"All over the world men and women are looking wistfully to heaven. Prayers and tears and inquiries go up from souls longing for light, for grace, for the Holy Spirit. Many are on the verge of the kingdom, waiting only to be gathered in" (White 1911:109). Synonyms for “wistful” include “pensive, thoughtful, longing, wishful, sad.” With these synonyms in mind, let us rephrase the above quotation: “All over the world souls pensively, thoughtfully, sadly, wish and long for what we have.”

One such longing soul was Giselle Satterwhite, a college student at Temple University in Philadelphia. Breakup after breakup had hardened Giselle to relationships. When one more young man broke down those walls Giselle thought she had finally found love. Then he did what all men in her life had done—dumped her on the curb. Devastated, Giselle cried herself to sleep in her friend’s dorm room, waking in the morning only to see herself in the mirror, unrecognizable with bloodshot eyes. Dragging her body through showering and dressing, Giselle forced herself to attend class. Walking down the hall, she saw none other than her ex. As panic set in, her cell phone rang. Delon Lawrence’s buoyant voice said, “Giselle, remember that Bible study I told you about? It’s now. Do you want to come?”

“Yes!” she said, turning around to head for the meeting place.

At the study, Delon cut right to the heart of the matter, saying, “I’m not here to convert you or anything like that, but I am here to tell you that God loves you, and he wants to have a relationship with you. I’m here to let you know that the only way you can find some peace of mind is with God.”

Today Giselle says, “After our Bible study I realized that something had just happened to me. I no longer felt any pain. The gaping hole that was in my chest was closed. I was the happiest I had ever been in my whole life. Someone did want a relationship with me, and it was none other than the God of the universe! I left that meeting with my head held high. I saw the
guy who had just dumped me and I said, ‘Hey!’ with a giant smile on my face because my cup was filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Delon, along with the rest of us at REACH Philadelphia, sees Giselle as one of the first fruits of an ever-growing, abundant harvest for God’s kingdom. Meanwhile, the REACH team enthusiastically and joyfully works the fields of this urban sprawl we call “the city of brotherly love.”

**REACH: The Vision**

It all began when in April of 2008, the Chestnut Hill Seventh-day Adventist Church welcomed Tara VinCross as their Senior Pastor. Pastor Tara (affectionately called “P.T.”) set in place a visioning team, that mapped out a five-year plan. The plan included not only extensive ministry development in the church itself, but a thriving canvassing ministry, and a church plant conducted by young adults.

Canvassing? Church plant? Young adults? Sitting on the visioning committee felt for some like listening to a fairy tale. The future clashed with both past and present; the dream contrasted with reality. The Chestnut Hill Church had continually hoped, pled, prayed, and longed for young people, only to watch their ranks thin with each passing year. The church had also tossed around the idea of a church plant, but had never truly pursued it. And a canvassing team? That had never crossed their minds. Yet Tara carried on about these things as if planning to make a peanut butter sandwich. Was she inspired? Naïve? Delusional?

As it turned out she was inspired. She had been studying her Bible and the writings of the messenger of the Lord, Ellen White. These sources built her understanding of how an average local church could fan out into a ministry center that sent tendrils of salvation throughout a major metropolis. Thankfully, those inspired sources avail themselves to each of us. What is happening in Philadelphia is not about Pastor Tara; it is about God and what he can do for each congregation.

It is not the capabilities you now possess or ever will have that will give you success. It is that which the Lord can do for you. We need to have far less confidence in what man can do and far more confidence in what God can do for every believing soul. He longs to have you reach after Him by faith. He longs to have you expect great things from Him. . . . He can sharpen the intellect. He can give tact and skill. Put your talents into the work, ask God for wisdom, and it will be given you. (White 1941:146)

**REACH: The Context**

Philadelphia is the fifth largest city in the United States, sprawling out...
with close to six million people in the metro area. Only about 10,000 of them are Seventh-day Adventists. Let us put these statistics in perspective: That is a one-in-six hundred ratio. This does not sound too tragic until we compare this ratio to some other areas of the world: Philadelphia 1:600, Haiti 1:28, Philippines 1:92.

Wait! Do we not send missionaries to Haiti and the Philippines? Yes, and that is a good thing. What is bad is that we do not send them to places like Philadelphia, which actually have a greater need. This realization shifted the paradigm of the members of the Chestnut Hill Church. Scales fell off their eyes and Philadelphia, their hometown, transformed into a field white for the harvest.

It happened in the nick of time. Across North America, congregations grow older and smaller as the communities around them grow younger and larger (see Beckworth and Kidder 2010; Olson 2009). Did you get that? Churches age and shrink, communities expand. Imagine a huge bowl of fruit next to a small bowl of raisins. This is not meant to slight older folk, but which bowl is more inviting?

