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Anti-urbanism in Culture and in the Adventist Church: Advocacy and Action for Urban Ministry In the Twentieth Century—Part 2

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This article explores the response within the Seventh-day Adventist Church after Ellen G. White's death to the dual emphases in her writings on the city and rural living. On one hand she strongly encouraged large Adventist institutions and families raising children to locate out of the cities. This was because of the advantages natural surroundings have on physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing, and to shield children and young adults from the evils and temptations of the city. While she recognized the evils in the city and God's impending judgments, she aggressively pushed church leaders to take a more active role in evangelizing the cities, precisely because of their great need.

The church was slow to respond to her plea for greater mission to the cities during her lifetime. Once she passed away, the gains made in city mission during her lifetime were gradually lost. Leadership focused on foreign missions but work in the cities seem to have fallen by the wayside, being replaced with a drive for all Adventists to move to the country. This paper's focus is on the period from the 1910 through the 1990s.

Introduction

An unbalanced reading and a misapplication of White's writings blunted mission to the cities following her death in 1915. With the exception of a short period around the early 1900s when White was dealing with concerns over John Harvey Kellogg's excesses in the Chicago Medical Mission, White's counsel on city missions was overwhelmingly positive (Butler 1970; Moon 2013). When Adventists started to awaken to their neglect to city mission in the later part of the twentieth century Jonathan Butler suggests:

The early growth of inner-city involvement in the 1880s was only encouraged by Mrs. White, and its decline in the first decades of the twentieth century was only resisted in her writing. A return, then, to early Adventist tradition on this issue, is not a return to the Adventism of the 1920s but to the Adventism of the 1890s. A retreat to the suburbs and tranquil conservatism is not in the spirit of *nineteenth century* Adventism at all. (1970:49, 50)

The objective of this article is to explore dynamics subsequent to Ellen White's death, within and without of the Adventist Church, which resulted in an increase in anti-urbanism and the loss of its earlier focus on urban mission.

Shifting City Emphasis Within the General Conference

There is no question that A. G. Daniells, General Conference (GC) President from 1901 to 1922, and William A. Spicer, GC Secretary from 1903 to 1922, and then GC President from 1922 to 1930, propelled the Adventist Church into a bold missionary program. With the 1901 to 1903 reorganization of the Adventist Church, the administration of day to day matters were shifted from the GC to the local fields. This prompted Daniels to tell the GC officer group that "he believed the future work for the General Conference would be, primarily, that of a great Missionary Board" (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists [GC] 1902:115a). To that end an administrative structure was created within the GC "for recruiting, deploying and maintaining missionaries from the North American homeland and the new European and Australian heartlands to Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and the islands of the Pacific" (Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research n.d., 7).

But sadly, the investment in city missions in the homeland did not keep pace with the church's investment in foreign mission. Daniells was most eloquent when he was speaking about the foreign mission movement. In

his 1918 GC address he plead for “plans for a stronger and more extensive foreign mission work than anything we have yet approached.” He boldly proclaimed, “We aim at nothing less than the whole world. This conference should lay plans for more rapid strides, and for mightier achievements” (1918:4).

As a result, the focus on city mission, first of all, shifted in two discernible ways. Reaching immigrants and ethnics became a major priority. Additionally, literature sales and distribution along with large evangelistic campaigns become a primary vehicle for evangelization. At the 1905 General Conference Session the North American Foreign Department was launched (GC 1913, 52). By 1913 the department was well developed and O. A. Olsen, secretary of the department, noted that the foreign born along with their immediate descendants were estimated at forty-six percent of the current population in the United States (52). He and his superintendents reported at length on the ambitious and far-reaching work among Germans, Jews, French, Swedes, and Russians, as well as Hungarians, Italians, and others (52-62).

In order to strengthen lay involvement in evangelism it was recommended at the 1913 session that the “home missionary secretaries, both for the General Conference and the North American Division Conference be appointed for the promotion of the church missionary work. The duty of the secretaries shall be to cooperate with our conferences and missions, each in his own field, in building up the church tract and missionary movement” (GC 1913:293).

Second, the work among Blacks in the United States was beginning to grow at the same time that sentiments towards the growing Black presence in the north was also shifting. These factors prompted Monte Sahlin to conclude the following: “From 1913 through the 1930s, Adventist urban ministry consisted primarily of attempts to reach immigrants and ethnic minorities. It is during this period that the African-American work began to grow, and that many of the German, Italian and other European immigrant churches were planted in the large cities, especially in the northeast” (2007:15). The dynamics connected to race relations is deserving a treatment all its own. Sadly, those findings are beyond the scope of this paper.

It is puzzling why mission to the cities lost steam during this period. Whether Daniells can be faulted for the shift away from work in the large cities is hard to say; however, what can be seen is at about that time a shift in messaging coming from church leadership, which coincides with the beginning of strong headwinds for city ministry.

