

Discussed: Flesh pots, smoked halibut, Mrs. Kellogg, A. G. Daniels, T. A. Van Gundy, mortality studies, carnivores, Gary Fraser

# The Myth of Vegetarianism

By Keith Lockhart

In Andy Nash's entertaining memoir of his Adventist upbringing in the 1970s, he recounts the story of a church potluck attended one Sabbath by a non-Adventist family. Anxious to make a contribution, the visitors rushed off to the local Kentucky Fried Chicken and returned with a large bucket of drumsticks that they placed on the buffet table.

The church members, uncertain as to how they should react, at first passed over the chicken and headed for that standard fare of the Adventist potluck, the Special K Loaf. Then the pastor of the congregation coolly approached the bucket and helped himself to a juicy drumstick. A hush descended over the hall, we are told, "not unlike the silence just before an avalanche." Then, as one, the church members descended in a frenzy on the fried chicken.<sup>1</sup>

An embroidered tale perhaps, but one that brings to the fore an enduring misconception about the Church: the idea that Adventists are vegetarians. It is a myth perpetuated in most of the information one reads about Adventism in reference works and on the Internet. The entry on Adventism in the current *Encyclopedia of Christianity* states that Adventists "embrace vegetarianism."<sup>2</sup> An article on the Church posted on the Religious

Movements Web site says that "a large proportion" of Adventists practice vegetarianism, and CNN's interactive Web food pages simply state that Seventh-day Adventists "are vegetarians."<sup>3</sup>

It is not surprising that non-Adventist sources say this kind of thing since this is an image the Church is keen to foster. In a book on the Adventist lifestyle prepared for new believers by the denomination in 1987, prospective members are informed that "many Adventists choose to be vegetarians."<sup>4</sup> A new member writing to the *Adventist Review* in 2003 was certainly under the impression that "most Adventists are vegetarians," whereas the pro-Adventist SDA Today.net declares that the "majority of Adventists are vegetarians."<sup>5</sup> The image is further reinforced by the fact that only vegetarian food is served in the cafeterias of church institutions, except in hospitals that may cater to non-Adventist patients.



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Yet even a passing look at Adventist history reveals that vegetarianism as a lifestyle choice has never actually taken hold in Adventism. Reviewing the progress of health reform in the denomination up to 1891, John Harvey Kellogg reported that vegetarianism among church members was practically nonexistent. Indeed, Adventists had come to the perverse conclusion, as far as he was concerned, that “good beef steak was necessary for good health.” Furthermore, camp meeting food stands included “dried beef, smoked halibut, . . . codfish, smoked herring,” and “sundry coils of sausage.” Among “the families of the denomination,” he gloomily concluded, “there are probably to be found few indeed who do not daily gather about the flesh pots.”<sup>6</sup>

Battle Creek Sanitarium, however, which Kellogg ran, also served meat. A sanitarium menu dated in 1888 shows beef steak and roast lamb among the options.<sup>7</sup> Ellen White, who introduced vegetarianism into the denomination with her health visions, had herself continued to eat deer, duck, chicken, oysters, and herring.<sup>8</sup>

There was a final effort in the last decade of the nineteenth-century to convert Adventists to vegetarianism, led principally by Kellogg. In the early 1890s, he eliminated flesh foods from the sanitarium menu, and in 1894 Ellen White at last gave up meat.<sup>9</sup> But most Adventists did not go down the same road, among them Kellogg’s wife.

