that both the small town and the rural church have become the paradigm of the Adventist lifestyle in the United States. Adventism was born in a rural context and the denomination’s appeal has historically been directed to those areas (25).

In studying the history of Adventism, it is possible to identify the development of country versus city tension in three phases. First, during the period in which Ellen White developed her thoughts and views about the relationship of the Christian to both the countryside and the city. Second, during the period after the death of Ellen White, in which the denomination came to emphasize an anti-urban stance, largely due to the publication of the compilation, *Country Living*. Third, during the recent period when ecclesiastical discourses and actions point to a more balanced and thoughtful view of the city.

### Ellen White's Views

As Butler (1997) and Jones (2013) have pointed out, the anti-urban mentality was not hegemonic in 19th century America—many Christians sustained an ambivalent view of the cities, and Ellen White was one of them. On the one hand, she promoted country life as an ideal for Adventists, because of its more natural and slow-paced environment. It also offered an environment where Adventist were less likely to be “infected” with crime, chaos, corruption, and health problems generally associated with cities of that time.

On the other hand, Ellen White was very concerned about urban evangelism. She was disturbed by the fact that the church leadership of her time was slow in proposing a strategy for cities that were becoming metropolises, such as New York City. Ellen White went so far as to doubt the genuine conversion of A. G. Daniells, church world president in the early 20th century, questioning whether he was able to lead the church. She refused to receive him a few times until he was able to present a bold plan to evangelize the cities (A. White 1982:239-251). For Ellen White, to see the cities being reached by the Adventist message was almost an obsession, and she criticized the neglect with which the great cities of that time were being treated by the church (Jones 2013:717).

To correct this neglect by the church was something that marked Ellen White's ministry, especially after her first trip abroad from 1885 to 1887. According to D. A. Delafield (1975:35, 44, 95), White became impressed by the social, cultural, and religious challenges of the great cities in Europe, and she anticipated the emergence of this same scenario of urbanization and industrialization in America.

Regarding evangelistic outreach in England, for example, especially in London, White showed impatience with the reduced number of missionaries and resources employed in that city. She also acknowledged that it was necessary to observe how Britain society was formed, what groups

formed it, and what different approaches were to be used for each of these social classes (White 1946:414-418).

The time has come to make decided efforts to proclaim the truth in our large cities. The message is to be given with such power that the hearers shall be convinced. God will raise up laborers to do this work. Let no one hinder these men of God's appointment. Forbid them not. God has given them their work. They will occupy peculiar spheres of influence and will carry the truth to the most unpromising places. (White 1902:40)

For White, what was under discussion was not an evaluation of *whether* or not Christians should evangelize cities, but *how* to do so (Knight 2001; Jones 2013). She developed in her writings a model of missionary work called *outpost evangelism*. This model suggested that Christians engaged in evangelistic outreach in the city should live outside it, establishing themselves in the suburbs or in rural areas. "The cities are to be worked from outposts. 'Shall not the cities be warned? Yes; not by God's people living in them, but by their visiting them, to warn them of what is coming upon the earth'" (White 1958:353).

According to Knight (2013:715), there are 22 statements by Ellen White on so-called "outpost" evangelism. Part of her counsels dealt with this, as it was a way of reconciling the ideal of living in the countryside without neglecting the mission in the cities. What many Adventists would ignore after her death, however, is the context of these statements. According to Knight (715, 716), each of these quotations refers to the establishment of Adventist medical, educational, and publishing institutions. In Ellen White's view, such institutions were to be established in the countryside or in the suburbs of large urban centers, and their staff could travel to metropolitan areas to participate in evangelistic outreach, such as churches, vegetarian restaurants, bookshops, child daycare centers, and elementary schools.

Given this evangelistic model, White made recommendations that local churches should be built within cities; Adventist institutions, however, including publishing houses, medical centers, and even training and education centers, should be established outside of them.

