

# Urban Crisis and the Church

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The urban crisis is getting attention in many different circles in American life.<sup>1</sup> Everyone talks about it: most people deplore it, many demand that something be done to correct it, and a few even attempt to define it. The reason why it is so hard to define is that various people interpret the phrase differently, each one thinking of it in terms of the impact it has on his particular area of concern. For example:

For the Negro youngster in the central city ghetto, it is overcrowded schools, inadequate facilities, and insensitive, ill-trained teachers.

For the welfare mother it is feeding and housing a family, with increasingly inadequate resources as costs continue to soar.

For the aged person it is old neighborhoods breaking up and deteriorating, growing property taxes and skyrocketing food costs — all to be provided from a fixed income.

For the big city mayor it is not-to-be-denied demands from municipal employees for higher pay combined with equally insistent demands from the general public for better quality services, all to be met from a deteriorating tax base and lagging state aid.

For the suburban commuter it is traffic jams and insufficient parking facilities and a suburban environment which every day resembles more the city environment supposedly escaped.

For the unskilled in search of work, it is nonexistent jobs or jobs located many miles from place of residence, or jobs denied because of employer and union discrimination added to limited and often irrelevant training opportunities.

For many urban scholars it is a system of local government characterized by overlapping, fragmented jurisdictions with tax bases unrelated to public service needs, and with public power, particularly zoning, used for anti-social purposes.

For militant blacks and disillusioned youth it is demonstration of America's refusal to allocate its resources to humane and social purposes, instead of to destructive ends.

For many other Americans, the urban crisis is racial strife, crime in the streets, polluted air and water, and a generally deteriorating environment.

The urban crisis is all of these things and many more. For the average citizen the crisis is defined by how it affects him personally. It is the direct personal impact which he feels and understands.<sup>2</sup>

However it is defined, the urban crisis certainly demands new and forceful efforts by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in helping to untangle the problems of men and women in desperate need of healing and salvation. The creation of the Urban Service Corps Committee is but a beginning effort of the church to organize its concerns and determine what implications the urban crisis really holds for it, and to discover new responses to the challenges the church faces in the cities. Also needed is an Adventist urban training center through which the church can utilize the resources of its educational and medical institutions in inner-city programs.

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Such a center should perhaps be located in Chicago. The geographic environment here includes Andrews University with its graduate school and seminary, the headquarters of the Lake Region Conference (predominantly Negro) and the Illinois Conference (predominantly white), and the Hinsdale Sanitarium and Hospital. The city itself has sizable minority population groups, including blacks, Appalachian whites, American Indians, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Cubans, and Eastern Europeans. Further, such a location would be near the middle of the nation.

The church needs an urban training center to prepare personnel for administrative work in the cities, for urban ministry at the congregational level, and for viable educational efforts in metropolitan areas. The church needs such a training center also to bring about Christian understanding between the races within the church itself, where, tragically, racial strife and misunderstanding are deteriorating relationships between brothers.

Ministers who are new to the urban environment, and who do not know what it means to be directly affected by its dynamics, need training in order to be effective pastors to their congregations, to bring counsel and healing to their parishioners. For a long time Adventists have had a notion of "the universality of the pulpit," assuming that all Adventist congregations have the same needs, whether at home or abroad, in a rural setting, in a city, or in a suburb (with perhaps the only exception being the careful appointment of pastors for the "institutional" churches). But a successful pastor in rural Iowa may not be a successful pastor in metropolitan Detroit or New York unless he is trained to meet the special problems of an urban ministry.

For example, the Spanish Adventist church in Chicago has about three hundred members, including at least fourteen nationalities. The largest group is of Puerto Rican descent, followed in order by Mexican-Americans,

Dominicans, and smaller groups from Cuba, Brazil, and other parts of Latin America. The older members and those most recently arrived in the United States do not speak English; but others, especially among the young, speak only English and refuse (for psychological and sociological reasons) to speak Spanish. Some of the members have attended college, and a few have done graduate study. Some are very poor and are forced to accept public welfare assistance in order to survive. Some are very light-skinned, some very dark, and some in between. The lighter children want to learn English rapidly in order to be absorbed into the larger society, but the darker members (even in the same family) refuse to learn English, not wanting to suffer the plight of the American Negroes. Some of the adults plan to return to their native lands, while others want to stay in the United States indefinitely.

Where is a conference president going to turn to find the right man to pastor such a congregation? The challenge involves much more than instructing the people about proper dress, movies, sex, reading, Sabbath observance, etc.; it includes helping people to survive in unfamiliar surroundings in a big city with cold winters and segregated neighborhoods. Sometimes a pastor is called from as far away as Chile — from a setting 10,000 miles away, farther than from Washington, D. C., than to Vietnam. Now a conference president has the right to call any man, wherever he can be found, to meet the needs of his conference; but he also has the responsibility of providing whatever training is necessary to make that man an effective minister to his people. An Adventist urban training center would be able to give the necessary preparation for effective preaching and counseling within the context of what is happening in the cities.