A survey of Adventist publications after White’s death reveals an increase with her counsel for families to leave the cities and almost complete neglect of her counsel on the urgent need to work the cities.

But before examining this trend it is important to look at Evangelical Fundamentalism and the Adventist Church and its impact on reading Ellen White.

Adventism in 1919 and Fundamentalism

When assessing the Adventist perspective toward the cities it is important to take into consideration Ellen White's council related to cities. As noted previously, White was adamant about the denomination's responsibility to evangelize the large cities, in particular those of her day in the United States. For a period of time she excoriated Daniells for not doubling down and leading out by example in evangelizing the cities. Yet, there was another theme in her writing where she counseled families about the problems and dangers in the cities to health, evil influences, and raising children. Additionally, on numerous occasions she counseled administrators against locating large educational and health institutions in the city.

While White was alive, she guided the application of these principles by her own influence. But with her passing in 1915 there was a vacuum within the church in this regard and the denomination was searching how to handle this new epoch without the "prophet." With the passing of time, pressure mounted on how to properly interpret her writings. In 1919, four years after her death, the historic 1919 Bible Conference was convened to discuss principles of interpretation (hermeneutics) of both the Bible and the writings of White. This conference was in no small part a result of the burgeoning debate within evangelicals circles due to the modern trends in science and liberal theology.

Fundamentalism, as this reactionary evangelical movement has been called, though not monolithic and by no means static in its beliefs and objectives, shared some general things in common. Between 1910 and 1915 three million copies of a series of twelve booklets called *The Fundamentals* were distributed for free to the English-speaking Protestant workers around the world (McIntire 1984:436). In this regard Michael W. Campbell's summary of the themes in *The Fundamentals* is very helpful.

Approximately one-third of the articles dealt with the inspiration of Scripture and generally endorsed a view of infallibility and verbal inerrancy, at least of the original autographs. (This view stood in contrast to Ellen White's endorsement of thought inspiration as opposed to verbal dictation.) Another third dealt with traditional theological pillars, including the Trinity, sin, and salvation. The last third of the articles contained personal testimonies, attacks against competing, aberrant forms of Christianity (such as Mormonism and

Roman Catholicism), the relationship between science and religion, and general appeals for support of missions and evangelism. Altogether, these articles show that although the emerging Fundamentalist movement did not have a clearly defined set of beliefs, its adherents knew what it was against: anyone and anything that might challenge the divine authority of Scripture. (2019:32)

The important traits that have remained constant among fundamentalists over time is their call “for a return to an inerrant and infallible Bible, to the traditional statement of the doctrines, and to a traditional morality which they believed once prevailed in America” (McIntire 1984:435). Attitudinally, they see themselves as possessing the truth and called to do battle with those whom they see as undermining Christianity and America.

Campbell’s book, *1919: The Untold Story of Adventism’s Struggle with Fundamentalism*, and George R. Knight, *Ellen White’s Afterlife: Delightful Fictions, Troubling Facts, Enlightening Research* provide helpful discussion on the 1919 Bible Conference and the resultant challenges within Adventism with regard to principles of biblical interpretation and how to apply the writings of Ellen White. Suffice it to say that the participants at the 1919 Bible Conference “represented two different, polarized approaches to Scripture” (Campbell 2019:55). Those known as “progressives” were in the majority and they focused on the context of the biblical passage. “They were open to making necessary revisions if they found something that was not necessarily correct, especially when it concerned historical details. The traditionalist emphasized a more literalistic way of interpreting inspired writings” (55, 56). Significantly, those conservatives who embraced verbal inspiration and inerrancy saw any attempt at revision, no matter how minor the detail, as a threat to the faith.

Campbell singles out a third group, not actual participants of the conference, who were disgruntled with church leadership and held a “rigid view that emphasized the verbal inspiration not only of the Bible but also of Ellen G. White’s prophetic writings” (52). Campbell cites two “vociferous critics,” who had an outsized influence at that time, who well represent this segment even to this day, Claude E. Holmes and J. S. Washburn. They were disgruntled Adventists upset by the 1911 revisions to *The Great Controversy*. The militant forces within and without the Adventist Church made it increasingly difficult in the 1920s to navigate between modernism and fundamentalism. “The major casualty in that polarized era was the moderate and open approach to inspiration held by Ellen White and those who had worked most closely with her” (Knight 2019:33).

Knight points out that although the Adventist Church never voted official positions affirming verbal inspiration of the Bible and Ellen White,

this “progressively dominated Adventist thinking in the following decades, although not everyone accepted them among either the laity or the clergy” (2019:34). In illustrating this shift Knight cites examples of individuals whose view shifted toward verbal inspiration during the decade following the 1919 Bible Conference (33, 34).

