

Adventists and the City / Country Living

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Protestant Christians often disliked and mistrusted cities yet also sought to reform them and evangelize the people living within them. The relationship that Seventh-day Adventists have had and still have with urban environments can be characterized as being tidally linked, with some decades seeing Adventists advocate city work and other decades seeing other Adventists call for a return to the country. This push-and-pull between city and country is ongoing.

Adventists and the City

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was organized during a period of rapid urban growth within the United States of America, especially within the American Midwest after 1860.¹ The Church's leaders, initially based in the Midwest and then on the East Coast, had differing views on cities and on rural and urban life. Throughout the decades, the stance of Church leadership and members toward cities has varied; individual Seventh-day Adventists were equally repulsed by and attracted to cities. Today, this dual impulse remains active within the Adventist community.

The Adventist relationship to cities has deep roots. In Greek and Roman literature, the countryside often symbolized "distant and innocent virtue", while cities were written about as being places containing vice *and* virtue.² Cities often provided opportunities for economic growth, and often grew in population during times of economic and technological change.³ Yet sometimes such changes, especially if rapid, produced unpleasant and sometimes dangerous side effects. Andrew Lees, a scholar of perceptions of cities, wrote, "Especially in the early phases of [cities'] growth, cities presented scenes of dreadful overcrowding and disease. For many, life was indeed nasty, brutish, and short."⁴ Those concerned with public health, including clergy, physicians, and social reformers, might criticize cities on that basis alone, and Adventists did critique the physical healthiness of cities.

But sanitation and people's physical health were not the only concerns that critics, especially Protestant Christians (including Seventh-day Adventists), had about cities; they were equally, if not more so, concerned with "cities' moral health"⁵. Once away from the regular communal patterns of rural family, home, and church life, individuals might stray from those patterns.⁶ This disintegration of social cohesion alarmed many Christians and led many to draw comparisons to the biblical examples of Sodom and Gomorrah and Babylon.⁷ Some criticized

cities in an attempt to improve them, but others sought to shun cities altogether.⁸ Seventh-day Adventists' relationship to cities draws on and often reflects this broader context, but is complicated by Adventists' desire to evangelize those living within cities.

1860-1880: Rural Roots

While living in an age of rapid urban growth, early Seventh-day Adventists were largely from rural locations in the American Northeast. The *Review* headquarters was relocated from East Coast towns to Battle Creek, Michigan, a growing town in the Midwest. While located on a rail line, Battle Creek was considered rural enough to meet the sensibilities of Adventist leadership while also meeting the practical needs of the growing movement.

Adventist evangelistic efforts in this era were oriented around having open space and depended on building local community ties. Tent meetings and camp meetings necessitated using rural places, farmers' fields, or empty lots on the edge of towns.⁹ The Vigilant Missionary Society's work was predicated on personal connection. Its largely female members mailed Adventist reading material and corresponded with people across rural New England, as well as engaging in intercessory prayer, visiting neighbors, going door-to-door to distribute tracts, and persuading others to join their Society. This work grew into the efforts of the General Tract and Missionary Society, formalized into the Church's structure in 1874.¹⁰ The Society largely acted as a distributor for denominational publications (namely, books, periodicals, and tracts), and its members promoted personal ministries, often using said publications.

1880-1915: Growth of Adventist City Work

As the denomination and its work grew, so did the tension between rural living and city work. In 1882, the General Tract and Missionary Society was renamed the International Tract and Missionary Society.¹¹ This move captured the growth that the Seventh-day Adventist Church's missionary enterprise had experienced since 1874.

At the International Tract and Missionary Society's meeting on November 13, 1883, members discussed the relation of the Society to city work being done in the U.S. cities of Chicago and New York. They also heard from John N. Loughborough about the work being done in Liverpool, England; from Sands H. Lane about Indianapolis; and from John O. Corliss about Washington, D.C. These reports led to a resolution to have Reuben Wright enter Washington, D. C., which they considered "an important missionary field", to do colporteur work there.¹² Work began growing along the West Coast of the United States, and those working in the Society were convinced that "[i]n city missions it has been proved that personal effort is the most effectual of any means to reach the people". W. C. White wanted "entire neighborhoods" to be reached.¹³

However, this evangelistic fervor was tempered, in part, by the strain of Protestant thought that saw cities as both physically and morally filthy. Former General Conference President George I. Butler wrote a two-part article on “Rural Versus City Life” for the *Review* in early 1890. He called cities “centers of influence whose wide-reaching arms extend to all parts of our common country. They really represent modern life intensified.” But this intensity had its downsides. “City life is a feverish life,” Butler wrote. “It is not a quiet, calm, natural life, but it is a whirling, rushing, extra busy life. It is not conducive to calm thought, religious meditation, needed rest, cool nerves, and quiet contemplations.” He described cities as places where houses “are jammed in close together”, with yards “strewn with ashes, broken fruitcans, or tumble-down outhouses; and stables hidden away as much as possible”, smelling of “coal smoke” and compost. While he could “highly appreciate that principle of sacrifice which impels *some* of our young people to leave pleasant country homes to work in the cause of God”, Butler stated that “many leave such homes for far different reasons”, claiming that those who did so loved “the excitement and pleasure of city life” more than the “quiet of country life.”⁴ Living in the city would make it more difficult for them to keep close to God. Butler clearly feared that Adventists would stray from the communal and moral patterns of rural life.

