

## **Cities: Should We Live in Them?**

The question has surfaced off and on since, and during, Ellen White's active prophetic ministry regarding how a Seventh-day Adventist Christian should relate to living in the cities. Over the decades, various, sometimes conflicting conclusions, have been drawn from her writings.

This research paper is intended to address the question of where those who minister in the cities should live. Is it appropriate for workers to live in the city? What principles would guide the worker in making that decision? In this paper the basic principles she promoted regarding city living will be elucidated from her own writings, preceded by a brief look at what she said about cities in general as a basic point of context. Following this brief discussion of the principles contained in her writings we will seek to apply those principles to the issue of workers living in versus near the city in which they will minister.

**Cities:** Their Nature In our treatment of the subject it is important to first set out the basic nature of what she meant by the word, "city" as used in the writings under consideration. In her book, "Ministry of Healing," she clearly outlines her understanding of what characterized a city. We turn to this volume because it provides a look at the broad, universally applied principles she taught. Cities were places "becoming hotbeds of vice. . . ." providing "enticements to sensuality and dissipation." MH 363.

In the same chapter she went on to describe the artificial lifestyle flaunted by the city's inhabitants who were caught up in an, "intense passion for money getting" and the "whirl of excitement and pleasure seeking." In short, the city was a concentration of the wretchedness of sin, calling out the worst in human nature, "turning the mind from life's true purpose" and "opening the door to a thousand evils." MH 364.

**However**, she did not stop there. Even its work environment was not wholesome for the Christian with its promotion of organized labour unions and their accompanying strikes and conflicts. Further, she addressed the very physical nature of the cities, writing: The physical surroundings in the cities are often a peril to health. The constant liability to contact with disease, the prevalence of foul air, impure water, impure food, the crowded, dark, unhealthful dwellings, are some of the many evils to be met. It was not God's purpose that people should be crowded into cities, huddled together in terraces and tenements. MH 365.

Her description of the perils and dangers of the city are all accurate in describing our modern cities—even those considered "small". Today's cities are somewhat cleaner and less diseased than those in her day, although modern cities still have much to be desired, regardless of the improvement in sanitation. However, that difference is rather minor when we realize that today's cities are most certainly hotbeds of crime and immorality—likely to a far greater degree than the cities of her day.

**Cities:** Their Need With just this brief look at her critique of the city, her inspired concern for men and women, especially Christians living in them, can be easily understood.

**However**, in the face of this severe critique of the dangers of the cities one cannot help but realize why she was equally passionate about the salvation of their inhabitants. This, too, helps to provide context within which to consider the subject of city living. Ellen White was especially passionate about the need to reach the cities: God requires that we shall give the message of present truth to every city, and not keep the work bound up in a few

places. Wherever an opening for the truth can be found, there let men be stationed who are capable of presenting its teachings with a power and conviction that will reach hearts. . . . The judgments of God are being stayed that the voice of truth may be heard in its simplicity. Let those who have a part in this sacred work be wide awake and each endeavour to labour in God's appointed way. Let none set up as the Lord's way the way of human devisings. For Christ's sake, I ask you to carry out God's purposes for the opening of missions in every city, in every place. Other Manuscripts, vol. 10, pg. 216-217.

With even a brief investigation of the prophet's writings regarding cities, her burden for the salvation of the men and women within them comes through loud and clear. Oh, if our people would feel as they should the responsibility resting upon them to give the last message of mercy to the world, what a wonderful work would be done! Behold the cities, and their need of the gospel! The need of earnest labourers among the multitudes of the cities has been kept before me for more than twenty years. Who are carrying the burden for the large cities? A few have felt the burden, but in comparison with the great need and the many opportunities but little attention has been given to this work. 9T 97.

As a slow-in-coming result of her persistent plea for greater effort to be put forth in reaching the cities, the General Conference Committee in January of 1910 had an afternoon meeting discussing the needs of the cities. During this meeting they appropriated \$11,000 more than they had done the year before specifically to the work of metropolitan areas. This was not enough. Ellen White stated, less than a month after this committee decision, "God requires of His people a far greater work than anything that has been done in years past" (MS 25, 1910). She further stated (Vol. 6, *The Later Elm Shaven Years*, pp. 219-221)

There is not seen in the East the reformation that should be taking place in our churches. Our brethren are not carrying the burden they should in behalf of the unworked cities. They have not been making decided movements to send men into these cities. — Ibid.

### **What could make her burden clearer?**

She had an unquenchable passion for the men and women living in earth's sin saturated cities. A passion that had burned for twenty years. A passion that finally refused to be left unanswered. Cities: How the Christian Should Relate Understanding both Ellen White's passion for the cities and her adamant condemnation of the quality of cities as a place to build a home, we have a healthy tension from which to springboard into a brief discussion of principles regarding city living. Before continuing, however, we must consider one more overarching principle, not yet mentioned, pulls both of these elements together. "They should ever bear in mind that they are working for the restoration of the image of God in man." 7T 80.