Repeatedly the Lord has instructed us that we are to work the cities from outpost centers. In these cities we are to have houses of worship, as memorials for God; but institutions for the publication of our literature, for the healing of the sick, and for the training of workers, are to be established outside the cities. Especially is it important that our youth be shielded from the temptations of city life. (White 1958:354)

White also understood that this orientation could be adapted according to the need of the various mission fields. For example, although she recommended that boarding schools should be established in rural areas, of which Avondale College in Australia is a classic example, it was necessary to consider the natural tensions between the ideal and real conditions (Knight 2013:715).

According to Knight, one of the “most destructive myths in Adventist thinking is that of the inflexible prophet.” In other words, it became fashionable in Adventism to use Ellen White as a radical interpreter of her own writings—the true followers of the pioneer’s instructions was to be as strict as she was. Those who adopted this view tended to defend their positions based on incisive and isolated texts from both the Bible and Ellen White’s writings that they applied in a careless way to daily life (Knight 1985:17). The result was an extreme posture.

This took place roughly in every area of Adventist lifestyle, including clothing, diet, education, and mission to the cities (Knight 1985:19). Intriguingly, this selective, authoritarian use of Ellen White’s writings was already taking place when she was alive—a position that she clearly disapproved of (White 1958:285, 286).

For this reason, it makes sense to note that between 1900 and 1910, Ellen White offered another possibility of evangelistic work in big cities. This was due to the expansion of Adventist colleges in poor regions, which at that time were largely inhabited by African Americans (who were still suffering from social and economic consequences of both the Civil War and the abolition of slavery decades earlier). In special situations, she advised, educational institutions should be established in the city.

Those who for years have been working to help the colored [Black] people are well fitted to give counsel in regard to the opening of such schools. *So far as possible these schools should be established outside the cities.* But in the cities there are many children who could not attend schools away from the cities; and for the benefit of these, *schools should be opened in the cities as well as in the country.*

The children and youth in these schools are to be taught something more than merely how to read. Industrial lines of work are to be carried forward. The students are to be provided with facilities for learning trades that will enable them to support themselves. (White 1909:175, 176; italics supplied)

White also recommended that some families move to major urban centers to develop personal evangelistic outreach. She considered the work of Pastor Haskell and his wife, Hetty, in New York City, a model that should take place in other similar contexts (Jones 2013:717).

The Haskells moved to New York and used an approach that involved various methods, such as “door-to-door selling of books, personal Bible studies, workers’ meetings to teach personal evangelism, utilization of health education to arouse public interest, printed Bible studies, evangelistic journals, contacting business and professional leaders, finding suitable sites for public meetings” (Douglass 1998:213). An evangelistic principle by Ellen White that the Haskells seem to have taken seriously was to spend less time on sermons and more on personal work for those interested in the Adventist message, whether in homes or congregations (217).

The Haskells mission team in New York eventually numbered 20 people, including nurses, Bible instructors, cooking school instructors, and young colporteurs (book and magazine sellers). The group was sustained by the salary of the couple as well as the income obtained by the sale of literature. From 1901 to 1912, the Haskells also worked in other American urban centers, such as Nashville, San Bernardino, Oakland, and Portland. One of the last major works by Stephen and Hetty was raising \$60,000 for the construction of the White Memorial Medical Center in Los Angeles (Moon 2013:404).

In summary, there are two parallel orientations of Ellen White concerning the work of the church in cities. First, Adventist institutions should be established in the countryside or suburbs, with their workers visiting the great cities from those outposts. Second, families need to be sent to the cities in order to establish churches, restaurants, bookstores, child daycare centers, and schools. However, the fact is that after her death, as will be seen below, only the first counsel of Ellen White was emphasized, while the other part was largely forgotten and neglected (Knight 2013:715, 716).