This shift toward a rigid understanding of verbal inspiration of the Bible and Ellen White along with militant activists who made it their mission to expose and unseat leaders who did not follow their opinion predisposed the church to drift toward an unbalanced application of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy. What resulted was a rigid, literalistic reading of *selective* statements, without due regard to the *context*. Propagated by loud-voiced activists, agitating popular views within the broader evangelical and fundamentalist culture, the Adventist Church succumbed to “proof-texting” itself into new understandings on major matters which impacted both concern for and effectiveness in urban mission (see Knight 2009:17-25, and Novaes and Lima 2019:57 for their discussion of this phenomenon). Specifically, the attitudinal shift within the Adventist Church and fundamentalism in general affected views on social ministry, fanned anti-urbanism sentiments, and poisoned race relations. These shifts in attitudes led to neglect and a stifling of urban evangelism.

Drift from Concern for to Scorn of the City

With the backdrop of Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism and the Adventist 1919 Bible Conference it is now important to look at the drift within Adventism away from urban ministry. The first example comes from an article written by A. W. Spalding, who was the general secretary of the Home Commission from 1922-1941 (1996:687). The focus of the commission was on helping parents with issues of home life and raising children (Spalding 1922:12). Throughout Spalding’s tenure as secretary of the Home Commission his tone was consistent and focused on exhorting parents in raising their children. But in one of his Home Commission articles in 1926 he dedicates the entire article on White’s counsel to families about raising their children in the country because of the evil influences in the cities and the benefits of being in natural surroundings.

Spalding begins the article by declaring that “the home is the citadel of the church.” He goes on to state that “it is the duty of the church to build good Christian homes,” and that we must not “only proselyte, we must save our homes” (1926:18-19).

In a subsequent section of his article, he puts a critical nuance on how he perceives mission. “Our church has a mission, not to save the world, but to save souls out of the world. Its mission is, first, to save its own

children" (18). Then later in the article, after lamenting the deficiencies in Christian education within the home by parents he writes, "Yet we face the fact that the majority of families in our church membership today are living in cities, where it is practically impossible to carry out these prime principles [found in White's writings] of Christian education" (19).

After quoting excerpts from White's council in *The Ministry of Healing* on the "Choice and Preparation of the Home" (1942:363-367) where she warns that "cities are becoming hotbeds of vice (363) and extols the benefits of living where the family can have access to nature, Spalding writes:

Yet, despite this instruction, our people like the people of the world, are crowding into cities, evangelization of rural districts is more and more neglected, and our church is rapidly becoming preponderantly urban in character. We are by such a course piling up the problems of the family, making almost futile the efforts to regenerate the home, and decreasing the chances of the church to purify and invigorate itself.

Why are not the words of that servant of God, Sister E. G. White, echoed throughout the land:

"'Out of the cities,' is my message." (quoted from White 1948:7:83 in Spalding 1926:19)

Several things in this passage must be noted. First, Spalding's critique that the Adventist Church is rapidly "becoming preponderantly urban in character" is being leveled when over half of the USA population had been living in cities since 1920 (U. S. Bureau of the Census 2012, Table 10). Furthermore, in the previous decade the church had doubled down on evangelizing migrant populations which had settled predominantly in the USA cities. Additionally, some Adventist leaders were beginning to recognize that their fields were becoming predominantly urban (Olsen 1918:168). Second, the charge that evangelization of rural districts is being neglected intimates that city evangelism was no longer needed, or at least out of balance with rural evangelism. Finally, Spalding's lifting of White's statement "'Out of the cities,' is my message" out of its context aimed at physicians developing sanitarium work *close* to the cities for the benefit of reaching the cities distorts her original intent.

Much is being made of the points in Spalding's article because I believe it illustrates how our denomination began to use White's writings to excuse turning its back on reaching the cities. The Adventist Church was not alone in its growing negative view of the large cities. Sadly, the church was simply mirroring Evangelical Protestant attitudes toward urbanization which was associated with secularization and the increasing immigration from Catholic majority countries (Marsden 1991:13, 14).

In Spalding's article one can see the following themes emerging, at least by implication: the mission of the church is seen as one of extraction rather than incarnational ("Our church has a mission, not to save the world, but to save souls out of the world"); the interests of home and nurture of our own children are elevated to primary importance without regard to our calling and responsibility to evangelize the world, including the growing cities ("Its mission is, first, to save its own children"); White's admonition to locate sanitariums out of the cities is being perceived as a blanket admonition for all Adventist work; to remain in the city is to risk Lot's experience in Sodom ("Shall we wait for calamity to fall upon us? Shall we be compelled to go forth from the cities as Lot went forth from Sodom?").

To be fair in the assessment of Spalding's work through the Home Commission, it needs to be noted that in surveying over fifty of his articles, this is the only time that he takes up this theme. Furthermore, much of the article held wise counsel. But what is clear here and in similar cases where writers take up the theme of city living, there is a one-sided focus on White's warnings about the evils of the city with a grave omission to her call for mission to the cities. This tone is increasingly evident from the 1930s and 1940s and becomes significantly amplified with the publishing of the White compilation *Country Living: An Aid to Moral and Social Security*, and the organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Commission on Rural Living, both in 1946.