**In other words**, the greatest concern that Ellen White has, is "the restoration of the image of God in man." This is what everyone needs, no matter where they are located. As we investigate living in the cities more closely, keep this principle in mind—it is the principle that stands behind the entire discussion of where a Christian city missionary should live. This principle alone will go a long way in determining where the missionary living quarters should be located.

Coming back to Ministry of Healing as our basic reference point, we find invaluable counsel regarding our subject. In her counsel to families, she instructed them to select a place for a home where the principles of the kingdom are reflected and enforced, not torn

down, by the surrounding environment. "The more nearly we come into harmony with God's original plan," said the prophet, "the more favourable will be our position to secure health of body, and mind, and soul." MH 365.

**Further**, the advantages of living in the country extend to the temporal realm. Those reared in a country environment are taught the lessons "of self-reliance and self-control." MH 366.

These lessons fit them to work more effectively in the work force—wherever that may be. Country living also promotes physical health. "Better than any other inheritance of wealth you can give to your children will be the gift of a healthy body, a sound mind, and a noble character. Those who understand what constitutes life's true success will be wise betimes. They will keep in view life's best things in their choice of a home." MH 366-367.

There is much more counsel on country living, such as the value of being able to cultivate the land and have ready access to fresh food, air and water, but this really covers the basic principle. See 2 SM 355.

The principle outlined, though broad, clearly undergirds the call to country living. It is this principle that must guide our decision in selecting a place for a home, especially if there are children in that home: restoring mankind to the image of God. However, it is this basic principle that, as mentioned earlier, creates some healthy tension in our discussion of where the city missionary should live.

### **Cities: What Happens If Every Christian Leaves?**

In the beginning of our article, we considered two basic issues: the condition of the cities and their desperate need for Christ. Is it not cold for the Christian to simply abandon the city and turn their attention to their own spiritual growth? Are they not failing of fulfilling the Gospel commission? Yes! How then, is the Christian to relate to the needs of the city? We will answer this question by outlining several principles gleaned from Ellen White's writings.

**First**, it is very clear that families with children or youth should not remain in the cities. Let children no longer be exposed to the temptations of the cities that are ripe for destruction. The Lord has sent us warning and counsel to get out of the cities. . . . Fathers and mothers, how do you regard the souls of your children? Are you preparing the members of your families for translation into the heavenly courts? 2 SM 355.

The intense passion for money getting [in the cities], the whirl of excitement and pleasure seeking, the thirst for display, the luxury and extravagance, all are forces that, with the great masses of mankind, are turning the mind from life's true purpose. They are opening the door to a thousand evils. Upon the youth they have almost irresistible power. MH 364.

The city is no place to raise a family. Some of her strongest counsel, as seen above, is directed to parents with children who are yet living in the cities.

**Secondly**, only churches and missions are to be in the city, we are not to establish any of our schools or lifestyle centers there. Some things have been presented to me that I deem of great importance. Light has been given that our institutions are not to be established in the midst of the cities.

So great is the wickedness of these cities that much of what the eyes see and the ears hear, has a demoralizing influence. Especially should our schools and sanitariums be

located outside of the cities, in places where land can be secured. It is not pleasing to the Lord for those who claim to believe present truth to establish institutions in the cities. . . .” Other Manuscripts, vol. 10, pg. 212.

The above was true with some exceptions. One such exception were schools designed to reach out to the local children as a ministry. “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.” 9T 201.

The principle of restoring God’s image still remains. The ideal location to accomplish this is in the country, but that ideal is not always possible due to the situation of the people being ministered to. She was very clear in her counsels that our institutions were to be outside of the cities.

### **Another couple of statements will suffice to explain.**

The cities 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. Letter 182, 1902.

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 of the cities. 2 SM 358.

"Out of the cities, out of the cities! this is the message the Lord has been giving me. The earthquakes will come; the floods will come; and we are not to establish ourselves in the wicked cities, where the enemy is served in every way, and where God is so often forgotten. The Lord desires that we shall have clear spiritual eyesight. We must be quick to discern the peril that would attend the establishment of institutions in these wicked cities. We must make wise plans to warn the cities, and at the same time live where we can shield our children and ourselves from the contaminating and demoralizing influences so prevalent in these places. [Review and Herald, July 5, 1906.] LS 409.5

These statements make it very clear that God’s call to institutions and families is out of the cities. Especially as we approach the end of time when wickedness is rife and the judgments of God are upon the cities. However, the tension between guarding our spiritual life and working the cities is still present, even in her own writings.