Many of Ellen White’s quotations used by advocates of anti-urban discourse in Adventism refer to what she wrote between 1901 and 1906 in the context of a conflict between Doctor John Harvey Kellogg and the world leadership of the denomination. However, from 1906 onwards, there are several statements highlighting the need to evangelize cities (Sahlin 2007:9). Again, however, only the first part of her writings has been emphasized.

Ellen White’s insistence on the evangelization of the great cities had some results in her time. It was at the turn of the century between 1890 and 1910 that Adventist mission to the cities reached its climax (Knight 1999:124; Krause 2014:51). From 1883 to 1893, the first Adventist missions in cities were established. The *Church Yearbooks* from 1885 to 1904 point out this development (Sahlin 2007:8). The 1886 record, for instance, reported the existence of 36 missionary initiatives in cities, with 102 church staff and 224 volunteers working. In Krause’s view, these numbers were significant for a church with just over 23,000 members at that time (2014:50, 51).

According to Knight (1999:124), the pioneer “proved to be a moving force in urging the denomination forward,” and Bauer (2013:996) believes that Ellen White was preeminent in shaping the Adventist vision of mission. However, other people also played an important role in this process. Among them were Doctors John Harvey Kellogg and David Paulson, who worked on the “front line” of Adventist medical care in Chicago (Krause 2014:50), and Stephen Haskell, already referred to, with his work in New York City (Knight 2001). At the administrative level, Arthur G. Daniells, General Conference president in the early decades of the 20th century helped broaden the Adventist concept of mission. During his years in administration, there was a significant increase of missionaries sent out from North America and evangelistic outreach to cities also gained new impetus (Oosterwal 1972:30).

Another noteworthy event was the holding of a five-day meeting in early July, 1910, in New York City by the executive committee of the General Conference to discuss urban strategies. Articles were presented; however, the group decided not to publish the material. It is also interesting to note that at the last General Conference session (1909) that Ellen White participated in, she made her last appeal that missions to the cities not be forgotten. However, with Ellen White’s death in 1915, Adventist urban mission lost its main advocate. Her pro-rural writings were more emphasized in the following decades and an anti-urban stance, as part of the broader Protestant tradition that was wide-spread in the 19th century, was emphasized and intensified in Adventist circles. This phase of Adventist mission history is classified by Sahlin (2007:12) as “city neglect.”

### Ellen White’s Post-death Views and Eschatological Tones

From 1913 to the 1940s, there was a shift in focus on Adventist outreach efforts in cities. The denomination prioritized work with immigrants and ethnic minorities. It was during this period that African American congregations began to grow, as well as ethnic churches among Germans, Italians, and other Europeans, especially in the northeastern cities of the country (Sahlin 2007:15).

In addition to the two world wars and all the political and social implications they brought to the religious scene of the time, the period between 1920 and 1950s witnessed major theological debates in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the United States. This period was critical for Adventism because American Protestantism had polarized itself between “conservatives (fundamentalists) and liberals (modernists),” and the church was forced to position itself on that spectrum (Knight 2000:129).

For Sahlin (2007:16), the dualistic theology of American fundamentalism

influenced Adventists, as well as other Protestants, to ignore the social implications of the gospel. As a result, Adventists began to show less interest in urban mission and its complexities, as well as in humanitarian work in general. There was also growing emphasis on the importance of leaving the cities

In this period of tension between tradition and modernity, one of the major issues debated by the church was the validity, scope, and inspiration of the writings of Ellen White. In the first decades of the 20th century, Ellen White's writings acquired among most Adventists a status that rivaled the Scriptures. At a time when the literalness of the biblical text was being questioned in academic circles, theories of biblical inerrancy were applied to the writings of the Adventist pioneer. The notion that White's counsels were irreplaceable, ahead of her time, and that "all her writings came through direct revelation from heaven" (as opposed to what she herself claimed) became rooted in Adventist culture (Knight 2000:158).