Before examining some examples of the twisting of White's counsel on this topic, it is important to briefly review her views on both sides of this issue. There are various compilations of her writings on this topic (White 1946a, White 2012, Luppens 2015) but for simplicity sake I would like to focus on two of White's articles published in 1906.

The first article begins by recounting the dedication of the Loma Linda Sanitarium. White then turns to writing about the principles and ideals for Loma Linda and sanitarium work in general.

The advantage of outdoor life must never be lost sight of. How thankful we should be that God has given us beautiful sanitarium properties at Paradise Valley and Glendale and Loma Linda! "Out of the cities! Out of the cities!"—this has been my message for years. We cannot expect the sick to recover rapidly when they are shut in within four walls, in some city, with no outside view but houses, houses, houses—nothing to animate, nothing to enliven. And yet how slow some are to realize that the crowded cities are not favorable places for sanitarium work! . . .

One of the chief advantages of the situation at Loma Linda is the pleasing variety of charming scenery on every side.

But more important than magnificent scenery and beautiful buildings and spacious grounds, *is the close proximity of this institution to a densely populated district*, and the opportunity thus afforded of communicating to many, many people a knowledge of the third angel's message. (White 1906a:7, 8, italics supplied)

Two themes stand out. First, there are powerful therapeutic benefits to being situated outside the city in beautiful natural surroundings. This is a psychological and physiological phenomenon that current science is confirming with empirical research (see Kaplan 1989 and Schertz and Berman 2019 as just two examples). However basic and important the first theme is, for White, Loma Linda's close proximity to a "densely populated district" was even more important because it provided the opportunity to share the third angel's message with "many, many people."

The second article concerns things she was shown while still at Loma Linda following the Sanitarium dedication about "The Judgments of God on Our Cities" (White 1906b, 7-9). White shares that although the "scene of buildings shaken down and destroyed, with great loss of life" was awful that "which impressed itself most vividly on my mind was the instruction given in connection with it." The angel shared with her "that God's supreme rulership, and the sacredness of his law must be revealed to those who persistently refuse to render obedience to the King of kings."

Two consecutive paragraphs are worth noting, for they tie together White's warnings about the evil in the city and the divine judgments which will be visited on them with the necessity to warn them before it is too late.

For many years we have known that the great cities would be visited with divine judgments because of long-continued disobedience. In no uncertain words the Lord has warned us not to establish large institutions in the cities. "Out of the cities; out of the cities,"—this is the message that has often come to us. And this is one reason why the Lord has been opening the way so wonderfully for our publishing houses and sanitariums and schools to be located in country places.

The cities must be worked. The millions living in these congested centers are to hear the third angel's message. This work should have been developed rapidly during the past few years. A beginning has been made, for which we praise God. Outpost centers are being established, from whence, like Enoch of old, our workers can visit the cities and do faithful service. (White 1906b:7)

In the next paragraph White combines the themes of the previous two paragraphs of working the cities, but without "establishing institutions in the heart of these cities," and rather working from "outpost centers." And

once again she would repeat the emphatic statement, “Out of the cities; out of the cities!” She concludes this paragraph by reminding her readers that “we must make wise plans to warn the cities, and at the same time live where we can shield our children and ourselves from the contaminating and demoralizing influences so prevalent in these places” (1906b:7).

Much has been made of White’s counsel to work from “outpost centers” and for decades it has produced more heat than light (Oosterwal 1980; Wilson 1980). Whatever White meant by working the cities from “outpost centers” one thing on which she is abundantly clear, there is a heaven sent imperative that the cities must be warned. And although her most quoted statements relate on what not to do, she has plenty of statements which qualify and provide nuances to what has already been singled out.

Later in this same article she recounts a dream she had thirty years earlier about two “beehives, one in San Francisco and one in Oakland” (White 1906b:8). At that time believers were few and sources for financing the work were limited. White and her husband decided to sell their property in Battle Creek and use the proceeds for the work and building churches in those two cities.

In November of 1900 White had the opportunity to visit a church she and her husband had helped build almost 30 years earlier. “As I stood before the people, I thought of the dream and the instruction which had been given me so many years ago, and I was much encouraged. Looking at the people assembled, I felt that I could indeed say, The Lord has fulfilled his word” (1906b:8).

Sadly, over time White’s catalog of “many lines of Christian effort” enumerated in this same article have been passed over by most in favor of the sensational “Out of the cities!” and the convenient “labor from outposts.” Efforts she enumerates include visiting the sick, homes for orphans, work for unemployed, nursing the sick, distribution of literature, classes on healthful living and care for the sick, a school for children in the basement of the Laguna Street meeting-house, a working men’s home, medical mission, a branch of the St. Helena Sanitarium, a health food store, a vegetarian café, a ship mission on the water front, and evangelistic meetings in large halls.

I would dare say that this “beehive” does not comport to the type of activity that most Adventists would have imagined of comprising an “outpost” city mission. All of these enterprises could not have been maintained by staff who commuted into the city in the morning and left by evening.