As superintendent of “an experimental kitchen and a school of cookery” at Battle Creek Sanitarium, Mrs. Kellogg published a general cookbook in the early 1890s.<sup>10</sup> Despite some introductory remarks about ani-

mal food being “by no means necessary for the proper maintenance of life or vigorous health,” a huge section of the book was devoted to the selection, preservation, and preparation of meats. Recipes were offered for beef, mutton, poultry, game, fish, and shellfish such as lobster and crab.<sup>11</sup>

Mrs. Kellogg specifically omitted pork, prior to the Church as a whole prohibiting the use of all “unclean” flesh after S. N. Haskell became the first Adventist to expound the Levitical dietary laws in 1903.<sup>12</sup> But the case for full vegetarianism was lost for good later in the decade when Kellogg, who might have swung the Church around, was expelled from the denomination in 1907, and when the General Conference president, A. G. Daniells, successfully ruled against Mrs. White’s belated wish to make vegetarianism a test of fellowship in 1908.<sup>13</sup>

It was not just the fact that Daniells, the Church’s longest-serving president, was famously a carnivore himself. He probably also understood the members rather better than the prophetess. For if she had prevailed, and vegetarianism had become a requirement of church membership, a vast proportion of Adventists, including some top leaders, would have been disfellowshipped at a stroke.

One thing that may have worked against vegetarianism was Adventism’s rural constituency. Many lay members at the beginning of the twentieth century were farmers, who presumably were habituated to eating the meat of farm animals.<sup>14</sup> As that farming base declined, more church members did become vegetarians. The trend was helped in the 1920s and 1930s by Adventist

entrepreneurs such as T. A. Van Gundy, who developed new lines of soy-based products, and Jethro Kloss, author of the famous vegetarian book, *Back to Eden*.<sup>15</sup>

From the 1940s, Adventist manufacturers like Loma Linda Foods and Worthington Foods started developing meat analogues that may also have enabled some Adventists to wean themselves off meat.<sup>16</sup>

However, a survey conducted in 1958 among pupils who attended Adventist schools in California found that only 27 percent followed a vegetarian diet. When the children were asked to pick out their favorite food from a selection of several different meat and non-meat dishes, most chose fried chicken. The lowest number opted for veggieburgers.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1990s, Monte Sahlin's research consistently showed that only about 28 percent of church members always practiced vegetarianism, and only 27 percent thought "a great deal" of emphasis should be placed on it.<sup>18</sup> A health survey of delegates at the General Conference session of 2000 produced a figure of 30 percent vegetarian, still a very low proportion considering that the individuals who attend the event are almost entirely administrators, ministers, and other employees—in other words, those most committed to the denomination.<sup>19</sup> Among the Church's ethnic minorities, vegetarians are even scarcer.<sup>20</sup> Only 7 percent of Adventism's adult Hispanic membership abstain from meat.<sup>21</sup>

The only surveys that appear to contradict these

findings are the Adventist Mortality Study (AMS), which tracked Adventists in the 1960s, and the Adventist Health Study (AHS), which did the same during the 1970s and 80s. They each give a figure of around 50 percent vegetarian for the membership.<sup>22</sup>