Butler was not alone in this line of thinking, which can also be seen in Ellen G. White’s writings. In *Ministry of Healing* (1905), White wrote that, when it came to physical wellness, rural areas were practically heavenly compared to urban environments:

To many of those living in the cities who have not a spot of green grass to set their feet upon, who year after year have looked out upon filthy courts and narrow alleys, brick walls and pavements, and skies clouded with dust and smoke—if these could be taken to some farming district, surrounded with the green fields, the woods and hills and brooks, the clear skies and the fresh, pure air of the country, it would seem almost like heaven.¹⁵

As for moral wellness, in *The Great Controversy* (1911), White discusses Waldensian young people being sent from their secluded rural homes to “the cities of France or Italy”:

The youth thus sent forth were exposed to temptation, they witnessed vice, they encountered Satan’s wily agents, who urged upon them the most subtle heresies and the most dangerous deceptions.¹⁶

The cities were seen as strongholds of Satan, but they were not to be shunned for that reason. They were to be worked. Indeed, Ellen White was adamant that the cities were to be evangelized. In 1906, she lamented, “If I were twenty-five years younger, I would certainly take up labor in the cities. But I must reach them with the pen.”¹⁷ In 1910, she wrote, “For years the work in the cities has been presented before me and has been urged upon our people. . . . Before this time, every large city should have heard the testing message, and thousands should have been brought to a knowledge of the truth. Wake up the churches, take the light from under the bushel.”¹⁸

Church workers such as Dr. David Paulson tried to put her words regarding outpost centers into practice so that city missions would continue to flourish,¹⁹ but by and large, her words on the matter were not heeded. The enthusiasm for city work began to diminish, though it never completely went out. Church leadership focused their energies elsewhere, and administrative issues with a key proponent of city work, John Harvey Kellogg, also tarnished the overall concept.²⁰ In some respects, it was easy for Adventists to fall in line with anti-urban sentiment when American Protestant thought was already rife with it.

1915-1929: A Call to the Country

The Seventh-day Adventist Church continued its drift away from city mission after Ellen G. White's death in 1915. Adventists continued to see cities as places of vice, temptation, and disease. Articles in the *Review*, including selections from non-Adventist writers, emphasized the benefits of country life. A selection on "Training Little Children", written by American educator and author Dorothy Canfield Fisher;²¹ and obtained by the *Review* staff in a pamphlet issued by the United States Bureau of Education, promoted the benefit of country living for children. Fisher wrote, "If...the country mother will see that her children are not cheated out of their birthright of a share in the processes of country life, she need have small fear for their health, happiness, and moral development."²² J. Brush Anderson, an Adventist photographer, bemoaned the fact that the young people in 1923 "long for the moving-picture show, the dance, the thrill that speculation carries with it, hoping to make a fortune in a hurry. Country life is too slow. It is all right for the old folks who have had their day, they say, but they choose the city." Anderson saw this as unwise, and he cautioned Adventist young people that "[c]ities are like fiery furnaces, beautiful to look upon, but in their glory they consume those who play with their fire. . . .Who has ever traveled the gilded way so swiftly, as did King Solomon? There was nothing under the sun that he did not investigate."²³

A prominent Adventist leader who was decidedly and influentially anti-urban was Arthur W. Spalding. An educator, researcher, and writer,²⁴ Spalding was adamant that cities exerted an active, ongoing harm to Adventists. This he made clear in his work as secretary of the General Conference's Home Commission ("[a]n interdepartmental committee, for the helping of parents and uplift of the home"²⁵). In his "Report of the Home Commission" for the 1926 General Conference Session, Spalding lamented that Adventists, "like people of the world, are crowding into cities", and were, in his eyes, neglecting the evangelization of "rural districts" and leading the church to "rapidly" become "preponderantly urban in character". This "urban character" included increased family problems and endangered Adventist children. Spalding tied the need to flee cities to Adventist parents' desire to raise their children in the Adventist faith. On this point, Spalding declared:

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? God forbid! The salvation of our children demands, not a headlong flight of families in a time of terror, but a well-considered, carefully planned removal under conditions which, by determination and

consecration, will make the move successful financially as well as educationally and. spiritually. This matter demands the attention of the church,— the teaching of the ministers, the will to do on the part of parents, the careful planning and co-operation of conference officials. And while we wait, thousands of our children and youth are being sucked down into the maw of Sodom and Gomorrah.²⁶

Spalding would repeatedly return to the theme of cities and “the passing of the social order” as Sodom. Calling himself “an apostle of the simpler life”, Spalding once declared, “If Sodom,...I will get out of it; if Nineveh, I will preach to it.”²⁷ Such thinking was at the forefront of 1920s’ Adventism.

1930-1945: Economic Downturn and War Leads to Renewal of Urban Mission

However, the economic realities of the Great Depression drew those Adventists who had left cities back to them. It is likely no coincidence that the first appearance of the phrase *welfare work* appears in the *Review* in 1930, in a report from the Central European Division, where Seventh-day Adventists had been ministering locally to those trying to recover in the aftermath of World War I. In his report, H. F. Schuberth stated that their Dorcas Societies enabled them to “bring the rich into closer contact with the poor, as they receive the clothing and food given by the benevolent and disperse them among the needy and the unfortunate.”²⁸ Other groups of Adventists not in the Central European Division also began ministering to the needs of their local communities, and they also sought guidance for how best to do so from the General Conference.