A survey of the *Pacific Union Recorder* for 1901 provides hints of the scope of the work and the number and enthusiasm of the local Adventist population. The opening of the Workers’ Training School in San Francisco took place in September (Rose 1901a:7). In November W. S. Sadler

reported that in June a flat had been secured, large enough for eight to ten workers “who might desire to connect with the work for training.” Financially this workers’ home was set up so that the conference assumed no financial responsibility. “The board is conducted on the community plan, each worker paying his share of the actual cost.” Sadler clarifies that the training classes for workers begun in September are held two evenings a week (1901:5, 6).

In the December 5, 1901 edition of the *Pacific Union Recorder* H. W. Rose reported in detail on the Laguna Street Church harvest ingathering service. This is the same “meeting-house” that White mentions as the location for the school for children in her visit one year before to San Francisco. In this celebration service for the “blessings enjoyed by the church during the past year” the children occupy a prominent part in the program. Rose concludes his remarks by observing that this was “one of the most interesting, most enjoyable, and most profitable services ever held in the San Francisco church” (8, 9). The evidence is that the San Francisco Adventist community was dynamic and thriving. No wonder White was so encouraged by her visit there one year earlier.

But the myth that White “instituted a blanket prohibition on city living” (Trim 2017:10) persist despite much scholarship to the contrary (Sahlin 2007:16, 17; Jones 2013:716, 718; Fortin 2013:742, 743; Knight 2013:715, 716). Had the church used White to qualify her own statements it would have been abundantly clear this is not what she meant. One White quote, in my mind, captures the lost mission opportunity of our cities in this regard.

We see the great need of missionary work to carry the truth not only to foreign countries, but to those who are near us. Close around us are cities and towns in which no efforts are made to save souls. *Why should not families who know the present truth settle in these cities and villages, to set up there the standard of Christ? . . .* There will be laymen who will move into towns and cities, and into apparently out-of-the-way places, that they may let the light which God has given them, shine forth to others. (1891:593, italics supplied)

Current doctoral research in this area is promising to provide greater clarity on the comprehensive plan outlined by White for reaching the city’s poor and the elite, through resources and institutions outside (outposts) and from inside the city (beehives). One such study is Doug Venn’s historical Geographic Information System (GIS) study into the San Francisco work circa 1900.

The De Facto Adventist Sentiment on Urban Mission

How far much of the church leadership's thinking had drifted from White's emphasis on city mission can be seen by an article promoting the work in the Alaska Mission by H. L. Wood. Before entering the ministry, Elder Wood was a successful businessman, running his own car dealership. Feeling a call to ministry he eventually sold his car business and served the church as a layperson. Upon coming to the notice of his local conference president, he and his wife were asked to join the conference workers. Wood demonstrated exceptional administrative abilities and served the Alaska Mission tireless for 15 years, from 1929 until his untimely death in a plane crash in 1944 (Emery 1944:20). In 1931, in making a plea for members to move to Alaska to help with the work he wrote: "You who are hovering in the wicked cities which have been hearing the message for many, many years, will you not heed the instruction given long ago to this people, 'Get out of the cities where you are not needed, and move to places where they have not heard the truth for this time, and there let your light shine'" (Wood 1931:16).

Undoubtedly, Elder Wood's intentions were worthy. He mentions that there were only three workers at that time in the vast Alaska Mission. The attention being given to this passage is not to criticize this dedicated and hardworking leader, nor to discount the desperate need for more workers in his field. Rather, what I believe this passage demonstrates is a de facto perspective that was generally held, so much so, that even the editors of the *Review* would allow this passage to go into print without challenge.

Though no reference is given, the wording of Wood's paragraph in question implies that White is the source of the words in quotation marks. The supposed quote is not only a conflation of White's words, but a distortion and contradiction to the one quote that comes closest matching part of his paragraph. The White passage his "quote" alludes to is, "It is not God's plan for our people to crowd into Battle Creek. Jesus says: 'Go work today in My vineyard. Get away from the places where you are not needed. Plant the standard of truth in towns and cities that have not heard the message. Prepare the way for My coming. Those in the highways and hedges are to hear the call'" (White 1948:216).

By his wording Wood does the following injustices: (1) casts city ministry in a pejorative light, "hovering in the wicked cities;" (2) implies that cities have been thoroughly evangelized and no longer need or are worthy of hearing the gospel, "have been hearing the message for many, many years;" (3) the leading phrase within quotes, "get out of the cities where you are not needed," conflates White's often misunderstood advice to get "get out of the cities" and the advice to specific individuals in Battle

Creek, “where you are not needed;” and finally (4) his joining the two phrases “get out of the cities” and “where you are not needed” directly contradicts the original message—to leave Battle Creek in order to “plant the standard of truth in towns and cities that have not heard the message.”

