

A Brief



on Adventism and Social Causes¹

Historians of American religion typically describe the widespread social reform movements during the first half of the 19th century as the cradle of Adventism. However, it is safe to conjecture that most Seventh-day Adventists infer from the gospel commission in Matthew 28 that their primary responsibility is to preach the gospel of salvation rather than to become an activist organization as we generally understand the term in the 21st century.

Historians have also taught that Millerite Adventists believed that the immediately approaching eternal paradise they proclaimed would be the only cure to all of Earth's woes. The Millerites' faith in the Second Advent inspired them to endure the trials of this world and at the same time countered any proclivities to engage with reform movements whose activities they regarded as peripheral to the church's mission.²

Adventists Begin Social Reform

The Great Disappointment of 1844 did not change their outlook. A conviction that the Second Advent was still literal and imminent lingered in the Adventist mind and pre-empted temptations to engage in social causes. However, a change began among those believers who organized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which shaped the denomination's orientation toward reform initiatives that has endured until the present. Three notable examples of their social reform efforts during the 19th century were the following:

- Founded in 1866 as the first Seventh-day Adventist health-care institution, the Western Health Reform Institute (later known as the Battle Creek Sanitarium), joined a growing number of institutions that promoted lifestyle reforms to improve the level of public health.
- A strong advocate of healthful living, Ellen White often chose to present anti-alcohol lectures (temperance was a

live issue at the time) to public audiences rather than to speak on traditional spiritual themes. Some have argued that her reputation as a public speaker depended as much on her temperance lectures as on her sermons.³

- In the area of education, from the outset of Adventist mission presence in countries with low literacy rates, the public regarded denominational schools as agents of social reform and uplift.

The change in Adventist thinking did not represent a denial of faith in the Second Advent. Adventists had always disagreed with the post-millennial theology of the 19th century, which provided a rationale for much of that era's reform. Post-millennialism held that humans were to reform the world into a thousand-year period of Christian goodness because the return of Jesus would not occur until this millennial paradise-on-earth had become a reality.

By contrast, Seventh-day Adventists continued to believe in a pre-millennial

BY FLOYD GREENLEAF

Second Advent. Post-millennialism not only violated prophetic chronology as they understood it, but also contradicted biblical teachings about salvation only through the atoning blood of Jesus. In addition to recognizing Jesus as the Savior of a sinful world, Adventists also believed that He was their example, and that they were to emulate His ministry, a large part of which was devoted to ameliorating human suffering. They first applied their insight to their own bodies, which led them to embrace the principles of healthful living. Thus, while Adventists rejected the theology of reform related to post-millennialism, they had no quarrel with the notion of reform itself.

Beginning in the 1870s, Adventists organized Dorcas Societies in local congregations that engaged in welfare activities to benefit the disadvantaged.⁴ The term *Dorcas* memorialized the New Testament woman, also known as Tabitha, whose passion for the well-being of her community impelled her to conduct a personal ministry of projects to benefit the community. The name revealed how Adventists sought to relate to their neighbors.

World Conditions Stimulate Adventist Engagement in Reform

But two world wars and a severe economic depression during the decades between 1914 and 1945 prompted Adventists to re-examine their relationship to the broken world around them. A conviction took hold after World War I that the church as an institution should reach beyond the local community. The congregation-based Dorcas Society became a first-line agency in collecting relief supplies for peoples shattered by war. Further, the Great Depression of the 1930s convinced Adventists that they should help ease economic dislocations, whose results were often as debilitating as wars and natural disasters. At first, the church directed much of its relief efforts to the Adventist community, but soon reached out to include the general public.

World War II and the subsequent Cold War marked a turning point in Adventist welfare and relief efforts. By 1946, the General Conference had

amassed several million dollars to spend on relief for a ravaged world. The combined threat of potential nuclear catastrophe and natural disasters, such as severe hurricanes in the Caribbean Basin, made it clear that the calamities for which the church would need to provide aid were both man-made and natural.

In the years following World War II, Adventist relief efforts frequently took the form of projects for which the denominational organization in the affected region assumed responsibility. A conference, union, or division might designate a special relief fund to which other fields would donate, with denomination-wide offerings occasionally providing additional funds. Adventist relief workers frequently labored side by side with other humanitarian agencies and even military personnel to assist victims of hurricanes and earthquakes.