This was the context that enabled a radical and selective reading of Ellen White's writings on city life. Although American Protestantism had long nurtured an anti-urban sentiment, as already described in this article, Adventism went further, adding to this posture a strong eschatological tone. This view was enabled by the Adventist apocalyptic view of a final persecution of believers. In addition to dealing with this theme in other works, it is in *The Great Controversy*, that Ellen White states that, before the end, God's people will be persecuted by the unfaithful possessors of the "mark of the beast," and that this persecution would begin in large cities (White 1911:631; 1932:166; 1992:121).

White suggests that there will come a time when Adventists should migrate from the cities to the countryside in order to seek refuge during this future period of intolerance, which may be considered as one of the more "intriguing manifestations of the exclusivist and sectarian facet of the Adventist eschatological vocation" (Novaes 2016:87). Silvia Scholtus also states that an extreme view of biblical prophecy motivated some Adventist groups to leave city life to better prepare for the end of the world in rural environments (2002:313).

This Adventist anti-urban understanding with its eschatological connotation gained more force with the 1946 publication of Ellen White's posthumous compilation of passages entitled *Country Living*. This booklet presented an "idyllic picture of the moral and social benefits of living in a rural environment" (Fortin 2013:743). Curiously, Ellen White wrote most of the material selected to compose this work between 1890 and 1910, when she most talked about urban mission.

According to Fortin (743), cities are described in *Country Living* as breeding grounds for iniquity and vice, where life is false and artificial.

He enumerates three reasons pointed out by Ellen White for Adventists to avoid living in cities. First, the rural environment is more conducive to a lifestyle marked by simplicity, self-sacrifice, and economy. Second, living in the countryside promotes integral health, which includes harmony between body, mind, and soul, a belief valued by the Adventist anthropological-theological perspective. Third, by living away from the great cities, Adventists would experience God's protection from the impeding judgments on those cities.

In the years following the publication of *Country Living* ecclesiastical leaders felt the first effects of the work upon the American Adventist community. Although the Ellen White passages used for the book were originally written in the 1910s, her advices gained further meaning for readers of the time of that publication who had experienced the traumas of World War II.

Soon, a large number of Adventist families, especially in the United States, began to move to rural areas. The migratory movement generated strong concerns among church leaders, since many families were motivated by impulse and devotion, but lacked solid family and financial planning. Faced with reports of health problems and financial difficulties among the rural migrants, church leaders in North America in 1950 published the book, *From City to Country Living: A Guide to Those Making the Change*, as a kind of guide to instruct those who were thinking of moving from urban centers to rural areas.

In 1978 the General Conference recommended that the book be republished after being updated by Ellen White's grandson, Arthur White, who was one of the original authors. The coauthor of the material was Edward A. Sutherland, an educator, pioneer of Adventist universities, and compiler of the book *Country Living*. When these books were released, Sutherland was secretary of the "Country Life Commission" at the church's world headquarters (White and Sutherland 2019:7-10). Almost 70 years after its publication in English, this work was translated into Portuguese and published in Brazil in 2019.

The book, *From City to Country Living*, was written by people who had lived with Ellen White and who had experienced life in rural environments for decades. It was a practical guide for the application of *Country Living*, helping those who chose to make that kind of lifestyle change to have a successful experience by dealing with the benefits of country life and sharing the promises of God for those doing it. It also encouraged people not to make hasty changes in this regard, described the challenges of country living, how to grow a vegetable garden, and how to develop enterprises outside the city. The book emphasized that Adventists should not seek social isolation when desiring personal survival, but should be

active in witnessing to other people. It also offered advice concerning children's access to school and ways to improve a self-sustaining lifestyle.

Even after the publication of the guide on how to move from the city to the countryside, *Country Living* had a profound impact upon the Adventist ethos, including its philosophy of education, home life, and methods of evangelism. It is largely because of the isolated reading of this work that many Adventists have nourished a certain aversion toward cities (Fortin 2013:743). In addition to the Adventist migration to the countryside, this anti-urban emphasis also encouraged the practice of homeschooling among church members and promoted the idea of establishing boarding schools away from the major urban centers.