In White’s view it never was a question of one over the other. It had always been both rural and urban mission. But over time, for various reasons which deserve more consideration than space will allow in this article, urban ministry was no longer seen as an urgent necessity. In fact, in its more biased expression there was a view that to minister in the cities was a sign of spiritual apathy and neglect, even disrespect to White’s counsel. This apathy and neglect for the large cities would have pained the prophet. All the while urban populations in the United States and the rest of the world were exploding.

Institutionalizing Rural Living

In 1946 the General Conference took several steps which served to institutionalize what had already become a de facto stance on rural versus urban living and ministry. The General Conference Committee recommended the formation of The Seventh-day Adventist Commission on Rural Living. E. A. Sutherland was appointed secretary, and C. B. Haynes the assistant secretary. The objectives given for the commission were:

- A. To foster and develop self-supporting missionary work and institutions.
- B. To encourage and assist in the formation of the Association of Self-supporting Institutions, and the development of the holding corporation outlined in the action of the 1945 Autumn Council.
- C. To encourage our church members in cities to study the instruction in the Spirit of prophecy about country living and to develop plans whereby they can fulfill this instruction; to provide counsel and information to those who are considering moving to the country; to hold regional institutes for self-supporting missionary workers and individuals interested in country living. (Nichols 1946:24)

Sutherland led the commission until his retirement in 1950 where upon a short time later the name of the commission was changed to Commission for Self-supporting Missionary Enterprises (Nichols 1951:19). In tandem with the formation of the Commission on Rural Living was the publication of a compilation of White’s writings called *Country Living, An Aid to Moral and Social Security* (1946a). With the memory of World War II still fresh in the corporate memory and with the disproportionate impact of the war on the large European cities, the church took this message in. Sutherland positioned “removal of our people from the cities, and the establishment

of families on the land where they are to operate as mission centers and rural outpost from which to carry the closing message to the cities” as a test. He asked, “Will we be able to meet this test? If we do not, then World War III, with all its attendant troubles, will be upon us, and our people may be like Lot and his family when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed” (1951:19).

Sutherland’s intent may have seemed noble at that time. But over the years the outcome of the selective use of White’s writings combined with radical personal interpretations of the same has led to the blunting of urban mission with the loss of a wholistic incarnational approach.

It bears repeating again. There is no question that living in less congested, natural surroundings has physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits. When White contrasted the benefits of natural settings with the problems and evils found within the city, she had two things in view. First, she was emphasizing the law of cause and effect. Our surroundings affect our health, our mood, even our spiritual outlook. Second, when she so graphically and pointedly laid out the conditions of the city, it was to drive home the need of the cities for the gospel and the responsibility of the church to meaningfully engage with those who do not know Christ.

Although families with children were counseled to live away from the temptations inherent in the cities and where they were able to benefit from a healthier environment, this did not remove any Christian duty to ministering to the cities. At the same time that White counseled large institutions such as sanitariums, schools, and publishing houses to be in rural environments, she even more adamantly counseled them to be close to large population centers (1906b). *If anything trumped the other, it was Christian duty to witness.* Reading White’s counsel on rural living *without* her concern for city evangelism in full view radically distorts her message. Sadly, for some in the Adventist family it has become a badge of virtue to not only move out of the city but locate far away from the nearest population centers in the wilderness. The call has devolved to “end-time country living” rather than “end-time living witness” to the teaming millions in the megacities of the world.

Country Living, One Side of White’s Message

The overall zeal in getting Adventist members to leave the cities culminate in the publication of *Country Living, An Aid to Moral and Social Security* (1946a). I suspect that this small 32-page “pamphlet” has had an outsized negative impact on urban mission. By selectively lifting passages out of their context, the editors left an impression that all committed Adventists should exit the cities before the cities were destroyed by God’s wrath.

What they left out was that the spiritual need, due to the prevailing evil in the cities, was the precise reason Christians should become more involved in working for the cities. What follows is a brief review of a few examples from *Country Living* with the hope that those examples from that compilation will suffice to illustrate this point.

On page 8 of *Country Living*, there is a section entitled “Imminence of God’s Judgments.” This section is made up of three separate quotes, each a one or two sentence paragraph. These isolated passages, taken by themselves could give the impression that all should leave the cities at once because God’s judgments are soon to be poured out on these wicked places. But upon examining the original context it is important to note that White was either directing the location of a specific type of ministry, or making the case for the church to engage the cities.

The first passage reads, “There are reasons why we should not build in the cities. On these cities, God’s judgments are soon to fall.” This paragraph is from a letter to Brother and Sister J. A. Burden (White 1902), advising him on strategies, including the location of the health institutions he is helping to develop. This is not a blanket prohibition against building Adventist institutions in the city. Elsewhere, White advised leaders to build churches and schools in the city. As noted elsewhere, White was particularly concerned that sanitariums, large training schools (what today would be called colleges and universities), and publishing houses should be built outside of the cities. This concern for placement of large institutions makes a lot of sense. Cost of building in the city, the likelihood of loss of property due to city wide fires, so common in her day, combined with the benefits of a rural environment for patients, students, and families employed by these institutions, and raising children were major reasons for her advice.