Let us look again at Pennsylvania. Research indicates that over 70 percent of congregations in the Pennsylvania Conference have plateaued or are declining in membership. The average age of the churches is 58 years old (Conversation with PA Conference President Ray Hartwell, 2009). We love our old churches, but the question arises: Why have these older churches not spawned younger ones to bring down the average? Perhaps we need an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and a renewed vision of what God can do.

**REACH: The Movement**

Fortunately, God has moved the worldwide church toward these very things. On Monday, October 11, 2010, the Annual Council session of the General Conference Executive Committee approved “an urgent call for revival, reformation, discipleship and evangelism.” By kneeling in prayer, over 300 delegates voted “yes” to the document.

The document states that:

The Church’s growth rate is simply not keeping pace with the world’s burgeoning population. An honest evaluation of our current evangelistic impact on the world leads to the conclusion that unless there is a dramatic change we will not complete heaven’s assignment in this generation. In spite of our best efforts, all our plans, strategies, and resources are incapable of finishing God’s mission for His glory on earth. (God’s Promised Gift 2010)
Revival. Reformation. Discipleship. Evangelism—four essential, ordered steps toward a better future for our church. Let us look at each one.

Revival

The document adds, “There is nothing more important than knowing Jesus and seeking His promise of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in latter-rain power for the fulfilling of the gospel commission” (God’s Promised Gift 2010).

Before his ascension, Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you,” He said, “and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). At Pentecost, God electrified and empowered ordinary people to bear witness of Him. Because of the power received, and the witness given, the persecutor Saul found himself face to face with the Messiah. After his conversion, he said, “Continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister (Col 1:23, NASB, emphasis supplied). What began with a true revival, an outpouring of the Spirit, ended within a few years with the entire world evangelized!

“By the co-operation of the divine Spirit, the apostles did a work that shook the world. To every nation was the gospel carried in a single generation” (White 1911:593).

Church leaders must realize that as time draws to a close, the Spirit will work through an ever-broadening spectrum of men and women of all ages, races, nationalities, and socioeconomic levels. Rising up like tidal waves from the sea of humanity, those Christ has called will surprise us with gifts and capabilities that might, in another era, have taken years to cultivate! We will have to step aside to allow them to do what God has called them to do.

“And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days (Joel 2:28-29, NIV).

Sons, daughters, old, young, male and female servants—God will gather his end-time workers as he sees fit, pouring out his Spirit upon them. Join in or step aside, church members, or you will be guilty of resisting God himself! Revival is beginning even now.

Ellen White said, “A revival of true godliness among us is the greatest and most urgent of all our needs. To seek this should be our first work. . . . A revival need be expected only in answer to prayer” (White 1958:121).
Because “prayer and faith will do what no power on earth can accomplish” (White 1952:15), revival always begins with prayer—individual and corporate, heartbroken, heartfelt, passionate, bold, promise-claiming prayer.

Reformation

Reformation means “to bring change.” “There is nothing that Satan fears so much as that the people of God shall clear the way by removing every hindrance, so that the Lord can pour out His Spirit upon a languishing church and an impenitent congregation. If Satan had his way, there would never be another awakening, great or small, to the end of time” (White 1958:124). This statement helps set the tone for the work of reformation. So often reforms have been carried out in the spirit of legalism, as if our reforms merit salvation. But to see our need for change in terms of “removing every hindrance” so that God can work freely among and through us, puts reform in a more God-centered perspective. Then and only then can we, as the statement indicates, scare the devil and serve the Lord.

Revival without reformation disintegrates into emotionalism. Reformation without revival decays into legalism. The two must work as a divine duo to work at all.

Discipleship

Discipleship and evangelism form another divine duo. At times in Adventist history evangelism has been emphasized without a corresponding emphasis on discipleship. Militancy has resulted. To cast newborn babies into the street would be unthinkable, but we do something similar to this when we forget about new believers as soon as they are baptized. Social disconnect often leads to spiritual disconnect, which leads to membership attrition, totally defeating the purpose of evangelism.

Jesus said, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:18-20). Notice the order: (1) make disciples, (2) baptize, (3) teach.

The word “disciple” can also be translated as meaning “teach,” making this order: (1) teach, (2) baptize, (3) teach some more.

This implies much intensive training and mentoring both before and after baptism. Relationships become the delivery system for biblical truth. Good disciple-makers will form strong bonds with those they win to Christ.
Evangelism

This intriguing word—in the Greek, euangelion—means “good message.” Our message, when firmly Christ-centered, is good. So often, though, we share the gospel as good advice instead of good news. Subtract the glories of the gospel from Adventism and you have a depleted to-do and do not-do list of standards and doctrines. This list has traumatized many right out of the church. How important that we realize evangelism by its very definition entails the warm, heartfelt conveyance of the love of Jesus. We share with souls first what God has already done for them in sending his Son to die for all people. Then we elicit a response of faith and obedience. Ultimately we invite them to come alongside us in revival, reformation, discipling and evangelism, thus repeating the heavenly cycle until Jesus returns.

