



Discussed: remote
schools, parallel
society, vilification of
urban culture,
majoring in minors,
LIFEdevelopment,
urbanized generation,
strengthening power
of the Holy Spirit

The Parallel Society

By *Tim Puko*

To get from my room at Newbold College to London, the closest city of consequence, I start my journey with a thirty-five minute walk to the train station in the nearest town. The train ride takes another sixty-three minutes. From Waterloo Station, it's another ten to twenty minutes on the tube (subway), depending on the exact destination.

This, apparently, is close. Well, close for an Adventist school. Take, for example, the trip from Andrews University to Chicago: one hundred miles; Loma Linda University to Los Angeles: sixty miles; Friedensau Adventist University to Berlin; seventy-five miles; and the University of Montemorelos to Monterrey, Mexico: forty miles. Although there are schools in close proximity to major metropolitan areas, they are the exception. Distance is the rule—a rule that's hurting the Church.

Church leaders seem to recognize the problem of separation between the Church and the world's cities. At its recent Saint Louis session, the General Conference dedicated a special offering to a Global Mission project called Hope 4 the Big Cities. The project will target at least sixty of the world's

largest cities for evangelistic efforts.

This program may theoretically create hope for these big cities, which are thoroughly void of an Adventist presence, but it creates just as much hope for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, an institution depressed by lack of connection with and understanding of an increasingly urbanized society.

Church members often trumpet the historic Adventist idea of "being in the world but not of the world," but many of them try as hard as possible to avoid being in the world, too. The location of our schools and universities is the quintessential example. Besides the universities listed above, scores of Adventist elementary church schools and secondary boarding schools dot the remote countryside and the far-removed exurbs.



Some were built in these locations for purely practical reasons—primarily cheap and available land. But the directives of Ellen White in the late 1800s also played a role as she encouraged organizations to keep a buffer zone between themselves and the perceived evil cities of the world. In following this advice so thoroughly, the Church has institutionalized a vilification of the world's urban centers, preventing it from reaching the citizens of those centers while creating an insular and unappealing church culture that endangers the progress of Adventism.

I believe in the distinct and logical gospel message of Adventism, and because of that I joined the Church just eight years ago. At the time, I was only a sophomore in high school; my parents had converted two years before. We lived just southeast of Pittsburgh, the metropolitan region with the second fewest Adventists per one thousand in the North American Division.

I went to public schools and secular colleges, where I continued to live outside the larger Adventist culture. My senior year of undergraduate school I rented an apartment one block from a stop on the elevated train system for which Chicago is famous. During graduate school last year, I lived in an apartment in uptown Manhattan, and I took the subway all over New York City, most frequently to Queens, from where I reported on life in the projects.

This year, I moved to England to volunteer at

Newbold College. Here I feel like an alien within the Adventist gates. Before arriving, I had never set foot on an Adventist campus. It seems that I had an atypical Adventist adolescence. I never went to Adventist school, attended Pathfinders, had Adventist friends my own age, or dated an Adventist girl.

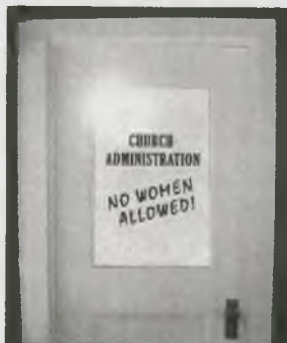
Though Adventist in my heart and theology, my culture is very much that of an urban intellectual. The move from the United States to the United Kingdom shocked me very little compared to the move from an Ivy League school in uptown Manhattan to an Adventist school in Binfield Village.

What I understand now is that Adventists have created, as Newbold vice principal Mike Pearson once explained, a “parallel society” for themselves. Because we educate so many of our own in our own schools—and then employ so many of our own in our own schools, hospitals, and church institutions—we have become concentrated in communities that surround these organizations. The Adventist Church provides the setting and direction not only for spiritual lives, but also for Adventists careers and social lives.