What must not be lost sight of is that elsewhere she would also counsel that proximity to large urban areas was of highest priority. Historical research of urban mission during White’s life with her counsel and approval is clarifying the symbiotic relationship between the “outpost centers” and the “beehives.” The Sanitariums, flagship schools, and publishing houses had an elaborate system of satellite branches in the city that were staffed by “missionaries” who lived in and served the city.

The second paragraph simply reads, “The time is near when large cities will be swept away, and all should be warned of these coming judgments.” This is probably the most poignant example of how lifting a passage from its context can alter its intended message. As this sentence stands in *Country Living*, the phrase “all should be warned of the coming judgments” would imply, “Christians need to be warned to leave the cities.” But this is not White’s intent. Here is the context before and after this sentence: “The

inhabitants of the ungodly cities so soon to be visited by calamities have been cruelly neglected. The time is near when large cities will be swept away, and all should be warned of these coming judgments. But who is giving to the accomplishment of this work the wholehearted service that God requires?" (White 1946b:29, italics supplied). The distortion to White's intent here is abundantly clear. This is one of the more dramatic examples of how lifting a sentence out of its context completely alters its message. And in terms of the topic of this paper it must be one of the most egregious missuses.

The third paragraph reads, "O that God's people had a sense of the impending destruction of thousands of cities, now almost given to idolatry." The fuller context is, "O that God's people had a sense of the impending destruction of thousands of cities, now almost given to idolatry! *But many of those who should be proclaiming the truth are accusing and condemning their brethren.* When the converting power of God comes upon minds, there will be a decided change. Men will have no inclination to criticize and tear down. *They will not stand in a position that hinders the light from shining to the world.* Their criticism, their accusing, will cease" (White 1903:6, italics supplied). This final paragraph, within its full context, best sums up Adventism's struggle with urban mission. There has been lots of controversy over this matter resulting in neglect and missed opportunities in reaching the world's cities.

Course Correction: Restoring an Urban Mission Focus

This pamphlet, *Country Living*, or more precisely, many peoples' subjective understanding of it became the "bible" for many Adventists on how to relate to the city. For many it codified White's counsel in very black and white terms. Cities are evil, the country is good. In fairness to the compilers, they did include a short section on working the cities. But again, the focus of the passages centered on "outpost centers," the evils of the cities without White's other counsel about the urgency and "beehive" approaches.

What began to resonate through Adventism is, "Out of the cities; out of the cities!"—this is the message the Lord has been giving me" (White 1946a:31). Generally, the sentiment came to be that no Adventist, at least no good Ellen G. White believing Adventist, would live in a city. This created a great deal of headwind when church leadership began to realize in the 1960s and onward that the large cities were being neglected and that a course correction was necessary.

First, the leadership needed to deal with their own feelings toward the city. Even to this day, and I include myself in this statement, there is an ambivalence, a questioning of "loitering" in the cities. I fear that for too

many of us, our hearts are not in it yet. So, although the statistics relating to the needs in the city and the size of the population was getting leadership's attention by this time, it would take time for passion, creativity, and a long-term commitment to catch up with the facts.

Second, the membership was rightly confused. Having been raised with a steady drum beat of "Out of the cities" minus the counterbalancing responsibility of city missions and a balanced view on how to work the cities, the rank and file greeted this sudden about face with suspicion.

Such was the case in 1990 when Ritchie Way asked, "Can we preach the gospel in *all* the world while living in the country?" This article entitled "The Paradox of Our Mission" was the first of a four-part series called "Country and City Living." In it he observed that "few evangelists, pastors, and teachers are able to live in the country and minister effectively to these cities," and even so, "few do." Therefore, he posited, although country living is desirable, it is an ideal, much like marriage, that some should forgo for the kingdom. But he went further, suggesting that "we should not withdraw from the world—and its cities—prematurely," and that "there are ways to embody the spirit of country living within the city" (1990:8-11).

Way's article drew this response: "I am somewhat concerned with 'Country and City Living' (Aug 9). Nowhere in *Country Living*, the compilation of Ellen White's remarks on this subject, in word or in spirit does she advance the 'take it or leave it' attitude put forth in this article" (Musson 1990:2). One can be certain that this reader was not alone in being "somewhat concerned" by new ideas being floated by some church leaders.

In 1997, in response to an article entitled "Flee to the City," a reader writes, "Why does the *Review* publish counsel that opposes earlier counsel from the Lord? In the July 5, 1906, *Review* Ellen White wrote, 'Out of the cities; out of the cities!—this is the message the Lord has been giving me'" (1946a:31). The writer concludes, "Work the cities? Yes. But we were told to labor from 'outpost centers'" (Morrill 1997:3).