With the formation of Seventh-day Adventist Welfare Relief, Inc., in 1956,⁵ Adventists officially adopted the idea already in practice that relief not tied directly to evangelism constituted a legitimate end in itself. Although the purpose of this new entity was to provide centralized direction to the church's international relief program, it actually functioned as part of the General Conference Lay Activities Department.

In 1967, a major earthquake in Caracas, Venezuela, provided an added stimulus to the growing network of Adventist disaster welfare. When the quake struck, C. E. Guenther, an associate lay activities director of the General Conference, happened to be in the Venezuelan capital to attend a laymen's convention. To his chagrin, he learned that the Adventist congregations in the city were completely unprepared to provide assistance. His description of the experience, published in the *Review*



With 80 percent unemployment, the people of Zimbabwe struggle to feed themselves. ADRA's garden projects are the largest across the country, covering 125 acres and benefitting thousands of individuals.



ADRA works with mothers in southern Ethiopia to identify children who suffer from acute malnutrition. This therapeutic intervention saves the lives of thousands of children each year.

and Herald for the entire church to read, urged “that Adventists in every conference, mission, and church in this disaster-ridden world, will get ready now to minister to the needs and share with them our great hope and faith.”⁶

Guenther’s call associated humanitarianism with soul-winning. But six years later, in 1973, the denominational relief organization capitalized on the church’s earlier commitment to conduct community service independent of direct evangelism by reorganizing as Seventh-day Adventist World Services, commonly called SAWS. This new title also reflected a broader vision of development and community service, rather than relief alone. By 1980, its budget approximated \$20 million, with most of the money coming from the United States Agency for International Development. This relationship with USAID nudged many of SAWS’ activities beyond direct evangelistic purposes.

Although SAWS’ leadership embraced a global vision, Latin American countries received more assistance than other regions of the world. Chile, Peru,

and Brazil were the leading beneficiaries. Through the 1970s, SAWS’ activities became increasingly developmental, focusing on responses to chronic conditions including hunger and sanitation, and community projects such as agriculture, nutrition, and maternal health.

ADRA and Non-Sectarian Engagement

Another name change in 1983 from SAWS to ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency)⁷ more specifically described the church’s commitment to proactive involvement in social uplift. An event that dramatically signaled the church’s intention for engagement occurred in 1987, when General Conference President Neal Wilson led a delegation of Adventists to the USSR to promote religious freedom. Reflecting the spirit of *glasnost*, he offered to make Adventist expertise in operating health-care institutions available to the Soviet medical profession.

Over the years, ADRA’s projects have been quite diverse. In some large South American cities, ADRA set up rehabilitation centers for youth caught up in substance abuse and prostitution. During the 1990s, as Yugoslavia broke

into quarreling factions, ADRA’s assistance included a neutral mail service that bridged warring parties. In Zaire, ADRA showed its commitment to environmentalism by conducting a tree-planting campaign intended to replace the forests that refugees had ravaged for wood. At the same time, this initiative helped to restore the habitat of the silverback gorilla, an endangered species. Peasant farmers in the Lake Titicaca region of Peru received instruction about small-scale agricultural diversification that enabled them to improve their own nutrition and produce garden products for sale. By the mid-1990s, more than 130 ADRA employees in Bolivia were helping engineers to improve community water and sewer systems, pave streets, and institute soil-preservation procedures.

According to the ADRA Website, current projects, in addition to disaster relief, include drilling wells and building sanitation systems, collaborating with a local expert company to build centers for drying and processing fruits and vegetables, and creating a female-directed goat cooperative (both in Zambia);

micro-lending projects in several countries; and educational programs for women and girls, as well as for refugees and people living in poverty.⁸

ADRA embodies the denomination's supreme example of non-sectarian participation in humanitarian projects, but Adventists did not always separate evangelism from public causes. Ellen White's anti-alcohol lectures morphed into a well-developed temperance program under the auspices of a General Conference department. During the 1950s and 1960s, Adventist temperance activities included anti-tobacco campaigns such as the Five-Day Plan to Stop Smoking, featuring the manikin "Smoking Sam."⁹ Informational films like *One in 20,000* also exposed the risks of tobacco use. Preachers in many parts of the world enhanced the appeal of their public evangelism by using these and similar tools to show that the Bible was a relevant source of health and social values.

