

BY GEORGE R. KNIGHT

NEW YORK IS BIG NEWS—especially since September 11. The events of that day spawned at least two results among the city's millions: 1) massive destruction and 2) a spiritual hunger and openness in the face of insecurities and ultimate realities.

Confronted by New York's unprecedented needs and openness, Don Schneider, president of the North American Division, has called for a worldwide evangelistic outreach for America's greatest city. One aspect of that outreach is to divide Manhattan into 48 population sectors and then enlist



the conferences in North America, the church's world divisions, lay groups, and the institutions to sponsor evangelistic workers in each of those sectors for an extended period. *Never before has Adventism in its 150-year history sought to amass such energy and finances in city outreach.* The time is right, and the church, claims Schneider, cannot afford to pass up an unparalleled opportunity.

But that very opportunity raises questions concerning the best way to accomplish Adventism's mission to the world's great metroplexes. Those questions are not new. The denomination struggled with them throughout the twentieth century.

Another Look at City Mission

*Many look to Ellen White for counsel
about how to reach the cities.
What did she really say?*

Much of that discussion centered on Ellen White's counsel on the topic. For her the issue was not *Should* the cities be worked? It was *How*?

The world's great cities provided Mrs. White with an ambivalent situation. On one hand, there isn't the slightest doubt that she saw the ideal for Christian families to be rural living, where they could avoid the corruption, wickedness, and health-related problems of the cities while at the same time nourishing their spirituality in the atmosphere of nature. On the other hand, she had a burden that the church had neglected gospel work in the cities. Correcting that neglect would be a focal point of her ministry between 1901 and 1910.

By that latter date Mrs. White was so upset with Adventism's lack of progress in the cities that she questioned General Conference president Arthur G. Daniells' conversion, suggested that in the face of what she perceived to be a lack of interest for city work, he was not qualified to continue to lead the denomination, and even went so far as to refuse interviews with him until he came up with aggressive strategies to reach the teeming millions of the world's great cities.¹

There were few issues that had agitated her so much in her long ministry. She was ready to go to almost any lengths to move the denomination off dead center on the topic of city mission.

The "Outpost Evangelism" Model

For Ellen White the issue was not the need to work the cities but how best to do it. Her leading role in advocating city work has given her and her counsel on the topic a central place in Adventist discussions on how best to spread the gospel in the city.

Those who have studied city mission through Mrs. White's writings have generally arrived at an understanding called "outpost evangelism." The outpost concept is found in several places in her writings. "It is God's design," she wrote in 1903, "that our people should locate outside the cities,



and from these outposts warn the cities, and raise in them memorials for God."² "The cities," she had written a year earlier, "are to be worked from outposts. Said the messenger of God, 'Shall not the cities be warned? Yes; not by God's people living in them, but by their visiting them, to warn them of what is coming upon the earth.'"³

Those two quotations are similar to many others that Ellen White wrote over the years. As a result some have held that it is wrong to locate Adventist evangelistic workers inside the cities and that to do so is apostasy from her clear counsel.

It is that position that needs to be reexamined. It is all too easy to take Mrs. White's quotations and run with them without examining everything she has written on the topic or even carefully reading the context of her statements.

Her counsel about education provides us with an interesting example of her breadth on the topic of city work. The earliest Adventist schools had been in small towns. In relation to the

founding of Avondale School in Australia she wrote that "never can the proper education be given to the youth in *this country, or any other country, unless they are separated a wide distance from the cities. The customs and practices in the cities unfit the minds of the youth for the entrance of truth.*"⁴

Following that counsel and the fact that Ellen White claimed that Avondale was to be a pattern school for other Adventist schools,⁵ the next 15 years saw Adventist schools around the world establish rural campuses. Some, such as Battle Creek College and Healdsburg College, even sold their campuses and bought large acreage in the country. Ellen White had left not the slightest doubt about her view on the topic.