Gary Krause (2014:52) also points out that for a long time in the history of Adventism—especially after White's death—the dominant discourse on urban mission was against cities. This scenario began to change in the 1950s when the church again started investing in ministries within large metropolitan areas such as New York and London. In the 1960s with the national context in America involved with the civil rights movement and the tragic death of Martin Luther King, Jr. Adventist African Americans promoted the need for the church's mission to include a strong emphasis on social justice (Sahlin 2007:18, 19). During that same period the church established health and wellness centers in several cities to serve the community and Adventist Community Services (ACS) were promoted in several conferences in the United States.

As Gottfried Oosterwal (1980) noted, until the 1970s Adventists had done nothing, with few exceptions, of much significance in the cities. It seems that the anti-urban perspective with its eschatological premise continued to have a strong impact in the decades following the publication of *Country Living*.

### Return to More Balanced Views of Urban Mission

As noted above, two main factors shaped the Adventist anti-urban stance: the initial resistance to the 19th century urbanization process by a church born in the American rural context and a selective reading of Ellen White's writings by many Adventists in the decades after her death. Some might think that in order to reverse this situation, it would be necessary to destabilize and deconstruct these two pillars.

As the Seventh-day Adventist Church moved from the 19th century into the 20th century, the church began to undergo an internationalization process. The denomination that was born rural and North American was becoming urban and worldwide. The global demographic movements themselves, which moved people from the countryside to the city, first

in the developed countries and more recently in the emerging nations, forced Adventists to take a comprehensive look at their mission strategies. After all, it would not make sense for a denomination with a strong evangelistic spirit to leave the cities, when much of the world's population was migrating into urban centers.

While geographical and cultural changes pressured the denomination to revise its anti-urban stance, on the other hand, it also forced the church to reread the writings of Ellen White or to understand them more comprehensively. How can Ellen White's advice to leave the cities and evangelize urban centers be reconciled? Adventist scholars have focused on this subject, notably the works of Wilson (1981), Knight (2001), and Sahlin (2007), as well as the articles by Jones, Knight, and Fortin in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, published by the General Conference in 2013.

Sahlin, for example, surveyed Ellen White's 107 magazine articles, which mention cities. He found that 24 of them emphasized leaving urban areas, 75 offered counsel to move to cities in order to evangelize them, while 8 publications criticized the conditions of the cities of that time without saying whether or not Adventists should leave them or move to them (2007:16).

In the 1980s and 1990s, churches in the United States became more concerned about social inequalities and realized that black youth living in cities did not have the opportunity to live the "American dream" (Sahlin 2007:22). During this period, Adventists established evangelistic centers in many cities and did research to evaluate the Adventist presence in urban areas. Churches started pilot projects to test new approaches and more churches mapped and studied their communities to better respond to local needs.

One of the new approaches that emerged from these "think-tanks on evangelism" was the satellite preaching campaigns entitled NET 95, 96, and 98 (Sahlin 2007:23). The intention was to transmit religious programs and preaching to the countries of North, South and Central America, Africa and Europe with simultaneous translation. These broadcasts "were not simply an evangelistic series, but a systematic method to spread Adventism around the world" (Schwarz and Greenleaf 2000:576). Despite its high cost, church leaders saw the initiative as an effective means of communicating the Adventist message, especially to the world's megacities. It is estimated that 100,000 people listened to the 1996 campaign.

After nearly a hundred years, urban mission was again the subject of a General Conference session in 2005. Pat Gustin, then director of the church's Institute of World Mission, presented a report that outlined the rapid urbanization of the world and the growth of secular people. She emphasized the rapid growth of slums in many cities and said that the

church needed to use new and varied methods to reach the large cities of the world. Shortly thereafter, the “Hope for the Big Cities” project launched, which challenged denominational leaders to establish 200 new churches in the world’s 54 largest cities by 2010 (Sahlin 2007:26).