In response, the General Conference Minority Committee studied the issue and recommended to the full General Conference Executive Committee that “welfare work” was “to be fostered by the Home Missionary Departments of the General, union and local conferences”.²⁹ They assigned “preliminary study” of how to work out plans for a “Committee on Welfare Work” to the Committee on Missionary Activities, whose membership was drawn broadly from General Conference personnel, including departmental secretaries, a GC associate secretary, and the secretarial staff of the Home Missionary Department and Missionary Volunteer Department.³⁰ Their study was given to the Committee on Plans, which brought a report to the 1931 Autumn Council, where it was recommended that a “Seventh-day Adventist Welfare Society” be created, with the “counsel of the conference officers and the Home Missionary Secretary”, in local churches where there was “great need for this kind of work”. These Societies would “render temporary aid to families in real need, along the lines of furnishing clothing, bedding, fuel, and food” as well as connect families with other organizations that could assist with housing and other financial needs.³¹ E. F. Hackman, of the GC Home Missionary Department, reported to the 1933 Spring Meeting that 311 such societies had been organized by the end of 1932, and that they were “bringing relief to many in distress” as well as bringing people into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Hackman commended the lay members in North America who had “come to the help of this movement in this time when decreasing funds are making it necessary to cut budgets and lay off workers”.³² F. L. Peterson, secretary of the

Negro Department, reported that congregations of Black Adventists were “also active in welfare work”; indeed, they were going a step farther and “conducting health clinics in Oakland, Chicago and other cities”³³ Seventh-day Adventists in the 1930s were seeing what their communities (especially the urban ones) needed and stepped up to meet those needs.

But this shift toward a more favorable view on city living and welfare and evangelistic work within cities caused consternation among those who promoted country living above all else. John E. Fulton dwelt on the danger that cities posed to those of “God’s people” who lived in them:

Our cities are hotbeds of vice and iniquity, and are awaiting certain doom. . . . Yet many remain, to the detriment, if not the destruction, of their own souls, and the loss of their families. . . . Cain was the founder of the first city, and it may be presumed that it was like him in morals, and so are many other cities, ancient and modern. Some, like Joseph and Daniel, placed by Providence or circumstances in cities with many temptations, stand the test of fire and are crowned with honor; but the gutters are full of those who fall under the temptation of the crowded haunts of men. It is dangerous to leave God’s fields, to exchange them for man’s streets.³⁴

This pushback grew even as war broke out in Europe and as the United States was eventually drawn into that war. An unsigned editorial in the *Review* from 1942 asked the question, “Should our readers with children living in large cities seek homes in the country? Many are considering this question today.” Its answer to the question was, “We would say to those with families of small children, Leave the large cities and find homes in the country, provided it is wise and best for you do so. We recognize that all could not do this.” Its writers added the additional caveat that even moving “to a well-populated community or a small town or country village” would be acceptable while also allowing people to earn money and “be a light” to those among whom they lived. Those tasked with “important church offices” and “heavy responsibilities” due to living in cities would have to stay in less-than-ideal situations because “heavy loss” would come “to the work of God” if they were to get out of the cities.³⁵

1945-1950: Self-Supporting Work, the Commission on Rural Living, and Country Living

The tension between country living and city work grew in the wake of World War II. While Adventists were never exactly pro-urban, what began in the 1920s came to fruition between 1945 and 1950. It was in this era that Adventist Church leaders took deliberate steps to get Adventist members out of the cities and into the country, and, almost as soon as they were able to, Adventists took a decidedly anti-urban stance.

In March 1946, the General Conference Committee, acting on recommendations from the General Conference officers, created the “North American Commission for Self-Supporting Missionary Work”; this commission was to be chaired by the North American Division (NAD) president and was to begin its work in July 1946, after the

General Conference Session. It was set out that this commission would “stand as a body of counselors” to any Adventists who were seeking to live in rural areas. The people asked to serve on this committee at the time of its creation were L. K. Dickson (General Conference vice-president for North America), E. A. Sutherland (founder of Madison College), W. H. Williams (General Conference undertreasurer), H. T. Elliott (General Conference associate secretary), W. H. Branson (General Conference general vice-president, president of the Missions Division, part of the General Conference Ministerial Association’s Advisory Council, vice-president of the Voice of Prophecy, and vice-chairman of both the North American Radio Commission and the Seventh-day Adventist War Service Commission), H. A. Morrison (General Conference Educational Department secretary), H. M. Walton (General Conference Medical Department secretary), and W. A. Butler (acting secretary of the General Conference Home Missionary Department).³⁶

In July, the GC Committee tweaked its March action, allowing the commission to name a group of people to “constitute such a body of counselors” instead of those named in the previous action; the people named by the commission were Nathaniel C. Wilson, the newly elected NAD president; Carlyle B. Haynes (general secretary of the Seventh-day Adventist War Service Commission and executive secretary of the Council on Industrial Relations); E. A. Sutherland; E. E. Cossentine (the new secretary of the General Conference Educational Department); and the as-yet-unappointed secretary of the GC Medical Department.³⁷ On August 22, 1946, the Committee voted on recommendations from the North American Commission on Self-Supporting Missionary Work. As a result of the recommendations, Church leaders merged the Committee on Country Living and the North American Commission on Self-Supporting Missionary Work into a new “Seventh-day Adventist Commission on Rural Living”, which was explicitly to “serve in the North American Division only”. Edward A. Sutherland was the commission’s first secretary, and his first assistant was Carlyle B. Haynes. The commission had three main objectives: to “foster and develop self-supporting and missionary work and institutions”; to “encourage and assist” in the creation of the Association of Self-Supporting Institutions; and 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; [and] to provide counsel and information to those who are considering moving to the country”. Others included in the commission were Nathaniel C. Wilson, E. E. Cossentine, A. A. Jaspersen (principal of Fletcher Academy in the U.S. state of North Carolina and soon-to-be president of Madison College), and Howard J. Welch (a minister serving in the Kentucky-Tennessee Conference).³⁸

On the same day, an editorial note appeared at the end of an article authored by Haynes for that week’s issue of the *Review*. It read:

A brochure entitled *Country Living: An Aid to Moral and Social Security*, containing instruction regarding this matter, which has come to this people through the Spirit of prophecy, may be obtained from your Book and Bible House for ten cents.—EDITORS.³⁹