This hurts church members themselves, especially those of the younger generation. Many I met at Newbold this year lack an appreciation of city life and the atmosphere that occurs in the crosshairs of a metropolis's cultural centers and theaters, its prestigious univer-



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sities and museums, and its history and diversity.

Numerous students from the United States that I met here seem to have come from identical backgrounds. They had Adventist parents and all Adventist friends, lived in Adventist communities, and then spent more than fifteen years—from kindergarten through college—in Adventist schools with Adventist teachers and Adventist classmates.

But something was missing. Exposure to diverse ideas and cultures creates the tension that inspires progress and strengthens conviction. The "parallel society" effect limits that exposure in the lives of Adventist youth. In this way, the Church's inability to connect with urbanites and youth intertwine.

There seems to be a population of secular Adventists who resent the Church and ignore the message, though they come from an Adventist heritage and still occasionally participate in Adventist culture.

In part, this has occurred as a result of a backlash against the Church's vilification of urban culture. The secular world seems exotic and appealing to many young people who have been kept from it so much of their lives. While trying to satiate their burning desires for diversity and exploration, they find it necessary to renounce Adventism because they were taught in their formative environments that such quests cannot be reconciled with true Adventism.

More subtly, but more dangerously, this isolation encourages an inward focus for the entire church community. Instead of surrounding themselves with those in need, instead of being surrounded by those who are unaware of the power Jesus can have in their lives, Adventists surround themselves with each other. In this environment, there is a paucity of encouragement to think about how to serve the ignorant, though plenty of encouragement to think about how to correct the enlightened.

I know about this because I fight the urge myself. At Newbold, people's choices for acceptable Sabbath activities have often irritated me, but I shamefully remind myself that this is not a matter of salvation and that I, a fallen human, am ignorant and unfit to judge. Adventists have a reputation for such "majoring in minors," in another words, being legalistic.

Instead of taking care of the poor and widowed, we chastise the person who brings chicken to the church

picnic or the pastor's daughter who wears a spaghetti-strap tank top to vespers. Of course this has long been recognized as a problem in Adventism that has squeezed our youth from the Church. The problem's root is our own self-absorption, caused by isolation. Instead of windows to expand our field of vision, we have mirrors.

Not only will the Church continue to have difficulty retaining its youth in the present situation, it will also have trouble attracting young visionaries who could best move God's message forward. As mentioned at the General Conference Session in Saint Louis, more than 60 percent of the world's population will be urbanized by 2030, if not sooner. In the world's developed regions, almost 85 percent of the population will live in cities by that time.

Globalization, consolidation, high-tech commerce, and multinational corporations are pulling the world's citizens into megalopolises. The more talented and educated a person is, the stronger those forces pull. Many of the people who move to cities can capably differentiate between their positive attributes and opportunities and the depravity that inevitably festers in them.

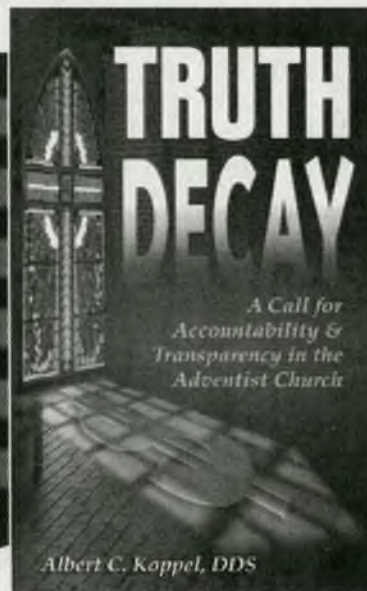
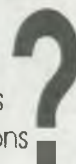
They (read: I) don't enjoy being part of an organization that vilifies the place they call home, a place that they likely learn to enjoy, even if they didn't enjoy it naturally. Although the Church has not legislated this vilification, the location of its institutions and the frequency with which it employs its members establishes a subtle rejection of the independent occupational and lifestyle pursuits of those talented individuals who are drawn to cities.