In 2005, the *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* was created with the proposal to be a forum for discussion on Adventist mission involving church leaders, academics, and missionaries (Bauer 2005:1). There are 18 articles in this academic journal dealing with urban mission, which Lima classified into four categories: demographic, sociocultural, theological, and methodological challenges. Texts about demography have to do especially with the mapping of the Adventist presence in the great cities of the world; those dealing with sociocultural challenges mainly discuss factors such as immigration, intergenerational and ethnic conflicts, and the emergence of the new cultural paradigm called postmodernity. In turn, most of the material focuses on the theological-methodological challenges of the Adventist urban mission, such as country versus city tension, a more comprehensive and holistic view of evangelization in urban areas, and the use of methods such as planting churches and the establishment of missionary communities (Lima 2018).

In addition to the emergence of academic studies on urban mission, the Global Mission program is another important element in seeking to understand the recovery of the emphasis on big city evangelism from the 1980s onward. Global Mission was partly created in response to the evangelical mission concept of the 10/40 Window, where most of the world’s unreached people were located and where few Christians lived. Global Mission was a worldwide program that sought to establish a new local church between 1990 and 2000 in each of the 1,800 segments of 1 million people where Adventism was not represented. The goal was huge, requiring one new congregation every two days.

Adventists traditionally had measured their fulfillment of the gospel commission by counting the numbers of countries in which they had established the work of the church, but this practice changed. After a sequence of brainstorming sessions and committee meetings between 1986 and 1989 church leaders called upon Adventists to visualize the world population as consisting of people groups rather than countries. These enclaves of people, defined by culture or language, existed independently or as subgroups in a country. A global strategy meeting in 1989 combined or divided these people groups into population segments, each with about a million persons. Of the 5000 segments in the world, 1800 were unentered by Adventism. (Schwarz and Greenleaf 2000:579)

More than only a program, the Global Mission initiative became a department within the Adventist Church's administrative structure that in 2005 took on a new name of Adventist Mission. Alberto R. Timm suggests that this new missionary strategy followed three previous Adventist mission phases: (1) mission restricted to North America (1844-1874); (2) mission to all continents (1874-1901); (3) mission to all countries (1901-1990); and (4) mission to all peoples (1990 onwards) (2011:21). The denomination came to recognize that the major challenges of mission were not geographical, but ethnic, cultural, and religious.

Following this new phase, Ted Wilson, the current president of the General Conference who was elected for the first time in 2010 and whose second term ends in 2020, has prioritized mission to the cities. Evidence for this is the fact that the document *It's Time: The Urgency of Urban Mission*, approved in 2013, has once again put the evangelization of cities as a priority of the church. The document recognized that the misguided view of urban centers has disrupted Adventist urban evangelism and acknowledged that while Ellen White appealed more than a hundred years ago for the church to prioritize cities, a selective reading of her writings prevented the urban work from advancing (*It's Time: The Urgency of Urban Mission* 2013). A website based on the document was launched to foster urban mission projects around the world: <https://missiontothecities.org>. The virtual space offers articles, a book with stories outlining faithful engagement in urban mission, and courses in text and video.

In 2012, another important step took place with the publication of the book, *Ministry to the Cities*. As one of the more recent compilations of Ellen White's writings, this work reflects the church's concern to return to a more balanced view of urban mission by offering a more comprehensive approach to urban evangelism (White 2012:8). The book deals with urban mission strategies, biblical examples of how God dealt with cities, the importance of church planting, and the integration of gospel preaching and the promotion of preventive health.

