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Wilson tells 12,000 Seventh-day Adventists campaign isn’t finished yet

Ironically, early Adventists were reluctant missionaries
Former priest first took Adventist message outside of United States

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Mark A. Kellner, Adventist Review

Wearing a dark blue baptismal robe, Tomas Olivera of Peekskill, New York, stepped into the giant pool placed before the platform at the Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum on this afternoon and knew only one thing: he was finally about to be baptized.

It quickly developed that the Seventh-day Adventist pastor who placed Olivera under the water was the president of the Adventist world church, Pastor Ted N. C. Wilson, who had just completed a sermon about the role this religious movement would play at the end of time.

Olivera was all smiles, as was John MacKneil, a former resident of New York’s Greenwich Village,
who returned to the Historic Seventh-day Adventist Church on West 11th Street to hear Wilson present a four-week “Revelation of Hope” seminar. MacKneil was also baptized by Wilson, and was a bit overcome at the experience.

“It’s an inspiration to be baptized by this man of God,” MacKneil said, standing next to Wilson, who briefly interned at that church when he first began his ministry. “I wanted to be baptized; I needed to be baptized. I feel good and I feel inspired.” Both MacKneil and Wilson said MacKneil’s brother would also soon join the church.

Inspiration was certainly the theme for this day of celebration and commitment, which was held under the banner of a joint campmeeting of the Greater New York and Northeastern Conferences, something local officials said was a first for the two groups. Adventists came from all over the region – joined by officials of the Adventist Church world headquarters and the denomination’s North American Division, as well as from even farther afield – to mark the completion of an initial phase of urban evangelism and the welcoming of hundreds of new believers. At least 150 were baptized at the Nassau Coliseum venue, evangelist Mark Finley told Adventist Review, with many more in area churches the same morning. Estimates point to nearly 2,000 baptisms in the NY13 campaign before today's event.

Hundreds more had been baptized before the event, as the New York City area hosted more than 400 evangelistic outreach events held by Adventist congregations. As Wilson said of the NY13 effort during his sermon, “This is not a spectator sport,” noting that several Adventist world church vice presidents and other world church leaders had conducted campaigns in the area as well.

At least one other division leader came to observe the results: Erton Köhler, president of the South American Division, and his wife Adriene were spotted among the worshippers Sabbath morning, no doubt happy that the “Arautos do Rei,” the Brazilian “King’s Heralds” quartet, were part of the morning’s worship music.
Music wasn’t the only cause for happiness that morning: several public officials came to publicly acknowledge the positive impact the Seventh-day Adventist Church had on the community. Mayor Wayne J. Hall, Sr., of neighboring Hempstead, New York, welcomed the Adventists, and Una S. T. Clarke, a former member of the New York City Council and mother of U.S. Rep. Yvette Clarke (D-Brooklyn) was also recognized for her presence at the event.

But the greatest praise for Seventh-day Adventists came from Bill DeBlasio, who holds a citywide office as New York City Public Advocate, a job formerly known as president of the City Council.

“I represent all 8.4 million New Yorkers,” DeBlasio said. “And I come to bring greetings and appreciation” for the work Adventists are doing in the community, he added.

“I was moved by the work of your young people after Hurricane Sandy struck. Every day, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is doing good works in the City of New York,” DeBlasio said. He lauded Adventist efforts in promoting healthy living and said the church’s schools comprise “one of the greatest educational systems on Earth.”

DeBlasio concluded saying, “Every day [Seventh-day Adventists] make us a better and a stronger city. I say, ‘God bless you.’”

Following the comments of these public officials, Adventist evangelist Mark Finley prayed for Hall, Clarke, and DeBlasio, each of whom was also greeted by Wilson.

Wilson, in his morning message, emphasized that the June 29 event, though historic, isn’t the end of outreach here: “NY13 continues until Jesus comes!” he declared.

Speaking about the “little scroll” that would be sweet to taste but “bitter in the belly” (Revelation 10:8-9), Wilson linked the disappointment of the early disciples, who thought Jesus would establish the Kingdom of God during His time on Earth but instead was crucified, buried, and resurrected, with that of the early Millerites. The 1840s Millerites, out of whom the Seventh-day Adventist Church eventually emerged, initially thought that the 2,300-day prophecy of Daniel 8 pointed to the return of Christ to Earth in October of 1844.

Instead, the first-century disciples began preaching the gospel and, as Acts 17:6 records, “turned the world upside down.” So too, Wilson said, Seventh-day Adventists – the spiritual descendants of the disappointed Millerites – have reached out around the world bringing the three angels’ messages and the hope that Jesus is coming soon.

“This is not another church,” Wilson said. “The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a movement of God.”

Noting the church’s presence in over 200 nations and territories around the globe, Wilson added...
praise for the church’s media outreach, noting “Adventist World Radio is making a major impact around the world,” and praising church-owned Hope Channel and supporting television ministry 3ABN for their part in the media outreach.

Wilson again emphasized that the day’s event was not the “end” of outreach in the region. He told the thousands gathered for worship and celebration, “We came to New York to highlight ‘Mission to the Cities.’ This is not a culmination today in New York City: the work is continuing.”

Speaking with Adventist Review while waiting to baptize Olivera, Wilson said his own campaign was “an amazing experience in Greenwich Village. The audience stayed with us the whole time.”

Members of the congregation were impressed. Duane Cady, interim president of Atlantic Union College, a church-owned institution in South Lancaster, Mass., was visiting from his home in Syracuse, New York.