This new pamphlet, commonly referred to as *Country Living*, was a collection of statements by Ellen G. White, compiled from her letters and manuscripts and removed from those original contexts, though each had a reference to the document it originally came from. Published in 1946 by the Review and Herald Association, *Country Living* immediately had a large impact on Seventh-day Adventists.⁴⁰ The 1946 Autumn Council adopted four recommendations related to country living:

1. That those residing in congested areas give careful consideration to the warnings and instruction recently published in the pamphlet "Country Living, An Aid to Moral and Social Security," and prayerfully study their privileges and responsibilities in the light of this counsel and prepare to make such adjustments as may be called for as "God opens the way."
2. That our people be cautioned in this endeavor, whether choosing a country residence near enough to the city to maintain employment connections, or selecting a situation offering business opportunities or employment in a rural environment, or engaging wholly in agriculture, to earnestly heed the admonitions given us that "not a move should be made but that movement and all it portends" be "carefully considered," (Country Living, p. 26), seeking counsel of "wise men" and spreading "every plan before God with fasting," (Id. p. 28), keeping well in mind: (a) adequate educational opportunities; (b) economic livelihood; and (c) moving in such a way as to avoid hardship and discouragement.
3. That those contemplating changing their location and possibly their vocation be urged to take counsel with their pastors, conference officers and others who may be able to give sound advice regarding these matters, so that hasty, ill-advised moves may be avoided and that any change made may be fruitful in providing spiritual and temporal blessings as well as opportunities for missionary endeavor.
4. That the attention of our people be called to the inadvisability of church members forming large colonies of Adventist believers in any district, but rather, if a move is undertaken, that they endeavor to establish themselves in places where they shall be best able to help advance the cause of God.⁴¹

These recommendations were made because the General Conference Committee believed that "conditions in the congested areas of population emphasize the importance of instruction which came to us from the Spirit of Prophecy years ago". Of chief concern were the dangers of city living to Seventh-day Adventists' "spiritual life and growth"; at this point, the physical conditions in the cities paled in comparison to the moral conditions.⁴²

Yet a review of the archival sources shows that the push to get out of the cities in the 1940s came from more than the explicit reason given by Church leaders, which was that they were following the instructions regarding cities as given by the Spirit of Prophecy. This is true, but why did Church leaders give emphasis to certain statements regarding cities now instead of earlier? In part, the sheer level of urban destruction, devastation, and death seen in the cities of Europe and in Japan during World War II, which had only ended less than a year before, propelled Church leaders to take a stronger anti-urban stance.

The threats from aerial assault and nuclear fallout were only the newest pieces of evident danger to be tied to urban life. The old evidence still applied. In January 1947, Arthur W. Spalding publicly railed against those who remained in cities, using rhetoric which, for him, had not changed in over twenty years:

The streets of Sodom! Sodom, known throughout the world as the wide-open city, where the wine shops never close, where thieves are every man you meet, where murder and rape and bestiality are commonplace, where the night is revel time, where the watchmen bar themselves in their towers and no one's person is inviolate!⁴³

A week later, Spalding again referred to Sodom and Gomorrah, and declared that “cities teach luxury and extravagance” and encouraged “indulgences and diversions”, even among “church people”. Those who lived in the city lacked practical skills, he said, writing, “City people are far removed from the sources of life...They have canned food, canned fashions, canned music, and canned recreation. They are cogs in the machine, and they move in unison.” Spalding’s remedy for this problem was twofold: if one must remain in the city, one should “take every possible holiday, and go out into the country”, but whenever possible, to heed “the warning that Lot received” and get out into the country permanently. To those city-dwelling Adventists who worried that a move into a rural area would lessen their income, he observed, “I know from long observation that soul poverty is more inimical to country living than a tightening of the belt.”⁴⁴ Gone was the mention of Nineveh and the action of preaching to it.

Throughout 1947 and 1948, Carlyle B. Haynes wrote articles for the *Review* pushing for moves to rural areas, drawing comparisons between city-dwelling Adventists and Lot and his family lingering in Sodom prior to its destruction. At one point, he commented, “Occasionally one of our members will raise the question whether the time has come to leave the cities. The fact is that time came years ago. Instead of being too soon now, it may, for some, be too late.”⁴⁵ An advertisement for *Country Living* in the pages of the *Review* pitched its argument as:

COUNTRY LIVING

By ELLEN G. WHITE—That the safest home environment is outside the modern city needs no argument. The growing labor unrest and the congestion of city housing give further accent to the wisdom of seeking rural retreats. All that is pertinent to this subject has been brought together here from the books of the author and periodicals containing her articles.⁴⁶

In addition to the ability to escape crowding and poor sanitation (long given as reasons to eschew the city), it was emphasized that living in the country was safer, especially in times of war. Living somewhere rural, where Adventists could “live on a piece of land where [they] could grow [their] own crops, have [their] own water supply, and if necessary, get along without too many conveniences”, was to be a bulwark against “[t]he suddenness with which disaster may strike in this atomic age”⁴⁷

The phrase *this atomic age* indicates that the potential deployment of nuclear weapons was a prominent concern for Adventists in this era. Writing for the *Review* a little later in the 1950s, Carl E. Guenther described

“the threat of nuclear war” as “the sword of Damocles...suspended over the head of every man, woman, and child” and then commented, “Though no place in this world is completely safe from atomic fallout, rural areas do provide a measure of protection against the hazards of nuclear warfare. It certainly makes sense to be as far away as is possible and practicable from the points of greatest danger.”⁴⁸ These “points of greatest danger” were, of course, cities.

