

Population, Planning And Church Policy

by Margaret McFarland

Significant population trends in the United States need to be addressed by church members and administration if the church is to plan effectively to accomplish its mission. Population — its size, composition and location — is the most basic datum for planners of all types. Planning as a profession has historically been concerned with urban development and land use, that is, with setting goals, objectives and policies for the built environment — for the configuration of streets, parks, homes and industries — and has relied on zoning as the implementation mechanism.

However, planning more broadly defined, as a methodical approach to making estimates of future trends and pursuing policies and programs in order to accomplish specified goals in that future, can be applied to any field. As an apocalyptic church, a church calling all God's children to a concern with the future, the Seventh-day Adventist Church should take a "planning" approach to church policy — church operations.

Population trends, therefore, as the basic data of all planning, are crucial to the church

in attempting to accomplish its mission in the twentieth century. Four issues of population deserve attention: urbanization, suburbanization, relocation and composition.

First, urbanization. As of 1975, 73.2 percent of Americans lived in metropolitan areas, while only 4.2 percent were still farmers.¹ Because many Seventh-day Adventist institutions, schools and administrative offices are not in these metropolitan areas, many Adventists are unaware of urbanization. This is not to say that Adventist locations — Berrien Springs, South Lancaster, Collegedale — are ill advised, but that we must not be blinded to the facts by our immediate surroundings. Most people, those to whom we are called to preach the gospel, now live in urban places. This is no longer a nation of farmers and small towns. If we are to preach the gospel, it will have to be done in cities. This fact, of course, has implications for evangelistic techniques.

The tent meeting and six-week to three-month evangelistic campaign will never reach the city dweller. The church needs to reassess the kinds of people who make up this industrialized society — factory workers, insurance brokers, computer programmers, garbage collectors, construction workers and

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a very few farmers. That is not to say that the migrant workers, Appalachian miners and small farmers that have not been incorporated into cosmopolitan America should not concern us, but simply to recognize that the vast majority of people cannot be reached by old methods.

Industrialized and postindustrialized urbanites have different life patterns, and our methods and language must be tailored to meet their religious hungerings. The church needs a major commitment of workers, as well as money, to set up restaurants, day-care centers, art exhibits, concerts, lectures, community colleges and hospitals where the people are, not as an *urban* ministry, but as *the* ministry. In an urbanized and institutionalized society, the ministry must become urbanized. The message remains; the medium must change.

SSecond, suburbanization. Along with the massive population movement from country to city, farm to factory, rural to urban society in this century, a concomitant population pattern has emerged since World War II, the rise of the suburbs. While urbanization has continued, the central city has lost population to the suburbs. Between 1975 and 1976, central cities lost almost 2,000,000 persons, and 75 percent of those leaving moved to the suburbs.² Statistics cannot begin to describe the abandonment of a Cleveland or of a Detroit. This “doughnut phenomenon” affects not only large cities, but also as surely if less viscerally, the Omahas and Toledos of the country.

Complex factors contribute to this blighting phenomenon — from the federal funding of highways and sewers, which provide the infrastructure for development, to racism and the pursuit of the agrarian ideal by individuals. As blacks moved into the old immigrant ghettos, whites did not just move across the street but moved out of town. In order to maintain the Jeffersonian belief that country living was superior, Americans, black and white alike, sought a patch of grass in the suburbs as a sign of an improved quality of life.

The resulting inequity manifests itself in

groceries that cost more where the ability to pay is least, schools that fail to teach, and social and spiritual alienation in the inner city. Massive investments in sewers, roads, stores, houses and churches which still have many years of usefulness are abandoned or underutilized, while a duplicate built environment is constructed in the suburbs, unnecessarily absorbing irreplaceable farmland and raising taxes for everyone.

A move to the urban fringe by even one individual or institution contributes to the deterioration of both city and county. Unless one is a farmer, a move into the cornfields or woods only guarantees that the corn or trees will not be there much longer. This extending of urban areas compounds driving distances and thus contributes to air pollution, removes more productive agricultural land, increasing dependence on chemical fertilizers and reducing the ability of the United States to feed hungry nations, and increases water pollution where septic tanks precede sewer lines and concrete replaces the earth under the rain’s downpour. It is difficult for one person or institution to see the impact it has on the environment, but it only takes a trip to Lake Erie or most any stream in the United States to see the cumulative effect.

The church cannot ignore either the causes or the results of this profligate suburbanization. The church must vigorously oppose racism. First, it must purge its own paternalistic structures and urge from the pulpit Christian brotherhood. Second, while the church may be unable to effectively counteract federal programs and local laws which make suburbanization economically attractive, it need not contribute to it by abandoning its old locations and older buildings. Reuse or revitalization of existing buildings and sites, such as at Loma Linda and Takoma Park, can offer stability to a rapidly urbanizing area in the former case or an aging urbanized neighborhood in the latter.

Such an example of commitment to a neighborhood or city may be the best advertisement the gospel could make. A move to the “country” by an institution such as the General Conference or Columbia Union College is virtually impossible, for suburbia — urban living — will just be relocated.

However, institutionally and individually, it is possible to counteract rather than contribute to suburbanizing trends.

The results of suburbanization and central city decay, the inequity of ghetto life, the alienation of suburbia without community, are also secondary population effects which the church must address. Establishing or

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maintaining churches in central cities would not only help stabilize the community, but also offer an opportunity to carry on a paid reach-out ministry of remedial education, low cost meals, health care and wholesome recreation to those left in the cities. For suburbanites, the community life that Adventists have to offer can fill the “lost” feeling of those who sought a quality of life, but ended up with no connections.