Cady, also a former board chairman of the American Medical Association, choked back tears as he contemplated the number of new Adventists being baptized.

“It’s amazing. We’re going forward, and I’m very happy, even thrilled,” he said.

As the baptisms continued, and an afternoon of music and testimony loomed, the joyfulness promised to remain for quite some time.

Ironically, early Adventists were reluctant missionaries

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Ansel Oliver and George R. Knight/ANN

Editor’s note: This story is part of a series of historical articles published this year marking the 150th anniversary of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Though John Nevins Andrews is rightfully credited as the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s first foreign missionary, the preaching of the Adventist message in Europe actually preceded his 1874 arrival in Switzerland by a decade.

Michael Czechowski, a former Roman Catholic priest originally from Poland, had requested to be sent to his native continent to spread his newfound faith that heralded the soon Second Coming of Jesus. Adventist Church leaders,
Though the Adventist Church didn’t endorse him, Michael Czechowski was the first person to take the Adventist message outside of the United States. He actually arrived in Switzerland a decade before John Nevins Andrews, who is widely known as the denomination’s first official missionary. [photos courtesy Office of Archives, Statistics and Research]

Though uncertain of his reliability and honesty, declined his request. He would, however, go on to become the fledgling denomination’s first overseas missionary, oddly enough, by validating their suspicions.

Czechowski, who had deserted his wife and children, later gained missionary sponsorship from the Advent Christian denomination – the main group of Sunday-keeping Adventists. Having his way paid, he ignored the teachings of his sponsors upon arrival in Europe in 1864 and proceeded to teach the Seventh-day Adventist message, gaining converts throughout the continent, including in Switzerland, Hungary, Italy and Romania.

With a church structure having recently been created, thus began the expansion of the Adventist message outside of the United States. But it would be many years before the Adventist Church would commit wholeheartedly to foreign mission.

Within the church at home – based in the U.S. state of Michigan – debate flared over the meaning of Jesus’ call in the Gospel of Mark to “Go into all the world.” Most of the 3,500-member church in 1863 thought reaching diverse immigrant populations within America was sufficient, some suggesting those immigrants would convert their friends and relatives in their mother country.

The 1871 General Conference Session passed a resolution to send “Bro[ther] Matteson as a missionary to the Danes and Norwegians”… in the nearby state of Wisconsin.

“It wasn’t our church’s finest hour,” says Adventist historian David Trim, who serves as director of the world church’s Office of Archives, Statistics and Research.

Meanwhile, in Europe, some of Czechowski’s followers accidentally discovered an Adventist magazine among his papers informing them that, to their surprise, they weren’t the world’s only Adventists. Adventists in the U.S., still arguing
over the feasibility of taking their teachings beyond national borders, were similarly taken aback.

“Adventists in America were actually sort of embarrassed to learn that there were already Adventist believers in Europe,” Trim says.

The mutual discovery led to American Adventists inviting a Swiss representative to the 1869 General Conference Session. He arrived too late, but spent the next year in the U.S. learning Adventist beliefs more thoroughly before returning home as an ordained minister.

At that 1869 session, however, the establishment of a missionary society was a key step in triggering a two-decade process of reversing the church’s mindset toward mission. The transformation was aided by a boldness of the small group of believers who thought they in fact could reach the world, and more importantly, leadership was becoming increasingly comprised of former missionaries.

The church’s prophet and co-founder, Ellen White, later penned her strongest calls for oversees mission after spending time herself in Europe in the 1880s and Australia in the 1890s.

In 1901, she declared at the General Conference Session, “The vineyard includes the whole word, and every part of it is to be worked.”

That same year, Arthur G. Daniells became the first missionary elected as the Adventist Church’s president, having served in New Zealand and Australia for 15 years.

“It’s a remarkable story of how our pioneers changed their mindset because they were such a small group,” Trim says. “The confidence of this tiny group to think they could reach the whole world is astonishing.”

The pattern for oversees mission can be traced back to when the church expanded to the west coast of the U.S. It was in 1868, one year before the landmark mission focus of the 1869 General Conference Session, that church leaders responded to a request for a minister in the far-off state of California. John N. Loughborough and D. T. Bordeau accepted the call and worked to build what would become a recipe for entering new areas – gain a sufficient following and then establish a printing press, a magazine and a medical facility.
The year 1874 was another key year for mission – widower Andrews, a former Adventist Church president, took his two children to Europe as the church’s first official missionary, and the denomination established its first mission periodical, “True Mission.” Also, Battle Creek College in Michigan was established to train ministers to work both in the U.S. and abroad.

By 1910 a steady stream of missionaries was heading out – the mission fields prior to the 1880s were joining the U.S. as the new Adventist homelands. The Germans took responsibility for Egypt, the Ottoman Empire and Russia, the Swedes for Ethiopia, the British for East and West Africa, and the Australians for Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. Jamaica, too, sent missionaries; one of them, C. E. F. Thompson, went to Ghana.

A new publication, “Mission Quarterly,” was established in 1912, telling the stories of missionary families, including the Stahls in South America, Gustav Perk in Russia, the Robinsons in South Africa, and others who had left the U.S. knowing they might never come back.

William A. Spicer, who was appointed church president following Daniells and had served as a missionary in India, published his thoughts on mission in the 1921 book, “Our story of Missions for Colleges and academies”: Mission “is not something in addition to the regular work of the church. The work of God is one work, the wide world over…. To carry the one message of salvation to all peoples … is the aim of every conference, every church, every believer.”

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