Considering a few statements regarding work in the cities will provide an interesting contrast to the above statements and a clarification of the principle and its application to us today.

In every city the Lord would have a place where sin-sick souls may find courage and sustaining help to overcome all unnatural appetites and sinful indulgences--tobacco using, tea and liquor drinking. All flesh meat is to be discarded. Educational meetings should be held where young men may be instructed how to develop a perfect manhood. Then they can become teachers of good things. Letter 95, 1898.

In every city there should be a city mission, that would be a training school for workers. Many of our brethren must stand condemned in the sight of God because they have not done the very work that God would have them do. MM 303.

So, how exactly do we evaluate all of the counsel regarding ministry in the city vs living there? That brings us to our third point: the cities must be worked. "We all need to be wide awake, that as the way opens, we may advance the work in the large cities." Letter 14, 1902.

With this statement we are brought back to the tension raised earlier: the wickedness of the cities versus their need for salvation. As noted in the above statements it is clear that every city is to have a mission.

How were these missions to be operated in light of the previous instruction about leaving the cities?

**First**, if at all possible, they were to be operated by personnel living outside of the city. "It would be well to secure a place as a home for our mission outside of the city. It is of great importance that they have the advantages of pure water, free from all contamination." MM 308.

This statement is perhaps less applicable in our modern American cities with their somewhat increased cleanliness. However, the noise and rush of city life still remains today. In light of this, speaking in regard to city missionaries, she wrote: "Our brethren who bring the truth to the city must not be obliged to imperil their health in the noise and bustle and confusion, if retired places can be secured." MM 309.

An interesting example would serve helpful at this juncture. In 1901 S. N. Haskell began a city mission in Brooklyn, New York. He and his wife moved into a 6th floor apartment that summer and began the city mission. They were joined by others whom they trained and worked with in reaching the surrounding city blocks. It is fascinating to note Ellen White's strong endorsement of this mission, though located in the heart of the city. 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. You are to show how the work should be carried forward, sowing the seed, and then gathering the harvest. There are those who can unite with you in your labour, engaging in the work understandingly, and in full sympathy with you. . . . Ev 385.

In contrast to this statement the prophet made another statement regarding the work progressing in Chicago. The mission was located within the city limits. This counsel the prophet gives here is interesting in light of its date. It seems that up until 1902 her statements had been a little less earnest about leaving the cities. However, rather interestingly, after 1902 she begins to come across more strongly regarding the issue. This statement, written in 1906, reflects this interesting intensification. For the present, some will be obliged to labour in Chicago; but these should be preparing working centers in rural districts, from which to work the city. The Lord would have His people looking about them, and securing humble, inexpensive places as centers for their work. And from time to time larger places will come to their notice, which they will be able to secure at a surprisingly low price.--MS. 33, 1906. [MM 305.4]

**Finally**, considering this issue, let us look at one more statement that seems to imply certain institutions are appropriate to locate within large cities. The statement was written regarding the establishment of a sanitarium in New York City. Go to New York City. Look the ground over carefully, and see whether it is advisable to purchase the hall and the land on which it stands. Perhaps the land could be leased for a term of years. I have been instructed that some such methods will have to be followed in the work in the large cities.

If, after careful consideration, you decide that it is best to purchase the hall, we shall do all in our power to raise the money. But it is best to move understandingly.

Pray, pray, pray, for, if possible, Satan will close the doors which have opened for the entrance of truth. The Lord desires a center for the truth to be established in the great, wicked city of New York. . . . I ask you to investigate the work in New York, and lay plans for establishing a memorial for God in this city. It is to be a center for missionary effort, and in it a sanitarium is to be established. . . . A determined effort must be made to unify our churches in New York and the surrounding cities. This can be done, and it must be done if aggressive warfare in New York is successfully carried forward. -- Letter 154, 1901. [Ev 388-389]

## **Conclusion**

The tension created earlier between the wickedness of the cities and their need for salvation must be considered in our conclusion. The cities must be warned by whatever means possible. If it is impossible to reach a certain area of a city with the Gospel without moving into the city, then it may be right to live in the city. That said, it is absolutely clear that God expects all of His people, especially those with children, to seek a place outside of the city. "Serious troubles are before us; and for many families removal from the cities will become a necessity. The physical surroundings in the cities are often a peril to health." MH 365.

The ideal is living outside and working inside. Thus, effective ministry does not necessarily, as some may promote, depend upon actually living where everyone else lives. Finally, prayerful consideration of where to live when doing ministry in the city is a must. What kind of ministry will be most effective in the city? How can the work be best carried forward? God expects us to use enlightened judgment when prosecuting His work. We will be called to give an account of our actions and their effects upon those we were called to minister to. It is truly a matter of personal prayer and careful consideration.

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