But in the early twentieth century Mrs. White began to give a second line of counsel. By that time the church had begun to make inroads among the poorer classes in some of the larger cities. What was her counsel in the face of that development? "*So far as possible,*" she wrote in 1909, "these schools should be established outside



the cities. *But in the cities there are many children who could not attend schools away from the cities; and for the benefit of these, schools should be opened in the cities as well as in the country.*"⁶

"Never" is worlds away from "so far as possible," but they represent the breadth of Mrs. White's counsel—a breadth often overlooked. She wrote on the topic in terms of both the ideal and the real. The ideal was always rural schools, but the reality of mission dictated that some Adventist schools would be in the city.⁷

Mrs. White also expressed a distinction between the ideal and the real in other areas of city mission. In one of her more forceful statements on outpost evangelism, for example, she noted (in the context of establishing a sanitarium in the New York area) that "it will be a great advantage to have our buildings in retired locations *so far as possible*,"⁸ indicating, as she did in the educational field, that it wouldn't always be possible. When it came to a conflict between the denomination accomplishing its mission and rural liv-

ing, the need to complete the mission successfully always won out from her perspective.

Ellen White's "Other" City Mission Model

Perceptive readers may have noted that both of the illustrations I used above had to do with Adventist institutions. That was no accident, because each of the 22 quotations on outpost evangelism found in *Medical Ministry*, *Selected Messages*, *Country Living*, and *Evangelism* is written in the context of establishing Adventist medical, educational, and publishing institutions.⁹ Not only do each of the quotations in the major compilations of Ellen White relating to outpost evangelism relate invariably to institutions, but so do those utilized by the two foremost researchers on the topic.¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that her perspective is often misunderstood in compilations since the outpost statements are not always supplied with their full context.

Mrs. White was dead set against institutions being established in cities if it was at all possible to avoid it. She sought to avoid large numbers of families being unnecessarily settled in the cities in relation to institutional work.

But she did not emphasize the outpost approach in relation to local churches. To the contrary, she penned in 1907: "Repeatedly the Lord has instructed us that we are to work the cities from outpost centers. In these cities we are to have houses of worship, as memorials for God; *but* institutions for the publication of our literature, for the healing of the sick, and for the training of workers, are to be established outside the cities."¹¹

Mrs. White not only advocated churches in the city, but she repeatedly spoke to the point on how the evangelistic work of those churches should be carried out. In *The Acts of the Apostles*, for example, she noted that "while it is in the order of God that chosen workers of consecration and talent should be stationed in important centers of population to lead out in public efforts, it is also His purpose that the church

members living in these cities shall use their God-given talents in working for souls."¹²

Along that same line, she wrote in 1909 that "the Lord has presented before me the work that is to be done in our cities. The believers in these cities are to work for God in the neighborhood of their homes."¹³ A year later she counseled: "Especially are the church members living in the cities to exercise, in all humility, their God-given talents in laboring with those who are willing to hear the message that should come to the world at this time."¹⁴

Some years earlier she had been quite explicit that some Adventists needed to *move to the cities* to raise up churches. "We see," she wrote, "the great need of missionary work to carry the truth not only to foreign countries, but to those who are near us. Close around us are cities and towns in which no efforts are made to save souls. Why should not families who know the present truth settle in these cities and villages, to set up there the standard of Christ, working in humility, not in their own way, but in God's way, to bring the light before those who have no knowledge of it? . . . There will be laymen who will move into towns and cities, and into apparently out-of-the-way places, that they may let the light which God has given them, shine forth to others."¹⁵

Thus we find in Ellen White's writings two sets of parallel counsel—one relating to institutions, advocating outpost ministry, and a second dealing with local church work, advocating working from within the city. That being so, we need to ask why only one set of counsel has received much publicity. The answer undoubtedly has been 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.

The Case of S. N. Haskell

One of the most interesting exam-

ples of the “other half” of Mrs. White’s counsel on city work is that of Stephen N. Haskell, who began work in New York City in the summer of 1901 at the age of 69. He and his wife rented a sixth-floor apartment at 400 West Fifty-seventh Street. Mrs. Haskell reported that “all our rooms are light and airy” and that “all open on the street and have full sunshine.” She went on to note that there were 56 apartments in their building and that they had begun their gospel work in their own and adjoining buildings, selling books, giving Bible studies, and providing practical medical instruction and care. When those who had been Adventists for some time asked the Haskells and their helpers to visit their own contacts, the Haskells told them they needed to become active themselves, since the Haskells had more than they could accomplish with “the hungry souls we find within a stone’s throw of our own home.” Mrs. Haskell found it to be a great advantage to be located in the neighborhood of their work, since the Bible workers “can hold two readings in an afternoon . . . when they only have to go across the street. . . . They could hardly hold one if they had to drag across the city to give it.” The Haskells held group meetings for interested people in their own parlor.¹⁶