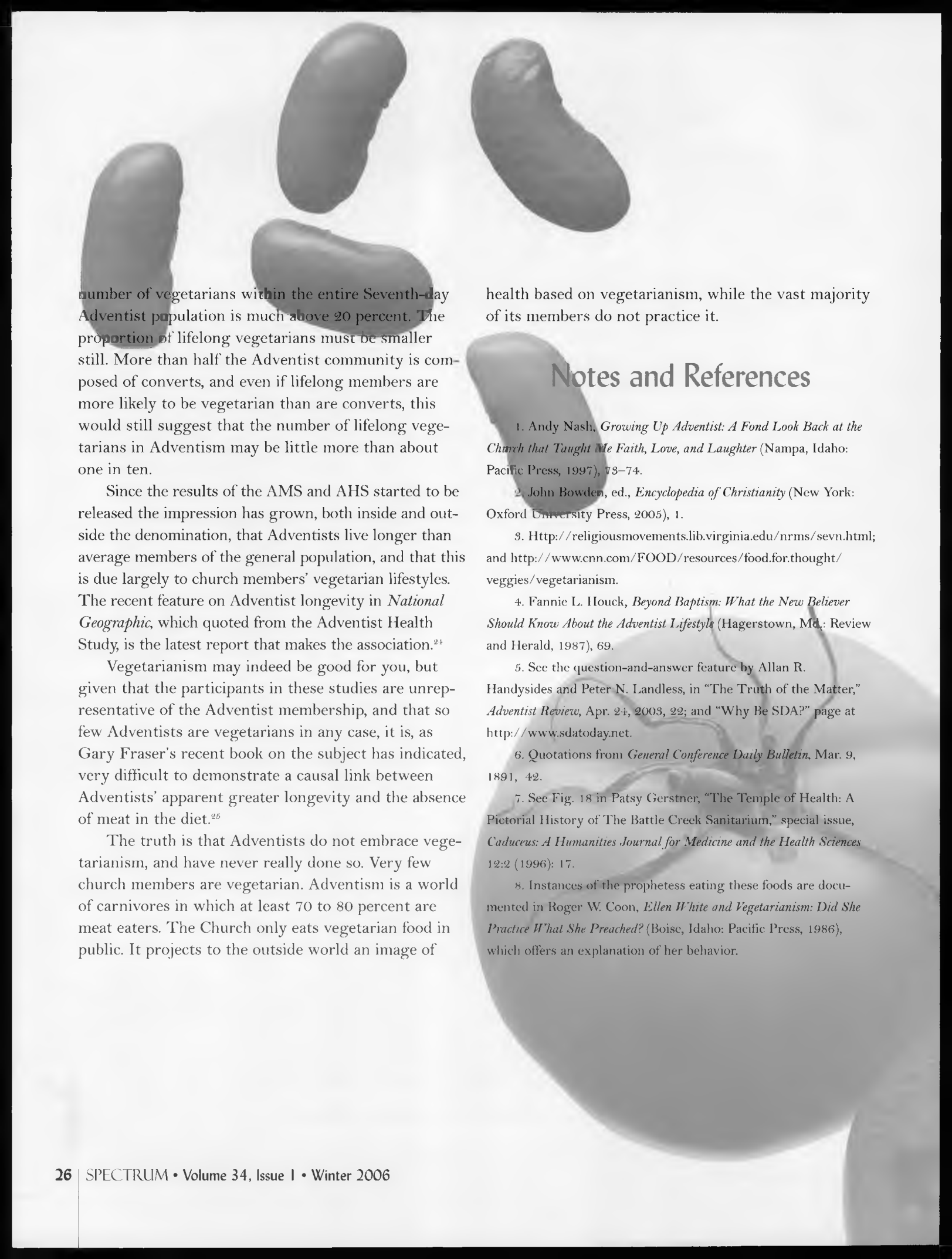
However, this includes many occasional carnivores, and the number of those who never ate meat was much lower—less than 30 percent.<sup>23</sup> But even this proportion probably overestimates the number of vegetarians within the Adventist population as a whole, for both studies were conducted among well-educated, white volunteers in California. A well-educated non-Hispanic white Adventist is more likely to be a vegetarian than a less well-educated white Adventist, or a black or Hispanic Adventist of any educational level.

In addition, it is likely (though difficult to demonstrate from existing data) that volunteers for the Seventh-day Adventist health surveys are more likely to be vegetarians than those who do not participate, and possible that vegetarianism may be more common among Adventists in California than elsewhere.

The results of the mortality and health studies, which reflect the Adventist lifestyles of the 1960s and 1970s, are therefore in line with those of more recent surveys in suggesting that the number of vegetarians is under 30 percent. However, given that church-run surveys usually include only the 60 percent or so of the membership in regular contact with the denomination, the proportion of vegetarians within the total Adventist population is probably actually lower.

In fact, there is little reason to suppose that the





number of vegetarians within the entire Seventh-day Adventist population is much above 20 percent. The proportion of lifelong vegetarians must be smaller still. More than half the Adventist community is composed of converts, and even if lifelong members are more likely to be vegetarian than are converts, this would still suggest that the number of lifelong vegetarians in Adventism may be little more than about one in ten.

