Since the end of the Second World War in 1945, Europe has experienced some dramatic events and drastic changes that have had consequences on population structures and economies. To this must be added that secularism and immigration during the last thirty years have changed European religious life. These positive and negative developments have also affected Seventh-day Adventist churches. In order to obtain a reasonable understanding of the latter developments this article will look at various historical and population issues which include colonization, foreign missions, secularism, and immigration issues.

The Era of Colonization

Colonization—also called imperialism—is the expansion of one people at the expense of another. Beginning in the 15th century, Western Europe became the largest colonizer in the history of the world. The powers involved were Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Scandinavia. While the U.S.A., Japan, and some Islamic nations also had their imperialistic adventures, their activities fall outside the purpose of this article.

Two main kinds of colonies have been established. In a few cases colonies provided an opportunity to let excessive populations from Europe occupy large and to some extent uninhabited territories (North America, Australia, and New Zealand) and develop and populate new countries and even continents. However, most colonialism was generally an establishment of superior aristocracy among weaker people who were reduced to subservience. Beginning in the 16th century, European imperialism was especially focused on South America, Africa, and Asia (Neill 1971:171, 172).
The Age of Discovery, with Europeans engaged in intensive exploration of the world, gave the impetus for both aggressive colonial adventures and the call to Christians to be involved in world mission. The areas that became the focus of that expansion were Australia, Asia, Africa, and North and South America (Age of Discovery).

Some anti-colonial historians have put missionaries in the same boat as imperialists and thereby have given missions a bad press. Missionaries were accused of being involved in economic exploitation and acting as servants of imperialism. No doubt there were a few cases where missionaries followed the gradual colonial expansions and even worked under the protection of colonial armies. However, there were also many areas where missions penetrated into unknown areas before the colonial powers even arrived in a country. Records reveal that there were even instances where missionaries were hindered in their work and imprisoned by colonial authorities when the latter tried to control their work for political reasons.

The Era of Missions

Although missionaries and mission societies should not be excused for mistakes and failures, evidence certainly shows that their general motive was not to establish the empire but to promote Christianity (Stanley 1990:11). The mission era ushered in a positive new global involvement, and the enormous results of the spread of Christianity not only changed countries in areas south of the equator—it changed the whole world. Former mission fields became independent nations. And for Adventism, a world church came into existence.

The first Roman Catholic missionaries arrived in the field around AD 1500, but Protestant missionaries did not go in large numbers until more than 200 years later (Kane 1979:57). The spread of Christianity has been so great that today South America is replacing North America as the strongest Christian continent and Africa could be awarded the title within a century.

Adventist missionaries (Europeans, Americans, and Australians) did not engage in foreign missions in a meaningful way until the late 1880s. Since then country after country has been reported as reached with the Three Angels’ Messages. Africa was entered in 1887 with the first baptism probably in 1893. At that time there were about 30,000 Adventists in the sending countries (Schantz 1983:774-781). The Seventh-day Adventist world membership in 2011 is about 17 million with 15.5 million of these residing in former missions areas (Africa, Asia, and Latin America) with only about 1.5 million in the former sending countries of Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand. There has been steady growth in the “developing world” while membership is stagnating or even declin-
ing in the “industrialized nations” (Seventh-day Adventist World Church Statistics). In some European countries in the last fifty years Adventist membership has declined by up to 30 percent. The decreases can, among other things, be attributed to secularism and family planning. There are only a few reports of increased membership in Europe, and when there is a membership increase it is generally due to Seventh-day Adventist immigrants joining established churches.

**The Effect of Secularism**

Secularization is defined as “the view that consideration of the present well-being of mankind should predominate over religious considerations in civil affairs or public education” (*American Heritage Dictionary*). In other words, secularization is a process where religion loses its significance. There are various debates on the causes of secularization in industrialized and modernized societies. The European secular trend is rooted in post-World War attitudes, prosperity, higher education, and a developing multicultural society. Secularism has positive traits but also negative influences on Christians and church life (Wade 2007). Christians in a secular community live in two societies. They move back and forth between two very different worlds. They belong to a mini-society, the Church, with its belief systems, biblical ethics, and rules. But they also have to work and play in a secular society. And both societies attempt to make rules on how to live, talk, and dress. The world around the Christian stresses that a person’s own opinions and experiences are extremely important, that money is an accepted main goal in life, that sexual relationships are a free choice, and that religion is a private matter. The effect is that the church must, in many cases, take second place where it loses its importance and is neglected or left behind. This secular course, paired with the acceptance of birth-control, has also impacted Western European Seventh-day Adventist churches with a decreasing membership.