Church members listened to these concerns, and thousands of copies of *Country Living* were purchased. Carlyle B. Haynes stated that “at the present writing between fifty and sixty thousand copies . . . have been eagerly taken by the believers.”⁴⁹ At that time, there were 250,939 church members in the North American Division.⁵⁰ Based on these numbers, between 20 to 24% of the church members in North America purchased a copy of *Country Living*. That was nearly a quarter of the Adventist membership in North America in 1950. Many of these church members also decided to move to more rural locations. We know this because enough of them must have requested assistance from Church leaders that it became necessary to provide a how-to guide for these city-dwellers seeking to become former city-dwellers. In 1949, a committee reported on a new manuscript, *From City to Country Living*, to the General Conference Committee, and the committee authorized its publication in a “condensed form” as a companion volume to *Country Living*.⁵¹ Despite the Commission on Rural Living’s scope being officially limited to North America, its reach went further as Adventists from North America worked in other countries and Adventists from outside North America came to Adventist schools in North America to be educated. *Country Living* had a ripple effect.⁵²

1950-1980: Promotion of Country Life and A Push for City Evangelism

Approximately 30 percent of those living in the United States in 1920 were considered farm residents; by 1980, that figure had dropped to just 4 percent. The immediate aftermath of World War II saw an average of a million people per year migrate from country to city, dropping to around 700,000 people per year in the 1960s and 300,000 people per year in the 1970s. However, the “reduction in the volume of outmigration was a reflection of the diminishing farm population base from which migrants are drawn rather than a decrease in the propensity to move.”⁵³ By 1987, the figure had dropped to 2 percent.⁵⁴

Suburbs, once seen as places of opportunity for poor urban residents due to their affordability and their accessibility (via public transportation, often train lines), began to be popular with the middle class. This was partially driven by a need to escape higher costs of living, a cherished “concept of a small community”, and, for some white Americans, a desire to remain segregated from Black Americans.⁵⁵

Against this backdrop, then, we find Seventh-day Adventists promoting country life largely for their pre-existing, pre-war reasons. Throughout the 1950s, articles appeared in the *Review* which promoted the benefits of country life. One such article, speaking in general terms about how “George and Mary Adventist” feel that moves to “the suburbs and outskirts of every city” was “not far enough, for the suburbs and outskirts soon get to be almost as

densely populated and congested as the cities. Fortunate indeed are the parents who can be out far enough that their children remain their own, and not mere community property.⁵⁶

In a world that was rapidly changing, having “more elbow room” was seen as desirable by some influential Adventists, especially those involved with self-supporting institutions. Wesley Amundsen, Adventist administrator and proponent of lay activities,⁵⁷ wrote in a series of articles “[n]ot that all Seventh-day Adventists should necessarily become farmers, but that they should, as the Lord opened the way, move into rural areas”. He also claimed that country living was not just something Seventh-day Adventists were doing. “Country living is not a slogan coined by Seventh-day Adventists,” he wrote in 1956. “The world around us is constantly using the term. Industrial leaders, businessmen, and others are becoming increasingly aware of the necessity of moving out of the heavily congested areas into the more favorable environment of the suburbs....This does not mean that we are becoming a nation of farmers, but it does mean that people want more elbow room.”⁵⁸

Yet, for varying reasons, not every Adventist could leave cities, nor did all Adventists living in cities want to leave them. The tension between country living and city living remained. The 1960s saw Seventh-day Adventists finding that tension uncomfortable. The September 8, 1966, issue of the *Review* leads with an article about “Country Living” on its first page and carried a sidebar of the familiar quotations from Ellen G. White on page five.

But another shift was taking place. In a short editorial, Kenneth Wood exhorted his readers, “But let no one take the message, “Get out of the large cities as fast as possible,” as an excuse to abandon responsibility for the cities’ teeming millions. Repeatedly the servant of the Lord urged God’s people to double and redouble their efforts to take the light of truth to the cities.” Rather than emphasizing the risk he believed cities to pose to Adventists, Wood pointed out, “It is one thing to carry the atmosphere of heaven in the country; it is quite another to carry it in the wicked, tension-filled cities. City living makes close demands on one’s spirituality; it calls for an usually personal and powerful relationship with Christ.” Wood concluded:

So let the call to leave the cities be accompanied by greater efforts to *save* the cities. Let it serve also as a call to pray earnestly for those who must remain in the cities, bearing faithful witness to the truth while keeping their own lives unspotted from the world.⁵⁹

This was different than what had come before. Wood sought to resolve the tension between country life and city work with the idea that neither is sundered from the other. No longer was the city merely a place of vice and temptation for Adventists—it was cast as a challenge, as a mission field for those Adventists who sought to save those who lived in the cities of the world.

Wood’s view initially appeared to be an outlier, however, although there was growing motion among Adventist young people to reach those living in cities.⁶⁰ Letters to the editor praised the *Review’s* emphasis on getting out of the cities,⁶¹ and Wesley Amundsen provided the *Review* with a series of four articles about “Out of the Cities” which ran during January and February 1970. The editors cautioned their readers, “As the series unfolds,

Seventh-day Adventists who reside in cities should review carefully their reasons for living there and should inquire whether the counsel to leave the cities applies in their cases.⁶² Amid the regular arguments and quotations from *Country Living*, Amundsen pointed out that Ellen White's words on getting out of cities had been "written before scientists succeeded in splitting the atom which released the most awesome power the world has ever known." He continued:

The scenes of Hiroshima that morning of August 6, 1945, when the first atomic bomb took scores of thousands of lives among men, women, children, and even babes, seem to us today incredible. Nevertheless, it did happen and could happen again.⁶³

Obedience to the Spirit of Prophecy was important, but the threat of nuclear annihilation was very real. The reason may have faded from Adventist discussion on this subject, but it played a part in the application of Ellen G. White's counsel regarding getting out of cities.