Since the results of the AMS and AHS started to be released the impression has grown, both inside and outside the denomination, that Adventists live longer than average members of the general population, and that this is due largely to church members' vegetarian lifestyles. The recent feature on Adventist longevity in *National Geographic*, which quoted from the Adventist Health Study, is the latest report that makes the association.<sup>24</sup>

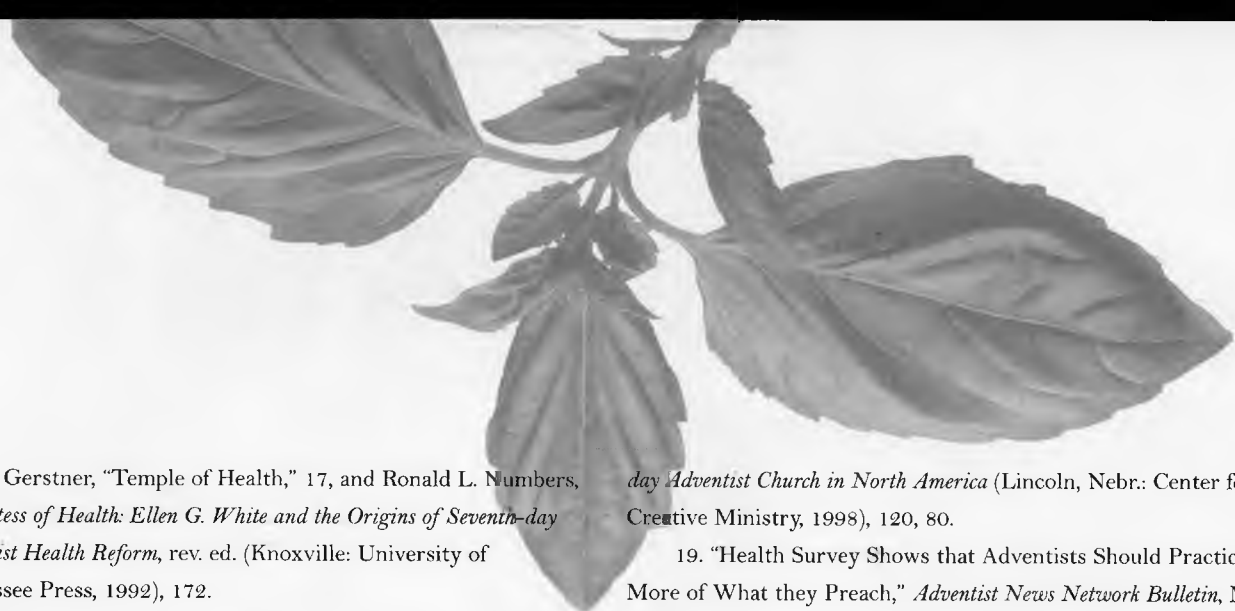
Vegetarianism may indeed be good for you, but given that the participants in these studies are unrepresentative of the Adventist membership, and that so few Adventists are vegetarians in any case, it is, as Gary Fraser's recent book on the subject has indicated, very difficult to demonstrate a causal link between Adventists' apparent greater longevity and the absence of meat in the diet.<sup>25</sup>

The truth is that Adventists do not embrace vegetarianism, and have never really done so. Very few church members are vegetarian. Adventism is a world of carnivores in which at least 70 to 80 percent are meat eaters. The Church only eats vegetarian food in public. It projects to the outside world an image of

health based on vegetarianism, while the vast majority of its members do not practice it.

## Notes and References

1. Andy Nash, *Growing Up Adventist: A Fond Look Back at the Church that Taught Me Faith, Love, and Laughter* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1997), 73–74.
2. John Bowden, ed., *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1.
3. <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/sevn.html>; and <http://www.cnn.com/FOOD/resources/food.for.thought/veggies/vegetarianism>.
4. Fannie L. Houck, *Beyond Baptism: What the New Believer Should Know About the Adventist Lifestyle* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1987), 69.
5. See the question-and-answer feature by Allan R. Handysides and Peter N. Landless, in "The Truth of the Matter," *Adventist Review*, Apr. 24, 2003, 22; and "Why Be SDA?" page at <http://www.sdatoday.net>.
6. Quotations from *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, Mar. 9, 1891, 42.
7. See Fig. 18 in Patsy Gerstner, "The Temple of Health: A Pictorial History of The Battle Creek Sanitarium," special issue, *Caduceus: A Humanities Journal for Medicine and the Health Sciences* 12:2 (1996): 17.
8. Instances of the prophetess eating these foods are documented in Roger W. Coon, *Ellen White and Vegetarianism: Did She Practice What She Preached?* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1986), which offers an explanation of her behavior.