But even the leadership's messaging was mixed. Way's article was the first of four in the "Country and City Living" series. The second article featured "A Modern Experiment in Primitive Living," featuring a family who moved "40 miles from town." Their focus on self-sufficiency led them to boast that "they could live comfortably for a year or more without visiting a grocery store" (Juberg 1990:14).

Although the third and fourth articles reengaged the topic of mission to the city, in the end the series comes off more as a referendum on country and city living, as the series was so titled. This is disappointing considering the introductory editorial by Kit Watts begins by putting the spotlight squarely on God's call to evangelize the world's cities of our

day. She begins with, "I have always sided with Jonah. It seems preposterous that God would ask him to go on a mission to a huge city filled with wicked people. . . . Today many Christians look at the world's cities with as little relish and as much pessimism as Jonah did." But then she pivots to White's "repeated and extensive appeals to help city people," and follows up with driving home that cities are where the majority of people are living. "Obviously, if we are to fulfill the gospel commission to make disciples among all nations and peoples, Adventists must take cities seriously." Ironically, in reporting "a hopeful sign that we will," the establishing of the "Center of Global Urban Mission," she confirms that in fact the church is not yet ready to make urban mission anything close to a priority. "It's small and low-budget (only a part-time office manager is paid), but the center is poised to raise our consciousness about the huge task before us." (1990: 5).

Watt's introductory editorial, "Balancing Act," and George E. Rice's closing "Perils and Possibilities: A Look at Ellen White's Concerns about Where We Live" (1990:11) bookmarked this series. What a contrast to Butler's bold historical assessment, quoted at the beginning of this paper. Both Watts and Rice soft-pedaled the need for incarnational, boots-on-the-ground to effectively reach the cities. This is in contradiction to what is evident from the successful urban mission in White's lifetime.

The preoccupation on "balance" and "perils" as a determinate in doing foreign mission would have seemed very odd to early Adventist missionaries. The early frontier missionaries hardly blinked an eye at the prospects of laying down their lives. Many succumbed or laid to rest loved ones within the first six months of arriving at their fields of service. Like the disciples of old they went because God said, Go! What is needed today is fearless modern missionaries who by God's Spirit boldly enter the mega-cities and work an interconnected network of ministries leveraging flagship institutions (outpost centers) with centers of influence (beehives).

Typical of Adventism thinking at that time, Rice, an associate secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate, ended the series with the caveat that "of course, the time will come when all of God's people will receive a signal to leave the large cities, never to return" (1990:11). City evangelism was not popular in White's time, and the reticence by many today to a full engagement continues. Rather than doubling down to reach the cities before it is too late, with every major world catastrophe even more move further into the country and add to their emergency supplies. The twin fears of contamination by the world and vicissitudes of the final time of trouble have been a continuing deterrent of a full engagement with the world's cities.

As I conclude writing this article, the world is moving out of the COVID-19 pandemic. The disproportionate devastating impact on the

largest cities is once again confirmation of White's warnings about the inherent problems and dangers in the city. If she was still present today, what would her counsel be? I believe her message would be the same. Our flagship institutions should be away from the congested cities so that they can function efficiently and effectively, but close enough to impact the large urban population centers and the branch ministries in the city. More than ever, our church needs to be in the city providing practical assistance and sharing a message of hope and salvation.

When the reality of this current pandemic was setting in, I received an email from someone I know at church with a link to a video by Walter Veith presenting his version of conspiracy theories in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Part way through the video he brings in White's counsel of rural living and then asks if there is still time or are we too late in getting out of the cities (Veith and Smith 2020, starting minute 40). My question is, Why is our first thought about escaping the time(s) of trouble, and not even thinking about the salvation of lost people in our world? Though Veith does not speak for the official Adventist Church, his type of messages, unfortunately, attracts too many from our midst.

While Adventism as a whole has been fleeing the cities the urban population of the world has been exploding. Do we not believe that the Three Angels' Messages is for all, not just some? Why then, at the first hint of world troubles, is our first inclination to flee for the hills, rather than seek the shalom for the multitudes of lost everywhere, including in the mega cities?

Conclusion

Over the last hundred years certain perspectives have overtaken the church, which in my view are an aberration of Adventism's original eschatological understanding. There seems to be a greater emphasis on protecting one's own purity than warning the rest of the world about God's impending judgments. In the closing months before the expected return of Christ in 1844, the Millerites did not withdraw from the world. Rather they doubled down in engaging the world so that as many as possible might be warned and saved. Ellen White never lost that Millerite burden for the lost. Her graphic description of the evil in the cities were, in the majority of the cases, in the context of addressing the need to take the gospel to the cities before God's impending judgment.

It is my conviction that until there is a fundamental change, deep within the heart and psyche of our church, from leaders to members, our church will not begin to touch the massive challenge of urban mission. We must repent from our neglect and sanctimonious shunning of the cities.

We must turn to God and plead that he will take our hearts of stone and give us a heart of flesh that will empathize with the lost millions in the cities. Then, and only then will we be ready to join God in his mission to the cities.

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