Often, the push for city evangelism in the 1960s and 1970s came from those trying to balance and apply Ellen White's words to a context rapidly changing from the one they had been penned in. One prominent and pervasive idea was that of outpost evangelism. Essentially, the model calls for "outpost centers" to be established outside of urban areas; these centers would supply personnel who would commute into those urban areas to work in health food stores and vegetarian cafeterias and conduct cooking schools and medical missionary work. A key proponent of this idea was James M. Lee, an Adventist minister, missionary, and educator.⁶⁴ Lee compared evangelism to a military campaign; his pamphlet from 1973, "God's Three Lines of Defense", stated that the Church's "corporate, legal holdings...such as its schools, hospitals, churches, publishing houses, etc." were God's first line of defense. The second line of defense, in Lee's view, was "the Divinely ordained system of 'OUTPOST CENTERS'" and the third line were rural places to which church members could flee in the face of persecution.⁶⁵ Adventists keen to avoid the city as much as possible but also to reach people living in cities saw this idea as a way to resolve the tension between country and city. However, this was not necessarily persuasive to those warming to Wood's idea of cities as a challenge, and calls grew for city work that was not based outside the city.

When the drive to evangelize the cities again generated pushback to those wanting to shun cities altogether, denominational leadership decided that a response was needed. The 1978 Annual Council adopted a document affirming the concept of "Country Living". This document detailed three broad areas ("Institutional Development and Relocation", "Evangelistic Outreach", and "Counsels to Church Members") and included an appendix of quotations from Ellen G. White on a variety of related topics.

The first section stated that "the planning and development of new building programs" of any type of institution should seek to "be located outside of heavily populated urban areas but within reasonable access to such areas" and that "large institutions" which were once rural but had had the city surround them over time should "be sensitive to the counsels regarding the locations of these institutions" when considering renovation or other

building projects. In other words, the 1978 Annual Council wanted Adventist institutions that had become surrounded by urban sprawl to get out of the cities.

However, the second section of the document belied the existing tension between that belief and the desire to evangelize the cities. This section states that the Church would “give priority in our evangelistic planning to the massive challenge of the large cities” and would do this planning “in harmony with the inspired counsels”:⁶⁶

The third section explicitly addressed church members and “urged” them “to study the counsels to move out of the large and heavily populated cities to areas that are more rural or to smaller towns” and provided principles for them to keep “in mind”. These principles cover a lot of ground. Church leadership stressed that “country living” did not necessarily mean “farm situations miles removed from city areas” but “relocation to more rural or small town areas conducive to the spiritual and physical welfare of the family, where land for a garden is available”. “Country living” also did not mean that church members had to purchase farms; they might instead operate “a small business or industry”. Whatever rural location a church member chose should have “a good water supply and garden space”, and those who moved their families to rural locations should have a means of supporting themselves and their families before making such a move. Church leadership also suggested that “some members could well move from large cities to smaller, unentered towns or counties” and start self-supporting work in those locations. They also stated their intention to republish *From City to Country Living*, to ensure that union and conference leaders were “acquainted with the counsels regarding these matters”; and warned against “new converts” immediately following such counsels, especially those in “practically impossible” economic situations.⁶⁷ The document generally supports country living with one concession: cities could be worked from “outpost centers”.

1980-Present: Evangelizing the Urbanized World

Beginning in the 1980s, interest grew in figuring out how to evangelize people living in cities, especially population numbers in cities continually kept rising. For example, while working as director of Metropolitan Ministries of New York, Ted N. C. Wilson researched and wrote a Ph.D. dissertation on “urban religious work in New York City in relation to the Seventh-day Adventist Church”, which analyzed Ellen White’s instruction on that matter and whose conclusions largely align with the outpost center idea as advocated by Lee and others.⁶⁸ Discussion still exists today as to the best way to implement “outpost centers” as part of the Adventist Church’s urban mission.⁶⁹

Whatever ways the Church’s mission is to be achieved, the perception was that Seventh-day Adventists as a whole were anti-urban, especially after decades of official support for being so. That meant that they needed persuading that the cities in the world needed to be evangelized. William G. Johnsson, writing in 1981 about “Mission to the cities”, made the argument that while “[t]he Adventist life style is more suited to a rural environment” and that cities “embody the worst features of human corruption”, “the masses now live in an

urban environment” and cities “are preeminent places of human need.” His conclusion? “That ... we must minister to the urban communities of earth no matter how distasteful the prospect....We need much earnest prayer and a willingness to be part of the answer to our prayers by venturing into the smoke, grime, and crime of the city.”⁷⁰ In 1987, Adventist missiologist Gottfried Oosterwal called for balance, explaining that:

The anti-city attitude leads to an utterly truncated form of mission, leaving the majority of the more than 2 billion people in the cities today without a powerful witness to Christ and to His gospel. The pro-city attitude could place us in danger of losing sight of its evil and demonic threat. The church would lose its prophetic calling; the salt would lose its saltiness [*sic*]....And so is the great Advent movement [a city movement] in many parts of the world. This is because the cities offer greater social and religious freedom, and people are more open to change than in the closed and more static rural areas. God's dynamic openness to change in our time offers the church wide-open doors for an effective work. He wants us to make the sprawling urban centers of the world the focus of His continuing compassion throughout the final harvest.⁷¹

There were certainly Adventists who were willing to venture into the “sprawling urban centers of the world”. Warren Banfield, explaining in the *Review* why he moved into a city, stated that while “many Christian churches have abandoned the inner city neighborhoods that are undergoing racial, cultural, or socioeconomic transition”, those neighborhoods were “just as Ellen White described...the place of greatest impenitence—and the place of greatest need”.⁷² Other Adventists, such as Ritchie Way, argued that “most witnessing Adventists will need to live in the cities also” since that was where “most people today” live. He pointed out those who live in the city could “embody the spirit of country living within the city” and cautioned that living in the country was no guarantee of “either physical or moral safety”, as “[s]enseless crimes and disasters strike anywhere. And radio, television, and video can instantly bring the city right into a country home!”⁷³