9. Gerstner, "Temple of Health," 17, and Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: Ellen G. White and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventist Health Reform*, rev. ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 172.

10. Mrs. E. E. Kellogg, *Science in the Kitchen* (Chicago: Modern Medicine, 1893), 3.

11. *Ibid.*, 391, 389–416, 392.

12. See Ron Graybill, "The Development of Adventist Thinking on Clean and Unclean Meats" (E. G. White Estate pamphlet, 1981), 5. It should be noted, however, that although the Church appears to have adopted these laws from early in the last century, and that Adventists have followed them much better than they have vegetarianism in general, they were not put into the denomination's fundamental beliefs in 1980.

13. On the latter, see Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, 173–74.

14. Adventists were still disproportionately involved in agriculture in some parts of the United States in the 1930s. See Walter R. Goldschmidt, "Class Denominationalism in Rural California Churches," *American Journal of Sociology* 49, no. 4 (1944): 348–55.

15. See Karen Iacobbo and Michael Iacobbo, *Vegetarian America: A History* (Wesport: Praeger, 2004), 157.

16. Information on Loma Linda Foods can be found in the *SDA Encyclopedia*. There is also a useful online vegetarian history at the Soyfoods Center Web site at <<http://www.thesoydailyclub.com/SFC/historyofsoybean.asp>>, which discusses Loma Linda and Worthington Foods in a chapter devoted to Adventism.

17. Irma Bachmann Vyhmeister, "A Survey of Children's Food Attitudes and Habits in Five Southern California Seventh-day Adventist Schools" (Master's Thesis, College of Medical Evangelists School of Graduate Studies, 1958), 57, 14, and Fig. 4.

18. Monte Sahlin, *Trends, Attitudes, and Opinions: The Seventh-*

*day Adventist Church in North America* (Lincoln, Nebr.: Center for Creative Ministry, 1998), 120, 80.

19. "Health Survey Shows that Adventists Should Practice More of What they Preach," *Adventist News Network Bulletin*, Mar. 15, 2001.

20. Sahlin, *Trends, Attitudes, and Opinions*, 120; and Gary E. Fraser in *Diet, Life Expectancy, and Chronic Disease: Studies of Seventh-day Adventists and Other Vegetarians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15, on black Adventists.

21. Johnny Ramírez-Johnson and Edwin I. Hernández, *AVANCE, A Vision for a New Mañana: Report of the Study of the Hispanic Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America* (Loma Linda, Calif.: Loma Linda University Press, 2003), 88.

22. The respective figures for the AMS and AHS can be found in Roland L. Phillips, "Role of Life-style and Dietary Habits in Risk of Cancer among Seventh-day Adventists," *Cancer Research* 35, no. 11 (1975): 3513, and W. Lawrence Beeson, et al., "Chronic Disease Among Seventh-day Adventists, A Low-Risk Group," *Cancer* 64, no. 3 (1989): 570. For more on the design of the AMS and AHS, see Fraser, *Diet, Life Expectancy, and Chronic Disease*, 279–87.

23. See Table 2, Phillips, "Role of Life-style and Dietary Habits," 3514; and Fraser, *Diet, Life Expectancy, and Chronic Disease*, 12.

24. Dan Buettner, "The Secrets of Long Life," *National Geographic*, Nov. 2005, 22–27.

25. Fraser, *Diet, Life Expectancy, and Chronic Disease*, 9, 12–13.

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Keith Lockhart has just completed, with Malcolm Bull, the second edition of their book, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream*. It will be published by Indiana University Press in the fall of 2006.

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