Ministerial students are expected to study Greek, on the assumption that an understanding of the New Testament in its original language makes it easier to apply the principles to the present. It has been assumed all along that the ministerial student already understands the present, so that all he needs to do is to study the materials of the past. The tragedy is that few in the church do understand what is taking place now, particularly in the cities. For too long Adventist evangelism has marched only to the borders of the metropolitan areas; it has not gone past suburbia into the central cities. Signs have proclaimed "Christ is the Answer" before anyone has asked "What is the question?" A training program in a proper setting could bring administrators, educators, ministers — and laymen, too — up to date, so that they could really be a bridge from the past to the present, and thus be a true *remnant*.

Many kinds of programs could be sponsored by an urban training center:

1. *Classes for teachers and educational administrators.* These might deal with education and urban politics, the psychological and sociological implications of growing up black, the special educational needs of Spanish-speaking minorities, the preparation of a black-history curriculum, and the counseling of minority-group students. The classes could be taught at the center by instructors from nearby universities and (as soon as possible) by Adventist teachers equipped to present such subjects within an Adventist framework. In any case, the courses would be sponsored by Andrews University, which would offer appropriate undergraduate or graduate credit. Such a program would bring the participants closer to their advanced degrees, to their environment, and, most importantly, to their own students.

2. *Courses of special interest to black Adventist ministers.* The church has recognized, at least since the establishment of the regional conferences in the mid-1940s, the unique needs of its black constituency; yet little has been done to train black Adventist ministers specifically and effectively to deal with these unique requirements. The seminary has the same program for everyone, even though different ministerial candidates will face very different problems. The black revolution in America is forcefully raising difficult questions for the black Adventist ministry. How does one relate to black militancy? Can a young man be Christian and truly "black" (in the psychological sense) at the same time? Can the church survive in the ghetto? What significance does the history of Negro religion in America have for Adventists? How does one best react to attitudes of white supremacy? What should be done in response to the attempt to discredit the writings of Paul by prominent black religious leaders? What does a minister say to young black Adventists who can't understand why there is racism in Adventist institutions? And how should they regard the writings of Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and Huey P. Newton? Are there any alternatives to these? These questions suggest but a few of the topics that could supplement the training Adventist ministers have received in college and seminary.

3. *Workshops and conferences.* Conference ministers, student-teacher groups from academies and colleges, church youth groups, etc., would have the benefit of a closer look at the church in action in the center of a city.

4. *Intensive training seminars.* Lasting perhaps six weeks, such seminars could bring in people from different cities to study the problems and possibilities of inner-city church centers. The seminars could be conducted in summer or winter, depending on the time when the participants could best

afford to be absent from their own areas, and could well include conference administrators, most of whom have responsibilities for areas that include large cities.

5. *Seminary courses.* Perhaps groups of seminary students could spend one day a week at the center.

6. *Human relations workshops.* Church personnel and others who might be interested could profit from workshops.

7. *Assistance in project planning.* The center would not be headquarters for community action programs as such; rather it would offer information and advice (for example, in regard to developing proposals for projects) to those interested in organizing such programs. The center would be an "idea bank," gathering materials from those who have sponsored successful programs and making these materials available to others. It would also be a center for research to determine the best ways for the church to respond to the challenge of the urban crisis.

8. *Orientation of medical personnel.* It is clear to those who are acquainted with the ills of urban living that more medical talent and effort must be brought into the cities. This is the challenge that the urban crisis holds for Adventist medical institutions, whose resources are needed to make healing possible in poverty-stricken areas. Adventist hospitals are not very sensitive to the needs of the poor; and the dynamics of specialization in medicine have led many doctors to the treatment of the disease instead of the patient. An Adventist urban training center could influence the education of future medical personnel to regard the total man in his social setting — with the urban context providing the greatest challenge.

Finally, an Adventist urban training center must be a North American Division enterprise. One important reason is that the urban crisis affects the whole church in North America, not just some of its members or organizations. Another reason is that the various programs of the center would need the cooperation of many schools, conferences, hospitals, etc. And a third reason is that the North American Division is the only structure of the church with access to the necessary resources to deal effectively with the challenge of the cities.

#### REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 This article is adapted from a paper presented at the inaugural meeting of the Urban Service Corps Committee of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, February 10, 1970, in Washington, D. C.
- 2 Alan K. Campbell (editor), *The States and the Urban Crisis* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall 1970), p. 4.