Two interrelated concepts were incorporated in the Adventist discourse on urban mission in this new phase—the “method of Christ” and “centers of influence.” Christ's methods refer to Ellen White's counsel for the church to evangelize as Jesus did: (1) mingling with the people, (2) showing sympathy, (3) ministering to their needs, (4) winning their trust, and (5) calling individuals to follow Christ (White 1905:143). Adventist missiologists have seen in this text the concept of “incarnational ministry,” an idea that is much present today in mission studies. Those who defend the appropriation of this concept understand that urban mission should combine gospel proclamation with service to the community, and that the gospel can only be truly understood if testimony is given through words and actions contextualized to the culture of the recipient.

The second concept, “centers of influence,” has to do with the spaces created for the “method of Christ” to be practiced. Ellen White also used that expression in speaking to Adventist leaders in her day about the need to establish vegetarian restaurants, reading rooms, healthy cooking schools, and other services in cities (White 1923:481). Those spaces did not have to be large; instead, she encouraged small facilities where community needs could be met and personal witness given regarding the Adventist message.

The most recent phase of this growing awareness and importance of city work was symbolized by the launching of the strategic plan for the quinquennial 2015-2020 entitled *Reach the World*, in which the emphasis on urban mission stands out. Two major studies involving 41,000 respondents, including church members, leaders, and former members provided the basis for the strategic plan. The document presents two major missionary challenges: the 10/40 Window countries and the world’s cities, most of which are in that region of the world where Christians are a minority. Krause (2014:53) sees in this emphasis a new wave of global mission in Adventism, which prioritizes urban and ethnic issues.

However, for Adventism to have a comprehensive role in the city it takes more than overcoming the ambivalence of enchantment versus an aversion to urban centers. According to Jones (2004), it is important to view a theology of urban mission not as a product but as a process for affecting the church’s community. It is also important to revisit and redeem concepts from the writings of the Adventist pioneers and especially from Ellen White, as a way to legitimize and consolidate this recent missionary emphasis on urban centers.

Speaking from a context of social inequality at the end of the 19th century and the beginning years of the 20th century, Ellen White did not shy away from addressing the issues of her time. In the compilation *Ministry to the Cities*, the third chapter is dedicated to the challenges of the urban context of that time. Racial tensions, the exploitation of the poor, the unnatural pace of life in the large cities, environmental pollution, and escalating crime and addiction, are mentioned, among other problems (2012:29-39).

That is why, for Krause (2014:59), the main question is not “reinventing the wheel” but rather rescuing the Adventist tradition creatively and appropriately for the today’s challenges.

### Summary and Final Remarks

This article provided an overview of how the historical tension in Seventh-day Adventism developed between the ideal of a more natural and “sanctified” life in the countryside and the challenge of preaching the

gospel in cities. When the denomination formed in the second half of the 19th century, the growing urban centers that were emerging in the United States were seen by many American Protestants as symbols of immorality and represented a break with many values of the rural lifestyle. Immigrants, especially European Catholics, threatened religious hegemony and added to the negative views of urban life.

Initially, Adventists also seemed to have manifested this anti-urban spirit; however, Ellen White, warned the denomination not to neglect the evangelization of large cities. Although White considered rural life the most appropriate for the development of spirituality and a healthy lifestyle, she encouraged families to move to the large cities in order to establish churches, schools for the poor, and centers of influence.

In short, in Ellen White's view, church publishers, boarding schools, and health clinics should stay out of the cities, while churches, schools, and centers of influence should be located in urban areas. Her appeals had more effect between 1890 and 1915, when the church's missiological vision began to expand; however, with her death in 1915, Adventist urban mission lost its main advocate.

In the following decades in the American context, a period of polarization between fundamentalist and theologically liberal Christians resulted. Adventism tended more toward the conservative group, assuming, especially in the United States, a posture with sectarian and anti-urban tones. Adventist eschatological understanding and an out of balanced reading of White's counsels concerning country living motivated an anti-urban bias. In addition the Adventist belief in the concept of the persecution of God's end-time people as spelled out in the apocalyptic imagery led many to understand that the cities should be abandoned as the best way to protect themselves from an eschatological scenario of intolerance.