On the other hand, the developing world (former mission areas) is highly religious. In some countries people can hardly imagine what life without religion is like. Even the critics believe that these highly religious countries will not quickly lose their religious beliefs as they develop higher levels of education and enjoy technological advances.

**Immigration**

Most Western European nations today have sizeable immigrant populations, many of non-European origin. The enormous developments in industries, all kind of communications, and the evolution in transportation, paired with static population levels, have made the industrialized nations a much desired destination for people from the developing world.
In that world they experience poor conditions, unemployment, poverty, high birthrates, and often suppression by governments and religious persecution.

Although Eastern European countries have also had a few immigrants, they were not popular destinations because of their financial situations. Their lower standards of living even caused Eastern Europeans in great numbers to migrate to Western Europe.

The focus of this article will largely be on the immigrants to Western Europe who came from Africa, Middle Eastern, and Asian Muslim countries. Immigrants fall into the categories of migrant or foreign workers (both legal and illegal) and refugees. These often came as refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced, and stateless persons. They generally fled from political and religious systems that did not give them opportunities for work, education, or health care. Some, unfortunately, exploited the situation and just came to take advantage of the well-developed social welfare systems.

The admission of people from many cultures and languages called for peaceful coexistence in what were traditionally mono-cultural nations. It also meant that Christians—both Catholics and Protestants—suddenly had neighbors belonging to other world religions, such as Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims who were among the immigrants and asylum-seekers. The short distance between Europe and the Middle East and the ease of access have created a situation where Muslims have become the largest minority in Europe with about 25 million Muslim immigrants in 15 Western European countries with a total population of 366 million (Islam in Europe). This means that about 6.5 percent of the European population is now Muslim. The people from Islamic nations are very challenging groups. They have their special demands for consideration for their life-styles and religion. Attempts have been made to force on the host society not only the immigrants’ lifestyle but also their ideal of limited religious liberty and freedom of expression.

In contrast, the percentage of Christian immigrants to Western Europe is rather low. One reason for that could be that European governments failed to draw attention to the often persecuted Christian minorities in Muslim countries. The result was that Muslims who suffered under other Muslims came in large numbers to Europe.

**Adventist Immigrants**

The few Christian refugees, asylum seekers, and job hunters who wanted to be faithful to their religion, whether Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, or Coptic, found their churches in Europe. Protestant and Evangelical immigrants joined their own kinds of denomination, or in some
cases they organized their own churches with a pastor preaching in their mother tongue.

Among the refugees there were also a number of Seventh-day Adventists. The majority came from Eastern Europe, Russia, and Africa. These Adventist immigrants proved to be a blessing to many of the languishing Western European churches and improved the statistics for the conferences.

The unwritten reports of the impact of these “new citizens” are fascinating and encouraging; however, both newcomers and host churches have had to adapt and get used to new worship styles.

The United Kingdom, the greatest colonial power in history, had immigrants from former colonies arrive immediately after the Second World War. The situation today is that these immigrants with their descendants make up over 80 percent of the church membership.

Germany especially has had an astonishing history of non-German Adventist immigrants. After the tragic persecution of Jews and Gypsies, the post-World War II (WWII) governments opened their borders and Eastern European neighbors came in great numbers. Africans, particularly Ghanaians, have established their own churches. Other immigrants came from Asia and South America. One of the largest groups involved Russian citizens who could prove German ancestry. They were invited and offered citizenship by the German government. Among them were quite a few Adventists who during WWII had been forcibly moved by Stalin to Siberia and to what today are the new Islamic states.

