Another motivation for health ministry is the nurture of existing members. This will not happen with the commitment of trivial corporate resources. In this respect high quality health programs from the church to the community will also benefit both those who give and those who receive. While acknowledging and respecting the Spirit of Prophecy where appropriate, materials presented need to be up to date, and reflect the state of health knowledge in the late 20th, rather than the late 19th century.

Without the Adventist motivation of a link between health and religion, most non-Adventists still have a long way to go in making the transition to healthful living. This is despite the profusion of scientific evidence. If the special emphasis in the Adventist church loses visibility among members, and if clear practical support from denominational leaders is less evident, why would Adventists not experience the same difficulties as others in effectively modifying and maintaining their health habits?

(To be continued)

This article is condensed from an article originally published in the January, 2005 edition of Adventist Today. It is written by Gary E. Fraser, MB.,ChB, PhD., Professor of Epidemiology and Professor of Medicine at Loma Linda University as well as Director of the Adventist Health Study. The entire article can be seen at: www.nadhealthministries.org

A Church With A Health Message?

To non-Adventists the most well known distinctive concepts of the Adventist Church are the Saturday Sabbath and the emphasis on health. Consequently when mixing with non-Adventists we often define ourselves along these lines. As science has slowly caught up with Adventist health over the last 130 years, it has become a national priority to change the health behaviors of whole populations. Yet changing health behavior, even in those who desperately need it, is often very difficult. Thus the Adventist experience is all the more remarkable, and points to the genius of tying behavior to the powerful motivator of religion.

Changes can either be motivated by negative consequences of poor health habits; or may be more positively from a conviction of what is right. There are many logical interfaces between religion and health, and these are increasingly recognized amongst some non-Adventist Christians.

Perhaps the most obvious motivation follows from the concept of a creator-God. The marvelous work that God created in the human organism, with its profound biochemical, physiological, psychological, social and moral components deserves the most fastidious care. A vegetarian diet would also better utilize the world’s agricultural resources efficiently, would promote a greater respect for the rights of animals, and hence the well-being of Gods creation. However many modern Christians are no longer creationists.

Second, the Christian God is a God of love and would surely have concern for the comfort of His creatures, and provide guidance promoting good health. Some such guidance is found in the Bible, but only Adventists among modern religions claim additional revelation on health. These additional insights are particularly well suited to preventing the modern diseases of affluence. With greater affluence, the less physical work, and modern food technology, the situation today is unique in history.

Third, as God’s representatives we should be active in guiding the non-believer to a knowledge of the Gospel. A vigorous, healthy group should be more productive in this regard, and more attractive to the new believer.

Fourth is the idea that healthful living may be in some way involved in salvation. Is the right lifestyle necessary for salvation, or is it only a spiritual discipline? Adventists may have differing convictions on this subject. Is it possible that the way we eat, the number of hours we sleep, how we exercise, can affect our thinking and perhaps our spiritual perceptiveness? There is no direct evidence, but such a conclusion is physiologically and pharmacologically plausible.

Supporting A Health Ministry To Our Church Members

It seems that the health emphasis of Adventism is going through troubled times. Our original health message was a mix of healing for those already ill and an emphasis on “right” living to prevent disease in the first place. Today, there is often a new balance that emphasizes medical institutions and modern healing, but provides fewer resources to support personal disease prevention. Our tradition of right living continues to pass down the Adventist generations, but with reduced corporate support and emphasis. Are the “glory days” of Adventist personal health practice behind us?

The distinctive of Adventist health practices are unlikely to remain without reinforcement that is no longer supported. How long is it since you heard a sermon on the importance of personal health? Administrators have many other priorities and worthy goals and health ministry is often not one of them. Sometimes the emphasis on personal health has tended to the ultraconservative, whose ideas can run contrary to good sense, modern medical knowledge, or even the Spirit of Prophecy. Dealing with some of these entrenched ideas has been an administrative chore, and has undoubtedly complicated the effort to maintain a balanced emphasis on personal health.

Contemporary Goals For The Adventist Health Emphasis

Has our model of health promotion been less successful than expected? Possibly so! However, this is entirely dependent on the expectation. As far as disease prevention is concerned, studies of Adventist health indicate striking success.

For some, the goal is to use the health message as an “entering wedge” so as to result in baptisms. To be most successful this preventive care needs to be given in the context of love and compassion, without a hidden agenda.

A similar but very different evangelistic scenario consists of a clear focus on religion that is then supplemented with health materials. The audience attends because of their interest in the religious theme, and the non-threatening health supplement may often be seen as a welcome bonus even if it means some difficult changes.