The publication of *Country Living* in 1946, a compilation of Ellen White's writings on the benefits of rural life, reinforced this spirit of isolation. This material helped to shape the ethos of the movement and its missionary strategies. Ironically, for a long time in Adventism, speaking about an urban mission meant speaking against cities. This trend continued until the 1980s and 1990s, when demographic trends pointed out that the future of society is urban and multicultural. Pressed by this new context, Adventists had to rethink their position on cities. At the institutional level, this new missiological understanding was ratified with the approval, in October 2013, of a document that placed urban mission as a priority and stressed the need for implementing a worldwide program for the evangelization of large cities.

Since then, many initiatives around the world have been tried. The emphasis of this new moment is on a more comprehensive approach and

a re-reading of Ellen White's writings, produced in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States urbanization, for today's reality. In this new moment, Adventists continue to seek approaches that dialogue with the problems and challenges of the global urban context. In Latin America and in other regions marked by great social inequality, this new posture also represents a new vision of the church in relation to social justice, which would be an excellent topic for further research.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>It might be useful to note that in Ellen White's time "colored people" was the mainstream term to refer to Black people. "By the 1900s, *nigger* had become a pejorative word in the United States. In its stead, the term *colored* became the mainstream alternative to *negro* and its derived terms. After the civil rights movement, the terms *colored* and *negro* gave way to 'black.' *Negro* had superseded *colored* as the most polite word for African Americans at a time when black was considered more offensive. This term was accepted as normal, including by people classified as Negroes, until the later Civil Rights movement in the late 1960s. . . . In 1835, black leaders called upon Black Americans to remove the title of 'African' from their institutions and replace it with 'Negro' or 'Colored American.' . . . African Americans popularly used the terms 'Negro' or 'colored' for themselves until the late 1960s" (Black people, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_people); italics in original, accessed 26 June 2019).

<sup>2</sup>"A complete and unbiased reading of all that Ellen White had to say about cities reveals that she did not issue simple, unmitigated statements about them. She never unequivocally stated that Christians are not to worship or live in cities. Perhaps reflecting the complexity of the city itself, White's statements about the city are complex, though not completely ambivalent. For Ellen White the ideal was the country. Reality mandated, however, that Christians not only could live and work in the city, but whenever and wherever they had clear evidence of God's leading, should move into them with vision and purpose" (Jones 2013:717).

<sup>3</sup>See Timm (2011) on the four phases of Adventist mission history.

<sup>4</sup>According to the United Nations (UN), it is estimated that by 2030, two-thirds of the world's population will live in cities. See James Griffiths. Two-thirds of world population will live in cities by 2050: UN report. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/16/world/world-population-cities-un-intl/index.htm>.

<sup>5</sup>This research is in a 2018 non-published paper by Wendel Lima for his Master's Degree program in Religion Studies at the Methodist University in São Paulo, Brazil.

<sup>6</sup>Term created by Argentine Christian missionary Luis Bush in 1990, referring to the regions located between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator, in an area that was supposed to have high socioeconomic challenges and less access to the Christian message.

<sup>7</sup>See General Conference Departments. <https://www.adventist.org/en/world-church/general-conference/departments> (accessed 26 June 2019).

<sup>8</sup>See, for instance, the article by Gary Krause, director of the Adventist Mission office at the church's world headquarters, in *Ministry* 85, no. 5 (May): 6-9. <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2013/05/treading-urban-ground-like-jesus>.

<sup>9</sup>These spaces have now been called Life Hope Centers. See “Life Hope Centers,” retrieved 29 May, 2019 from <https://missiontothecities.org/life-hope-centers>.

<sup>10</sup>See the definition of “influence center” on Adventist Mission website, “Centers of Influence,” retrieved May 29, 2019 from <https://am.adventistmission.org/360-centers>.

<sup>11</sup>The strategic plan is available on “Reach the World,” retrieved June 26, 2019 from <https://www.adventistarchives.org/reach-the-world>.

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