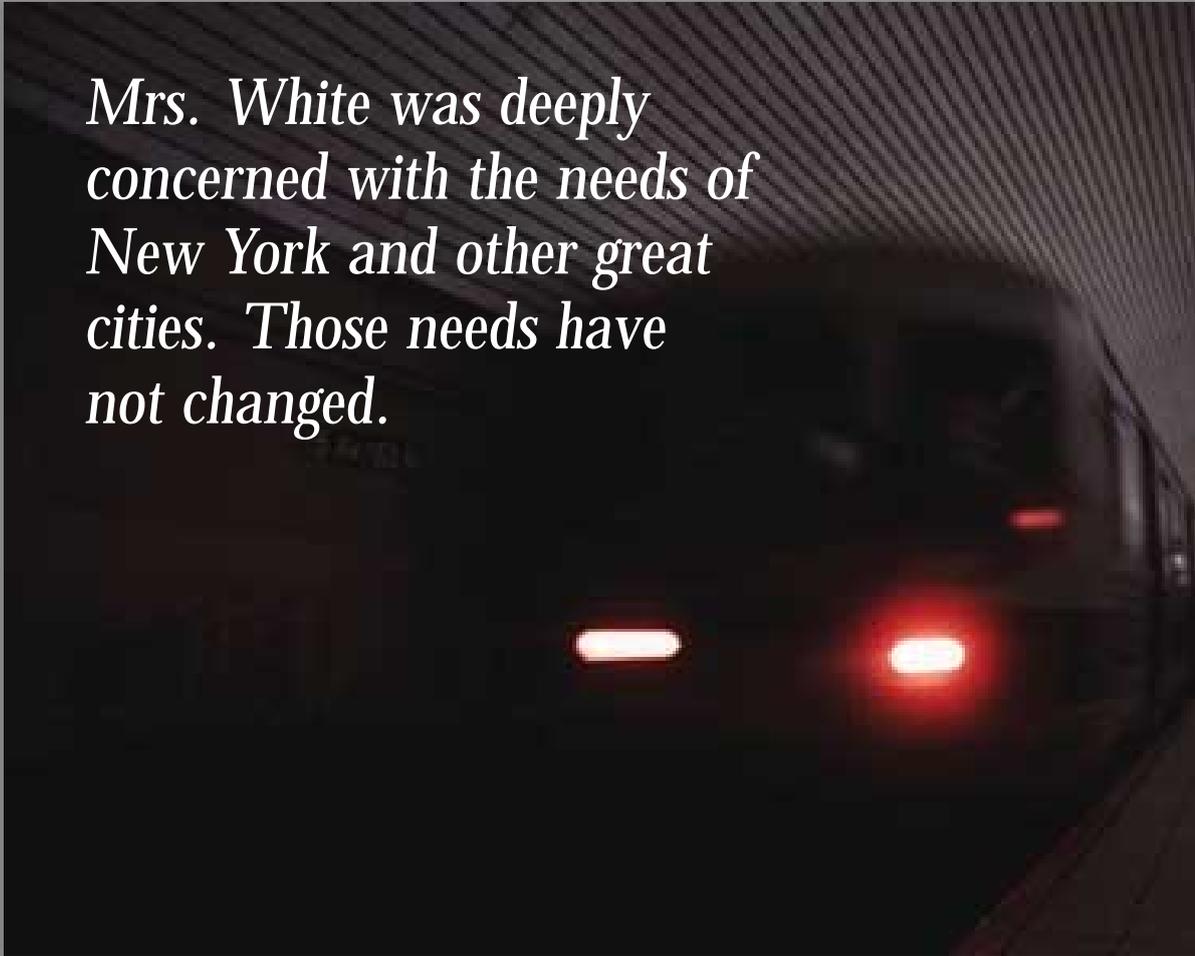
S. N. Haskell, always one to want to do the right thing, wrote to Mrs. White: “I hope to hear from you and if the Lord gives you any special light let us have it respecting our work here.”¹⁷ She sent him and his wife several letters on the topic. In early January

1902, when their mission had been operational for about five months, she wrote to them that “our manner of working must be after God’s order. The work that is done for God in our large cities must not be according to man’s devising. . . . Brother [Haskell], the Lord has given you an opening in New York City, and your mission work there is to be an *example of what mission work in other cities should be*. . . . Your work in New York *has been started in right lines*. You are to make in New York a center for missionary effort. . . . The Lord desires this center to be a training

we must leave the cities. As did Enoch, we must work in the cities but not dwell in them.”¹⁹ By the time Haskell and his coworkers had been in New York for about 15 months, he could report about 50 to 60 new Adventists and the formation of a church.²⁰