Position Statements, Gender Equality, and Political Involvement

Beginning in the 1980s, church leaders started to issue position statements about a variety of social issues with moral implications.¹⁰ Topics ranged widely, including child abuse, drug addiction, poverty, family matters, sexuality, literacy, human cloning, assault weapons, and environmentalism. For more than a decade, the denomination's Christian View of Human Life Committee studied bioethical issues and made recommendations to church health-care institutions and the church at large. At times, position statements have addressed international politics, such as specific wars. Typically, these papers link biblical references to the topics, but only occasionally does a statement center upon a specific doctrine. Believing that the church should represent a moral force in a troubled world, church leaders have used these statements to announce to the public where Adventism stands on hot-button issues.

A major concern in both the church and society has been the question of gender equality. During the 1970s, the denomination equalized salaries for men

and women, and as the century drew to a close, most employment positions in the church were technically open to women. But meanwhile, an animated discussion, abetted by several study commissions, arose regarding the appropriate role of women in church leadership, which also drew attention to their unique responsibilities as wives and mothers. Women agreed that being wives and mothers was an important responsibility for their gender, but pointed out that this should not preclude leadership roles for married as well as for single women. Indeed, they pled for more official recognition of family values, and for the church to recognize the uniqueness of women's ministries. Although the debate centered upon the question of women's ordination, most women were probably more concerned about increasing their participation in church decision making.

While the denomination's official attention to women's and family issues extended back unevenly into the 19th century, the intensity of the debate during the last quarter of the 20th century helped to drive resolutions for establishing several new departments—Children's Ministries, Family Ministries, and Women's Ministries—at all levels of church administration.¹¹ These new entities promoted greater awareness and action on issues relating to women and children, among them literacy and poverty, as well as how to handle such matters as divorce, family violence, and parenting. They also continued to fuel the question of how to broaden leadership roles for women and increase their involvement in church deliberative processes at all levels.

In some instances, Adventists promoted social ideals by serving in public office. Notable among them were descendants of the Andean tribespeople who for centuries had lived in virtual slavery under Peruvian landowners. Another was Eunice Michiles, whose paternal grandparents were Adventist pioneers in the German communities in Brazil. Michiles became the first woman senator in Brazil, earning an

international reputation as a protagonist for education, women's rights, and family planning. In a sense, she simply raised the bar of engagement that earlier Adventists had previously set years earlier in Peru and the Amazon watershed. In these regions, Fernando and Ana Stahl, Leo and Jessie Halliwell, and an army of national workers who succeeded them had helped to transform the economy and society through education and public-health programs (see article in this issue by Charles Teel on page 22). In Peru, the Stahls' labors triggered a revision in the national constitution that opened the door to religious freedom. In 1958, the Brazilian government awarded the Halliwells its highest award for civilians.

Ellen White and "Disinterested Kindness"

When describing the Good Samaritan, Ellen White termed his relief and assistance to a beaten and robbed traveler "disinterested kindness," explaining that such gestures may be the only means by which some will become conscious of God's benevolence.¹² Since their 19th-century origin, Adventists have come to realize that their commitment to the entire Bible as their rule of faith requires them to treat the natural world and other humans with care and respect because they are the product of divine creative power.

Yet, as the debate about gender equality has shown, engagement by Adventists in social causes has not been a unanimous undertaking, nor has it always followed a consistent line. The church equalized salaries for men and women in the U.S. only after a lawsuit forced the issue.¹³ The position statements issued by the church speak only to some selected matters, not to all major questions. Some Adventists, especially those who have endured hardship, have voiced concern about what they view as slow or inadequate response by the church to issues such as political oppression and ethnic discrimination.

Questions have also been raised about ADRA, which has remained the most visible agent of Adventist humanitarian activism, cooperating with existing local or national authorities to

carry out its programs. Although the organization receives money and gifts-in-kind from many sources, including large private donations, congregational offerings in churches, and funds from various public agencies, by far its major support comes from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). ADRA functions as a faith-based agency that distributes government-furnished international aid in a non-sectarian manner, although it has been free to advertise itself as an Adventist organization.

Focusing on the imperative of the gospel commission, some argue that the church's involvement in social causes has distracted from its central purpose of preaching the gospel. It is not the responsibility of the church, they say, to treat every social problem; in fact, the church may be too involved already. Because ADRA depends extensively on public money, some Adventists have expressed fear that its policies have brought the denomination precariously close to breaching its traditional position on the separation of church and state. However, most Adventists now live in places characterized by economic scarcity rather than plenty, and for them, combining the social aspects of the gospel with evangelism represents a more nearly complete version of the meaning of Jesus' ministry than does preaching alone.