The churches in Italy, Spain, and Portugal have, among other nationalities, accepted great numbers of Adventists from Romania, the country in Europe with the highest percentage of Adventists. In this case the languages of the receiving countries were not a great barrier as Romanian, like Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese, is a Latin-based language.

Countries like France, Belgium, and The Netherlands have been blessed with immigrants from their former colonies. Switzerland, Finland, and the Scandinavian countries have accepted immigrants from all continents with a high percentage of their new arrivals coming from Muslim countries. But even the Christians who fled Muslim persecution have had an impact on the life of the churches in Europe.

The great invasion of refugees and immigrants has put extra stress on the economy of the host nations. To this must be added the criminal problems some of the second and third generation immigrants from certain countries have fallen into as they struggled to adapt themselves to the new situations. This has caused some unrest in some of the larger cities in Europe.

However, declining churches in Europe have benefited in more than
one way from the influx of new members from other cultures. They not only help to fill the church pews on Sabbath mornings, but they also have a positive impact on the spiritual life and faithfulness to Adventist beliefs. Many immigrants come from countries where political and economic conditions are far from ideal. Corrupt governments, poverty, meager medical care, and limited human rights have forged a strong belief in and an unquestioned dependence on God as a very important part of life. Some have even experienced persecution from non-Christian religions. They have had to stand up for their special Adventist beliefs in societies where other Christians put them under pressure because they as Adventists have a different lifestyle. They take a strong stand for sincere faith and allegiance to biblical principles, so it can be difficult for them to understand and accept the often relaxed Western Adventist lifestyle or a liberal theology. Their commitment to traditional Adventism has in some cases strengthened church life in the receiving countries.

**Multicultural Adventist Churches and Evangelism**

In church growth principles there are two postulates that have special value for evangelism and pastoral care for new ethnic groups. In attempts to determine who are the *winnable people in a society*, it is suggested that *persons in transition are more apt to accept a new way of life*, especially when their felt needs are met. The second principle is Donald McGavran’s famous and much debated Homogeneous Unit Principle, claiming that “men like to be Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class-barriers” (cited in Wagner 1981:167, 168). Immigrants and refugees are definitely people in transition, especially in the first few months after they have settled in a new country and culture.

However, a problem with the application of the Homogeneous Unit Principle is that it undermines the European recommended commitment to multiculturalism defined as “the preservation of different cultures or cultural identities within a unified society as a state or nation” (Howell 2011:83, 84). In spite of that drawback, experience has revealed that personal witness to fellow immigrants is the most effective way of evangelism as people witness within their own language and culture.

Public evangelistic efforts focused on specific people groups also produces better results as the evangelist is able to speak to immigrants from his or her own culture. This seems to imply that multiculturalism as the recommended ideal in society is not the best approach for church growth and pastoral care.

These two church growth principles work from two very different perspectives. Soul-winning among immigrants has best results where the Homogeneous Unit Principle is applied. The same principles are at work in
a similar way among the indigenous people in the host nation. They will only reluctantly join churches where immigrant groups form the majority of the congregation. They also want to be or remain Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class-barriers.

In spiritual matters and worship the biblical goal is that all people are brothers and sisters. Multiculturalism should be applied. However, church membership is also a social occasion where the homogeneous unit serves as a strengthening factor. Thus, the dilemma of large numbers of immigrants filling the Adventist churches in Europe.

**Bread on the Water**

“Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again” (Eccl 11:1 NIV). The West European nations (Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, Great Britain, The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries) are the primary and most desired destinations for refugees and immigrants. Interestingly, the same European nations were pioneers and have been active in foreign missions for more than 600 years. However, today they are also the countries with minimal or no church growth.

The text from Ecclesiastes has been interpreted in many ways. I would like to apply it in a prophetic manner where bread is Christ, the Word of God (John 6:35), and waters mean nations (Rev 16:5). Then we have a beautiful prophecy that fittingly pictures what is happening in some cases in the Adventist world.

Adventist missionaries have for more than a century taken Jesus Christ and the Word of God to many nations. Now after many days the descendents of the missionaries are experiencing in their home countries immigrants from the mission fields making their contribution by being active members and strengthening the spiritual life in the very churches which in the past sent out the missionaries.

**Works Cited**


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