Evangelism without discipling is militancy, but discipling without evangelism is impossible. We must constantly reach out, ever widening our sphere of influence, in order to find disciples.

REACH: The City

As a people we need to hasten the work in the cities, which has been hindered for lack of workers and means and a spirit of consecration. At this time, the people of God need to turn their hearts fully to him; for the end of all things is at hand. They need to humble their minds, and to be attentive to the will of the Lord, working with earnest desire to do that which God has shown must be done to warn the cities of their impending doom. (White 1912:3,4)

The writings of Ellen White state two apparently contradictory things: That God’s people should leave the cities, and that God’s people should work the cities. Some have solved this tension by trying to work the cities from the country. The cost of fuel and the vastness of urban sprawl are making this nearly impossible. A more sensible option might be found in the paragraph itself: “to be attentive to the will of the Lord.” God may call some to the country and others to the city. Families with small children often benefit from simple, natural surroundings. Others may need a period of country living to learn of God and reconsecrate their lives. But leaving the cities in order to seal ourselves away from the people flies in the face of God’s counsel to reach those very cities for Christ. Building fortresses may have its place, but the example Jesus set for us reveals Jesus leaving his “fortress” and coming to our “city,” sinful planet earth. I am sure he hated the smog, the noise, and the sin. But he loved, oh, how he loved, the people.
REACH: The Story

The REACH story resembles a narrative with parallel storylines. REACH emerged alongside other ministries that support and supply it, such that to separate them completely would be like trying to separate the fibers in a tapestry. The ministries involved include the following:

*The Chestnut Hill Seventh-day Adventist Church.* The congregation at Chestnut Hill responded to the vision, shared through Pastor VinCross, as the Jews of Medio-Persia responded to Ezra’s call to rebuild Jerusalem. Without this nurturing, generous “mother,” REACH would have died in infancy. Thank God for big-hearted church members who willingly released some of their own members to begin a new church, even when this required sacrifice and separation.

*Pennsylvania Youth Challenge.* In the summer of 2009, Pennsylvania Youth Challenge (PYC) burst onto the scene in the form of nineteen high-energy young people who served as canvassers for nine weeks. The genius of summer canvassing programs is that they provide something young people know they need—a summer job—in order to provide something they might not know they need—a closer walk with Jesus. The challenges of door-to-door book sales prove to be excellent teachers. “Young men and women should be educated to become workers in their own neighborhoods and in other places. Let all set their hearts and minds to become intelligent in regard to the work for this time, qualifying themselves to do that for which they are best adapted” (White 1909:118).

In 2012, PYC will celebrate its fourth anniversary. The team has grown to 30 team members. In 2011, the same-sized team visited 58,177 homes, delivered 4,778 books, and shared 12,646 prayers. Hopefully, 2012 will top this, because even if each home visited held four people, it would take us 25 years to reach each person in Philadelphia. Fortunately, PYC is not all the Lord is doing.

*Ministry Internship.* The mother church watched as the Friday night young adult Bible study held at Pastor Tara’s house grew. As word got out about the joyful song services, the deep Bible study, and the sweet fellowship, what began as a few college-aged young people swelled into a capacity crowd bursting the seams of the VinCross living room. Convinced that a church plant would swell similarly, two Chestnut Hill church members donated the use of properties they owned. These apartments would house the interns who would provide staffing to the church plant. Some of the eight interns would receive free housing in exchange for part-time work; others would receive a salary in exchange for full-time work.

Gradually the intern team assembled itself. First, Pastor Nick Snell joined the team with his wife Deanne. Pastor Nick’s musical gifts have provided a backbone for the worship activities of the team. Pastor Tiffany
Brown joined the team full time, after completing her Masters degree in Community Development from Eastern University. She leads the team in incarnational, community outreach living—or what some call community service. Twana Ambrose came with a teaching background, and still teaches at the local Adventist school, Huntington Valley Christian Academy, while serving in ministry at the church plant. Sierra Davis came to know the team through PYC, as did Norshare Placide and Delon Lawrence. Our most recent addition is Lee Givhan, a Bible worker and graduate of ARISE Institute. Lee and Delon are a well-known music duo in the Philadelphia area. With a state of the art studio provided by a church member, they have begun a recording and video ministry called REACH Media. Their presence both on local college campuses and on the web has made them a strong draw to the church plant. Recently Lee posted a spoken word video about the Sabbath, which has received over 14,000 views.