After a history of 150 years of promoting social reform, seeking a balance between preaching the urgency of the Second Advent and dealing with the reality of a disturbed world is still an elusive goal that sparks debate. This tension is not destructive. Proponents of both sides of the issue help the church to achieve balance. They remind each other of the constant need to redefine the spheres of legitimate activity for the church and help it achieve a workable consensus. The outcome of this confrontation of convictions is the ever-lengthening list of projects that the church supports, which indicates that the collective Adventist conscience has become more sensitive to the world's acute needs. At the same time, the Ad-

ventist purse has become more capable of supporting wider participation.

The final decades of the 20th century and the opening years of the 21st have witnessed a plethora of uplift activity within global Adventism. In many places, the old Dorcas Societies have evolved into well-recognized community-service centers offering financial assistance, Christian counseling, a variety of adult education courses ranging from computer programming to English for Speakers of Other Languages, as well as other types of material assistance to the needy. As a part of their services, educational and health-care institutions alike promote wellness among their employees and to the public. Many teens and young adults take a year off from college to serve as student missionaries, participate in mission trips during school vacations, and engage in a variety of volunteer activities on community-service days. Pathfinders march to draw attention to substance abuse and collect food for community-service centers. In order to assist with short-term projects in dozens of countries, adults raise funds and volunteer their skills, ranging from medical assistance to laying brick. For a church that teaches disinterested kindness, all of this has seemed the right thing to do. ✍️



Floyd Greenleaf is a retired educator, historian, and author of books and articles about Seventh-day Adventist history and education. His most

recent book is *A Land of Hope: The Growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South America, which appeared in 2011 in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. He writes from Port Charlotte, Florida.*

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. I have distilled this article from previous research appearing in three of my books, primarily but not limited to the following pages: *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1992), vol. 2, pages 476-

499; *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* [coauthor Richard Schwarz] (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 2000), pages 458-477; *A Land of Hope: The Growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South America*, English edition (Tatui, Sao Paulo, Brazil: Casa Publicadora, 2011), pages 655-663. I have also relied on my research for *In Passion for the World: A History of Seventh-day Adventist Education* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 2005) and for articles I have written for *The Journal of Adventist Education*.

2. Charles Teel has aptly described this spiritual mood in "Bridegroom Cry" or "Babylon Call?" *The Journal of Adventist Education* 57:1 (October/November 1994):23-29. See <http://circle.adventist.org/files/download/jae199457012307.pdf>. Accessed March 6, 2013.

3. For reports of several of Ellen White's temperance lectures, including a presentation in Norway, see James R. Nix, *A Collection of Twelve Early Adventist Sermons That Illustrate Advent Preaching* (Silver Spring, Md.: North American Division Office of Education, 1989), pp. 79-81.

4. See "Dorcas Societies," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1996), pp. 473, 474.

5. See "ADRA," *ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

6. C. E. Guenther, "I Lived Through the Caracas Earthquake," *Review and Herald* 144:40 (October 5, 1967): _____; *ibid.* 144:41 (October 12, 1967):18, 19.

7. See http://www.adra.org/site/PageNavigator/about_us/history.html. Accessed March 7, 2013.

8. Projects listed on ADRA Website (<http://www.adra.org>), March 2013.

9. See "Five-Day Plan to Stop Smoking," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 463, 464.

10. The basic source for these position papers is the General Conference Website (<http://www.adventist.org>), which contains updated copies of each statement. For a helpful discussion about them, see Mark F. Carr and Gerald R. Winslow, "Using the Church's Ethics Statements in Your Classroom," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 70:1 (October/November 2007):4-11. See <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae200770010408.pdf>. Accessed March 6, 2013.

11. According to the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for 2011, the Department of Children's Ministries organized in 1995, Family Ministries in 1975 but reorganized in 1995, and Women's Ministries in 1990. These dates do not represent when the first activities in each of these fields began, but only when the responsibilities became large enough to justify full department status.

12. Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1941), p. 387.

13. U.S. Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit. Argued and submitted October 13, 1981; decided May 10, 1982: <http://openjurist.org/676/f2d/1272>. Accessed March 2013.