To use my personal example, should my calling be considered less sacred and less important than the calling of those in the ministry or in the medical profession because I chose the profession of journalism, writing for a diverse audience on issues of the day that can greatly impact readers' lives? I often feel that the church community thinks it should, and that's not a pleasant perception.

If I did not know better, if I had not recognized long ago that the message isn't always well represented by its followers, it would be hard for me to accept one that I felt did not accept me. It is difficult for any organization to reach a group of people when such dissonance arises in relation to the

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Kind words and thoughtful strategies implemented from the top down will not solve this type of problem when the attitude and, therefore, the problem itself has become ingrained in the culture. I am thrilled that church leaders are recognizing the Church's absence in the cities and calling for a solution, but the Church also needs a change of mindset at the grassroots level.

This is not to say that all Adventists should get up and move their entire church community into the closest city, but they can start accepting the city lifestyle as a legitimate alternative. City dwellers are not inherently decadent savages. They resent being treated as such, just as they resent condescending attitudes toward them as moral snobs. Let us not fall into that trap.

Instead, we must first accept others as Christ-accepted people. Then a relationship can be formed between the Church and the cities that involves Adventists who are willing to commit themselves to living happily and respectfully side by side with city dwellers.

In his leadership presentation to the General Conference, Leslie Pollard, vice president for diversity at Loma Linda University, pointed to the wisdom of 1 Corinthians 9 for our time and place. Starting in verse 19, Paul writes, "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.... To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

Paul traveled to, lived in, and served the great cities of Rome, setting the example for today's Christians. Evangelistic efforts in cities cannot be reduced, as they often have been, to hit-and-run operations, where leaders arrive as outsiders and confirm their disdain by leaving as quickly as possible. Only a group of metropolitans, accepted, cherished, and actively supported by the larger church, can lead the Adventist march onward within the great cities of the world.

It is encouraging to read that at least one such program in Great Britain is doing that. The *Messenger*, the British Union Conference magazine, reported that Trans-European Division leaders arrived in Saint Louis touting 12 percent growth during the previous five years. The magazine credited "LIFEdevelopment" as one program helping foster that growth.

"It encourages existing members to make genuine

friendships with secular people, allowing them to belong to church communities before they have become believers," says the article. Cecil Perry, leader of the Church in Britain, told the *Messenger*, "We are re-orientating the minds of our members. They are now thinking outside of their own flock."

Jesus tried to encourage the same rationale among followers as he sought out the citizens of the world. He did not call his disciples and then run for the hills to live in isolation. They lived and ministered in the cities and towns, confronting the persecution of the Pharisees and serving the needs of sinners. He called his followers "the salt of the earth," which is useful only when interacting with other elements, like food or snow.

Furthermore, in Matthew 13 Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the weeds, explaining that they must grow together and not be separated until the harvest. The world is both beautiful and corrupt. By the strengthening power of the Holy Spirit, we Christians can grow amid the corruption and still choose the beautiful.

The young, urbanized generation understands this mingling of sacred and profane. We are cynical and irreverent about fallen humanity. That does not mean we are incapable of loving a merciful God, but we cannot freely give our trust away to a church—a fallible institution. We've seen great political leaders and clergymen proven to be corrupt liars, and we are reluctant to give our faith away only to have our hearts broken again.

Our trust can only be earned with love, loyalty, and verifiable facts. We need to be convinced intellectually, exposed to a diversity of thought and culture, and put in an environment open to questions, disagreement, and confusion. We need to be accepted for our unique and modern talents and the desires they create, no matter how unorthodox or frightening they may seem to church folk.

Only if the Church removes the safety barriers of separation between itself and the cities—all those miles of country road—can the young and cosmopolitan be expected to remove barriers of their own that separate them from the Church.

Tim Puko recently graduated from the Columbia University School of Journalism.