While others still wrote about the importance of country living,⁷⁴ a shift was once again beginning to take place in the Adventist relationship to cities. In 1992, Myron Widmer stated:

But the unwelcome fallout from such counsel has been the not-so-subtle adoption of an anti-city mind-set by many Seventh-day Adventists. They see the large cities of the world as evil, morally bankrupt, dirty, poor, and no place for Christians. But such a view is wrong. Ellen White was never anti-city. And her writings should not be misconstrued to bolster the opinion that cities are evil *and* no place for Christians.⁷⁵

A presentation on “Worldview and Mission” by Juan Carlos Viera, then-director of the Ellen G. White Estate, made at the 1995 Annual Council, asked if “the country living counsel” was “against the incarnation principle we are advocating”. His conclusion was no, it was not, as the counsel could be summarized as:

While God's grace lasts, live far enough from the center of the cities to enjoy direct contact with the soil and to avoid the moral and physical pollution, but close enough—as Enoch did—to be able to witness of the grace of God to the people in the cities.⁷⁶

Such statements, as well as the surrounding discussions, were changing how cities were viewed by denominational leadership and represented to denominational membership. By 1999, William G. Johnsson pointed out to readers of the *Review* that “we have misused the prophetic counsel. We all but ignore her call for us to take the three angels’ messages to the city....[I]n the Bible the story of humanity begins in a garden, but it ends in a city made by God Himself. We are bound for a city.”⁷⁷ Adventist scholar George Knight, writing in late 2001, took “Another Look at City Mission” and pointed out that the instructions provided about outpost centers were “written in the context of establishing Adventist medical, educational, and publishing institutions” and not “in relation to local churches”.⁷⁸ In 2003, Leslie Kay shared that her family had moved from an “ultra-rural” location to suburbia and stated, “Country living is certainly God’s plan for families. So are community service, a healthy, vibrant social life, and full integration into the church family.”⁷⁹

The Church’s current official stance prioritizes evangelizing major cities; this is evident from the creation of the Urban Study Center under the Office of Global Mission⁸⁰ and the implementation of the “Mission to the Cities” initiative as part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s current strategic plan.⁸¹ However, tension between proponents of country living and proponents of city evangelism still exists today; as recently as February 18, 2022, the *Adventist Review* website carried articles on both country living and city evangelism.⁸²

Conclusion

Seventh-day Adventists have always lived in tension with the city. Repelled by its physical and spiritual dangers and attracted by the need of those living in the city, Adventists have debated for decades whether they should chiefly view cities as places which entice indulgence in vice and corruption or as places which provide opportunities for evangelism. Some eras of Adventism prioritized the country over the city, while other eras prioritized the opposite; each era’s thinkers and leaders generated arguments and justifications for the course of actions they took (or did not take). It is likely that this tension will remain.

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4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. *Ibid.*, 16-17.
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9. Both M. E. Olsen and A. W. Spalding describe various camp meetings in their works on general Adventist history. See M. Ellsworth Olsen, *A History of the Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1926) and Arthur Whitefield Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1961–1962).
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19. See Trim and Chism, "Ellen G. White, 'Outpost Centers,' and Mission Work in Cities," for a discussion of outpost centers,
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35. "Heart-to-Heart Talks: Leaving the Cities," *ARH*, August 27, 1942, 2, 11.
36. General Conference Executive Committee, March 14, 1946, GCC Minutes, 2327–28. For the positions that the committee members held, see *Yearbook of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination: The Official Directories, 1946* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946).
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39. Carlyle B. Haynes, "Adventist and the Industrial Conflict," *ARH*, August 22, 1946, 7–8.
40. One can view Ellen G. White, *Country Living* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1946), at <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/25.17>. After the publication of *Country Living* in 1946, all mentions of anything Ellen White wrote about cities in the *Review and Herald* are references to that pamphlet rather than to the *Testimonies* or the original letters and manuscripts from which the quotations came. This practice lasts well into the 1990s.
41. General Conference Executive Committee, October 22, 1946, GCC Minutes, 244.
42. *Ibid.*, 243.
43. Arthur W. Spalding, "Lot's Choice," *ARH*, January 23, 1947, 6–7. Spalding also oddly blamed Lot's wife rather than Lot for "Lot's Choice," claiming that Lot's wife "drove [her] husband to pitch his tent toward Sodom, who made him sell the birthright of his country life for the mess of Sodom's pottage, who turned him back from reformation at Dan and Hoba and Damascus, who gave [her] children to the lust of Sodom, who chose the pleasures of this world rather than the company of God." Ellen White wrote in *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1890), 161: "If Lot himself had manifested no hesitancy to obey the angels' warning, but had earnestly fled toward the mountains, without one word of pleading or remonstrance, his wife also would have made her escape. The influence of his example would have saved her from the sin that sealed her doom. But his hesitancy and delay caused her to lightly regard the divine warning." It seems that Spalding had forgotten this statement from Ellen White, as well as the fact that it was Lot, not his wife, who offered his own daughters to the men of

Sodom in his vehemence against Lot's wife in this article.