Perspective

As with many topics, Ellen White’s ideas concerning city work are more complex than some have imagined. She would always hold to the ideal of rural living, but she never let that ideal



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school for workers, and nothing is to be allowed to interrupt the work.”¹⁸

It is interesting to our present study that Ellen White could commend Haskell for working from within the city even though, as early as June 1899, she had written in relation to the location of sanitariums that “as God’s commandment-keeping people,

blind her to the realities of the needs of city mission. While she firmly held to outpost evangelism for institutions “so far as possible,” she also felt quite confident in recommending city work from within the metropolis when it came to the establishment and expansion of churches.

Mrs. White was deeply concerned with the needs of New York and other

great cities. Those needs have not changed. Mission to the city is still the greatest challenge for Adventism. In fact, the massive cities of the world are probably the most untouched of Adventist mission fields. As a church we have done well in Africa, Asia, and South America—the old mission fields. But such cities as New York still cry for help. Nearly a century ago Ellen White said that “it is right and proper that means be sent to China. . . . But while plans are being carried out to warn the inhabitants of various nations in distant lands, what is being done in

vants to do their full duty toward the unwarned inhabitants of the cities.”²¹

The challenge still remains. America’s great cities are still largely unwarned. But there has been a change in the past 90 years. Whereas Ellen White asked the church to reach the foreigners in America’s cities, if she were alive today she would know that Adventism’s large city churches are preponderantly made up of people not native to the United States. While much remains to be done among their ranks, the far greater challenge in 2001 is to reach native-born Americans in

the large cities, whether those Americans be Black, White, Hispanic, or Asian. Some of the largest unreached people groups in the world today are the native-born Americans in New York City and the nation’s other great cities.

A century ago Mrs. White noted that “the work in Greater New York should have the help of the best workers that can be secured.”²² Speaking about city work in 1908, she wrote that “the people need no encouragement to inactivity. They have already delayed many years to do

the very work that God has given them. Again and again have the needs of our large cities been presented to our people. Yet little has been done. The message now comes, Clear the King’s highway. God calls for missionaries to enter the cities without delay.”²³

That counsel has a distinctively

modern sound to it. The needs of New York are still big news. Doors have been opened. Will the church respond? It has the choice of clearing the King’s highway or continuing to debate the best methods of doing nothing.

¹ Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Later Elmhaven Years, 1905-1915* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1982), pp. 223-228.

² Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 76.

³ E. G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 358.

⁴ E. G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 312.

⁵ See E. G. White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White*, p. 374; *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 349; E. G. White manuscript 92, 1900.

⁶ E. G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 201. (Italics supplied.) Cf., *Life Sketches*, pp. 396, 397.

⁷ For a discussion of Ellen White’s treatment of the ideal and the real, see George R. Knight, *Reading Ellen White* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1997), pp. 90-94.

⁸ E. G. White, *Medical Ministry*, p. 309. (Italics supplied.)

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 305, 308, 309; *Evangelism*, pp. 76-78, 402; *Selected Messages*, book 2, pp. 357, 358; *Country Living*, pp. 29-32.

¹⁰ 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; James M. Lee, *A Compendium of City-Outpost Evangelism* (Loma Linda, Calif.: James M. Lee, 1976).

¹¹ E. G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 358. (Italics supplied.)

¹² E. G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 158.

¹³ E. G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 128.

¹⁴ E. G. White, *Medical Ministry*, p. 332.

¹⁵ E. G. White, *Christian Service*, p. 180.

¹⁶ Hetty Haskell to E. G. White, July 29, 1901; S. N. Haskell to E. G. White, July 18, 1901; July 29, 1901.

¹⁷ S. N. Haskell to E. G. White, July 18, 1901.

¹⁸ E. G. White, *Evangelism*, pp. 385, 386. (Italics supplied.)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 78.

²⁰ S. N. Haskell to E. G. White, Oct. 14, 1902.

²¹ E. G. White Manuscript 45, 1910.

²² E. G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 384.

²³ E. G. White Manuscript 7, 1908.



behalf of the foreigners who have come to the shores of our own land? Are the souls in China any more precious than the souls within the shadow of our doors? . . . Those in responsibility must now plan wisely to proclaim the third angel’s message to the hundreds of thousands of foreigners in the cities of America. God desires His ser-

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