In other words, while the church may counteract some suburbanizing trends, it can recognize and offer a ministry for those locked both in the cities and the suburbs.

Third, relocation. The 1970s have seen a new population phenomenon — no longer is migration from south to north, but the migration is now from northeast to southwest, east to west and north to south for industry and government and, hence, jobs and people. In fact, more than 80 percent of the nation’s population growth since 1970 has been in the south and west. This growth represents a wholesale population shift to the sunbelt states.³

Between 1970 and 1975, Florida experi-

enced the greatest growth of *total* population (1.6 million), closely followed by California, Texas and Arizona. Those states with the largest growth *rates* were Arizona, Florida, Alaska and Nevada. Furthermore, the south as a region added the greatest numbers of people in the first half of this decade, thus reversing the outmigration of the first half of this century.⁴

The growing states are attractive to both industry and government since they generally have lower energy, labor and land costs. More federal dollars — welfare, social security, military and civilian contracts — have been spent in the sunbelt states than in the older industrialized areas of the northeast and midwest. Houston is quickly approaching New York as a big money capital. Furthermore, lower housing costs and warmer climates have attracted large influxes of retirees, particularly in Florida and Arizona, compounding the industrial-government stampede.⁵

The implications for the church are obvious. These growing areas will also see more Adventists, but presently have fewer facilities — churches, hospitals and schools. Will Southwestern Adventist College and Union College be adequate to serve these growing needs? Can we develop a ministry for oil-rich Houston, as well as the retirees of St. Petersburg?

On the other hand, the schools and hospitals of the northeast and midwest may require greater assistance to maintain their financial position. Adventist institutions in these areas may need to be reformulated into community institutions. A continued and revitalized presence in these areas by our churches and institutions can provide services and stability to communities vexed by the problems of declining population. Furthermore, graduates of Adventist colleges and universities in the west ought to reconsider the “lure of the west” and commit themselves to service in such places as New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Indiana.

Flexibility and planning will be necessary to anticipate new trends and accommodate the demands and needs of both the new areas and those churches and institutions left in the older areas.

Fourth, changing composition. The church must consider the changing composition of the American population. The greatest changes are at opposite ends of the population spectrum. Since people are living longer and having fewer children, by the year 2,000 the elderly population is projected to rise from its current 10.5 percent to 12 percent of the population.⁶ Between 1975 and 1976, the number of elderly increased by 529,000, while the number of those under age five dropped by 544,000⁷

These changes are due to changing birth rates. First, the baby boom generation beginning at the end of World War II is nearly

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through college and will continue to create a bulge in the age structure of the population right into retirement. Consequently, the number of the elderly will increase from now to the end of the century. However, the declining fertility rate since 1957, now at .8 percent or about 1.8 children per woman, directly affects the school-age population.⁸ Between 1974 and 1976, the number of children between ages five and 13 dropped 10.1 percent and the number of preschoolers dropped 10.6 percent.⁹ However, as the last of the “baby boom” generation enters the childbearing years of 20-35, the numbers of school-age children will rise again.

Both these features must be anticipated by the church and its institutions. First, the church — local, union and general conferences — should provide retirement centers with individual living units as well as nursing home care in order to accommodate the

growing desire of older persons to be independent for as long as possible. Christian atmosphere for Adventist young people has long been the case, but now there is and will be a growing need to provide centers for the elderly with the distinctive Adventist life style — Sabbathkeeping, Christian companionship and vegetarian cookery. This growing segment of the population also suggests a new avenue for church ministry in offering not only unique hospital care to the community, but also healthful, Christian retirement centers as well.

A second serious problem posed by this change in population composition is declining enrollment at Adventist schools. Retrenchment may be necessary for Adventist educational institutions. Consolidation might be considered, particularly for elementary schools and academies, with an eye to future expansion needs as the children of baby boom parents create another bulge. On the college level, consolidation is probably less desirable, despite the financial burden of maintaining numerous small colleges, since their withdrawal would keenly exacerbate the problems of the communities and churches they left. Some reconsideration of the size, style or focus of each college might be necessary, however, in adapting to the changing age structure.

As enrollments fluctuate, the church administration should consider financial assistance to hard-pressed schools rather than continued increases in tuition. Alternatively, in conjunction with new day-care and elderly-care ministries, the extension of the Adventist school system into an outreach program serving as community schools, similar to the Kettering experiment, might help maintain schools which otherwise would experience the pressure of declining enrollment.

All four of these population factors, then, can be seen as critical elements in planning for the church’s mission in the United States. People, as the object of Christ’s sacrifice, must also be the focus of the church, and most of those people live in cities and suburbs with increasing numbers moving south and west and growing older.

While the urbanization of America will con-

tinue to demand new evangelistic tools, new ways of relating externally, suburbanization demands that the church evaluate its internal decision making, its institutional impact on the surrounding community. Relocation and changing composition of the population must be considered in both its emerging sections—the sunbelt states and elderly as well as the older industrialized states and young —

and programs must be developed to meet the challenge of the new areas and mitigate the impacts on the old.

How the church responds to these population phenomena — the people who need the message of Christ's love — will determine how well the mission of the church is accomplished in America during the coming years.

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