44. Arthur W. Spalding, "My Choice," *ARH*, January 30, 1947, 10–12.
45. See Carlyle B. Haynes, "Tarrying in the Cities," *ARH*, March 20, 1947, 7–8; Carlyle B. Haynes, "To the Country—Now!" *ARH*, August 14, 1947, 11; Carlyle B. Haynes, "Out of the Cities," *ARH*, December 18, 1947, 19; Carlyle B. Haynes, "Into the Country—Now," *ARH*, June 3, 1948, 13. The quotation comes from the last article.
46. Advertisement for *Country Living*, *ARH*, September 2, 1948, 21.
47. D. A. Delafield, "Country Living Is Safer," *ARH*, September 23, 1948, 5.
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55. Anthony Gigantino, "Suburban Sprawl: The Greatest Social Change of Post-World War II America," *The Histories* 5, no. 1 (2019): 35–42, https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol5/iss1/6. How American Adventism's anti-urban turn after World War II runs parallel to, or fits within, the phenomena of "white flight" remains to be studied.
56. J. O. Wilson, "Leaders in Community Life," *ARH*, February 25, 1954, 6–8.

57. Amundsen served as lay activities secretary of the Inter-American Division, as an associate secretary of the General Conference Lay Activities Department, president of Madison College, and executive secretary of the Association of Privately Owned Seventh-day Adventist Services and Industries (now ASI). See Amundsen's obituary in "Deaths: Wesley Amundsen," *ARH*, May 22, 1975, 23.
58. Wesley Amundsen, "What About Country Living?" *ARH*, April 19, 1956, 3–4.
59. K[enneth] H. W[ood], "Out of the Cities," *ARH*, September 8, 1966, 12 (emphasis original).
60. E. L. Minchin, "What in the World!" *ARH*, January 8, 1970, 14–15. Minchin described "[a] band of young people from Andrews University" who came to New York City during the summer of 1969 and worked to inspire "[a] new spirit of youthful witnessing and soul-winning zeal" throughout the city.
61. See Mildred E. Daniel to the Editors, "Letters From Readers," *ARH*, November 10, 1966, 13; Mable H. Towery to Editors, "Letters From Readers," *ARH*, November 10, 1966, 13; Myrtle Leora Nelson to Editors, "Letters From Readers," *ARH*, November 17, 1966, 14; Ernest Lloyd to Editors, "Letters From Readers," *ARH*, December 29, 1966, 13.
62. "This Week," *ARH*, January 15, 1970, 30.
63. Wesley Amundsen, "Time is Running Out," *ARH*, February 5, 1970, 7.
64. Kuk Heon Lee, "Lee, James Milton (1912-2013)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, April 27, 2021, accessed June 29, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=6FYH>.
65. James M. Lee, "God's Three Lines of Defense: City, Country, Mountain," prepared for Study, April 1973, LF 4894, Pamphlets Collection, General Conference Archives (emphasis original); the quote is from the back page. See also James M. Lee, "City-Outpost Evangelism," 1973, Box 12399, RG 58, General Conference Archives.
66. The reasoning given in support of this point is three short quotations from Ellen G. White's *Evangelism*, which could be summed up as "outpost centers, cities are Sodom, and outpost centers."
67. General Conference Executive Committee, October 17, 1978, GCC Minutes, 78–307 to 78–313.
68. N. C. (Ted) Wilson, "A Study of Ellen G. White's Theory of Urban Religious Work As It Relates to Seventh-day Adventist Work in New York City" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1981).
69. See, for example, Gary Krause, "Toward an Adventist Theology of Urban Mission," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 15, no. 1 (2019): 1–22; D. J. B. Trim and A. L. Chism, "If God gives me strength, I shall be in the cities': Ellen G. White, 'Outpost Centers,' and Mission Work in Cities," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 31:1-2, 24-62.

70. William G. Johnsson, "Mission to the Cities," *ARH*, February 19, 1981, 13.
71. Gottfried Oosterwal, "God Loves the Cities," *ARH*, February 5, 1987, 8–10.
72. Warren Banfield, "Why I Moved to the City," *ARH*, August 23, 1990, 12–14.
73. Ritchie Way, "The Paradox of Our Mission," *ARH*, August 9, 1990, 9–11.
74. See, for example, J. LeCount and Melvane Butler, "Close to Nature: Spiritual Lessons From Country Living," *ARH*, May 13, 1993, 12–14.
75. Myron Widmer, "The Challenge of the Cities," *ARH*, March 12, 1992, 5 (emphasis original). Widmer also pointed out that, while the Seventh-day Adventist Church had published *Country Living* in 1946 and issued a call for it to be republished in 1978, it had "never yet published a 300-page compilation (created in 1960) of Mrs. White's counsels on the church's responsibility to work in the cities."
76. Juan Carlos Viera, "Worldview and Mission: Suggestions for a Mission Theology," October 3, 1995, GCC Minutes, 95–235.
77. William G. Johnsson, "Who Loves the City?" *ARH*, January 7, 1999, 5.
78. George R. Knight, "Another Look at City Mission," *ARH*, December 6, 2001, 27. While he does not dig into specific reasons, Knight also correctly identifies that "one set of counsel has received much publicity" while the other set did not. He settled on the answer being "undoubtedly . . . that statements from the one perspective have been collected and repeatedly published in compilations, while statements from the other, even though equally valid and important, have sometimes been neglected. Thus some Adventists have highlighted only one half of Ellen White's perspective."
79. Leslie Kay, "Goodbye, Grasshopper Junction," *ARH*, August 28, 2003, 17.
80. See *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook for 1998* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1998), 26.
81. "Mission to the Cities: About," *Mission to the Cities*, May 1, 2018, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://missiontothecities.org/about2>. The Seventh-day Adventist Church's strategic plan may be viewed at <https://iwillgo2020.org>.
82. See Doug Batchelor, "10 Benefits of Country Living," *ARH*, online edition, February 18, 2022, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://adventistreview.org/feature/10-benefits-of-country-living/>; Gaspar and May-Ellen Colón, "Ministry to the Cities Is Important—and Urgently Needed," *ARH*, online edition, February 18, 2022, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://adventistreview.org/feature/ministry-to-the-cities-is-importantand-urgently-needed/>.

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