During the two-year internship, the REACH staff gain hands-on experience and training. Their proficiencies will extend beyond canvassing leadership into giving Bible studies, conducting community service efforts, preaching and teaching, coordinating prayer ministries, and last but not least, church planting.

Church Plant. Focusing on spiritual growth, active mission, and community, the REACH interns held their first Sabbath afternoon worship service on September 10, 2011. The “church” was none other than one of the ministry houses, in Nick and Deanne Snell’s living room. Week by week the crammed living room pulsed with music, testimonies, Bible study, and prayer. In the winter of 2011 when the last square inch of carpeted floor disappeared, the group realized they needed a bigger space. Through their weekday basketball game, the group learned that the Olney Recreation Center would provide free space for their church plant, affirming the community’s desire to see the church plant continue. They started meeting in the more public venue of the recreation center on December 3, 2011. The group meets at 1:30 p.m. for lunch, moving into Bible study, worship in music, a sermon from the Word, and then a time for dialog. The group breaks up about 5 p.m., migrating out to the parking lot for more chatting, laughter, and bonding time.

Though all ages are loved and welcomed, the church plant targets college students at the 90-plus colleges and universities in the Philadelphia area, as well as young professionals. Combining solid Adventist theology with new methods, REACH reaches this class, just as its name states.

Could there be a more direct fulfillment of God’s counsel?

We all need to be wide awake, that, as the way opens, we may advance the work in the large cities. We are far behind in following the light
given to enter these cities and erect memorials for God. Step by step we are to lead souls into the full light of truth. And we are to continue the work until a church is organized and a humble house of worship built. (White 1902:40)

The Story Continues

Angel Smith grew up in a God-fearing home. In college, however, she began to question her Christian religion. When she went on to pursue post baccalaureate courses to prepare to become a health professional, a Seventh-day Adventist invited her to Bible studies. At the studies, a new world opened up to Angel. Like a baby bird with open mouth, morsel after morsel of truth satisfied her hunger. Shortly after, upon acceptance in a Master’s program in Philadelphia, she left her native Houston with a heart burning with passion for what she had learned.

Arriving in Philadelphia, Angel traipsed from church to church—including Baptist, Methodist, and Catholic houses of worship—but felt unsatisfied. One day it occurred to her that she had learned precious truth at a Seventh-day Adventist Bible study. “I need to try attending a Seventh-day Adventist church!” she said. This led her to the Chestnut Hill Adventist Church. Angel says, “Two and a half months later I was baptized by immersion in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in that very church. I was taught the Word with clarity through Bible studies led by the Holy Spirit, and my soul continues to leap for joy!”

Angel continues: “I decided to join REACH Philadelphia. Being a member of REACH has been a transforming experience and has allowed me to be an active disciple for Christ. Currently, it has allowed me to express my faith by participating in ministries like Adopt-A-Block. In Adopt-A-Block, groups of two are assigned blocks. We go out knocking door to door in an attempt to get to know the community needs. This allows us to figure out how we can best serve the people. Ultimately it provides a way to share Christ with our neighbors. My partner Delon and I met a married couple who were really going through a tough time financially, and did not have enough funds to afford groceries. As a church we were able to meet the needs of that couple by providing groceries for them. This couple later invited us into their home, and we currently have ongoing Bible studies led by the Holy Spirit. Adopt-A-Block has transformed my faith by helping me realize that there is a joy like none other when you see that your efforts helped someone. REACH has taught me and is continuing to teach that giving up self is true discipleship.”

A group of REACH members attended the North American Division Just Claim It International Prayer Conference in Greensboro, North Carolina. Justin, a young adult, non-Adventist from Philadelphia, also came
to JCI at the invitation of his co-worker. Pastor Tara presented a seminar at the conference, that Justin attended. As part of her presentation, P.T. showed a promo video for REACH Philadelphia. Afterwards, Justin approached Tara, face aglow, and said, “This is what I’ve been waiting for in a church! I want to join your church!” Tara was pleased, but did not realize that he was not a Seventh-day Adventist—yet. By the time Friday night rolled around, Justin decided to be baptized. He approach Manny Cruz, the North American Division Associate Youth Director, who said, “Let’s go for it! Which local church do you want to join?”

Justin replied, “REACH Philadelphia church plant!”

He asked Pastor Manny if Pastor Tara would baptize him. The next morning, in the pool of the Sheraton Hotel, Justin began a new life in Christ. Twelve REACH members witnessed the beautiful moment he came up from the waters, hugging him, and welcoming him into the fellowship of believers. Justin brings guests to nearly every REACH service, an irrepressible witness of God’s love and leading in his life.

Like shimmering sheaves, Giselle, Angel, and Justin show us that an abundant harvest waits in the great metropolis of Philadelphia. To quote the great hymn: “Where are the reapers? Oh, who will come to share in the glory of the harvest home?”

Works Cited


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