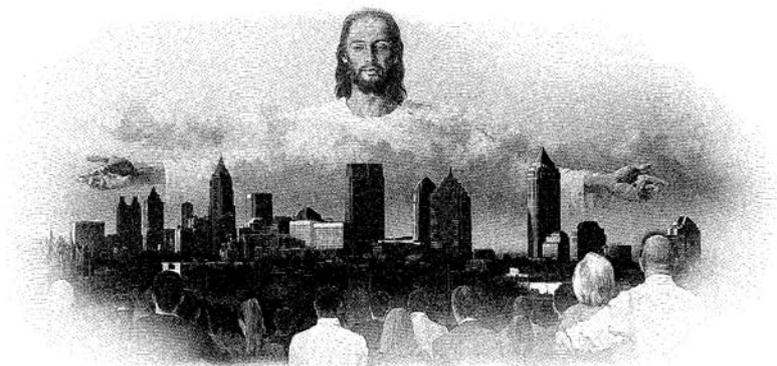


City Ministry¹ in the End Time



SABBATH—SEPTEMBER 10

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Acts 18:1–28; Exodus 2:23–25; Matthew 13:3–9, 18–23; John 15:12, 13; 2 Peter 3:9.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘Also work for the success of the city I have sent you to. Pray to the LORD for that city. If it succeeds, you too will enjoy success’ ” (Jeremiah 29:7, NlrV).

THE THREE ANGELS' MESSAGES call for the gospel to be preached to “every nation, tribe,² tongue [language], and people” (Revelation 14:6, NKJV). So, wherever people live, the message must be brought to them. And because so many now live in cities, to cities we must go.

In fact, the importance of city work intensified (became stronger) in 2007. At this time, the United Nations declared that for the first time in recorded history, the majority of the world's people were living in city areas. Today, city ministry has become the main focus (important point) of the Seventh-day Adventist mission plan.

In many nations, Adventist outreach has done more in the small towns and farming areas than it has in the cities. Surveys have shown that in some big cities most people have never heard of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. So they know nothing of the “three angels' messages.”

It is clear that to reach out to the world, we must reach out to the cities.

DEFINITIONS

1. ministry—work done for God.
2. tribe—a group of people that includes many families and relatives who have the same language, customs, and beliefs.

THE NATURE OF CITIES (Acts 18:1–28)

Cities bring together many different cultures, geographic groups, languages, and religions. In the past, each group had its place or territory in a city. More and more today, people of all kinds live next door to one another throughout city areas. These close living arrangements create problems and risk sometimes. But they also provide (give) great opportunity for sharing the gospel. People in cities can be more broad-minded about new ideas. They also can be more willing to listen about new religions than are those who live outside the cities. Cities could give church workers a greater opportunity to reach many people who otherwise might never know the Seventh-day Adventist message.

Read Acts 18:1–28 to find one example of how Paul did church planting in cities. What points can we learn from what he did there?

In these city hubs (busy centers), there were many languages, cultures, and geographic and ethnic³ groups, just as cities have today. Paul found certain kinds of people with whom he connected. He found people who shared his connections to the Jewish faith, to Roman citizenship, and to the tent-making business in which he was trained. He used these skills to support himself. He lived in the house of a couple who became believers and evangelists⁴ themselves. He taught in the synagogue⁵ until he was kicked out, and then he started a house church in the home of a believer. He trained and coached enough new believers so that when he moved on, he could choose people to lead the group.

Clearly, Paul understood and was comfortable working in cities with their different groups of people (read also 1 Corinthians 9:20–23). He knew how to adjust to the environment that he was in. And he learned how to present the truth in order to best meet the needs of those he was trying to reach.

How can we as members, and our local church as a whole, be trained better to mix with our communities so that we can reach them?

DEFINITIONS

3. ethnic—having to do with a person's or group's race.

4. evangelists—preachers who travel from place to place spreading the good news of Jesus.

5. synagogue—Jewish place of worship.

A HURTING PLACE (Romans 8:22)

As Christ made His way through Jerusalem, Capernaum, and other cities of His time, the sick, disabled,⁶ and poor crowded around Him, the Healer. His heart went out to suffering people.

In the city, there is more of everything—more people, more buildings, more traffic, and more problems. This creates a real challenge for churches. Those sharing the gospel cannot overlook the great needs of people around them and preach the message alone. To do so makes the message meaningless. If our actions do not show the love, mercy, grace,⁷ and hope of which we speak, then what we speak will be powerless. People will receive the message as just another one of the many voices competing for (trying to win) their ears.

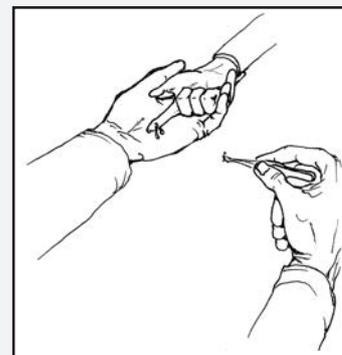
Read Exodus 2:23–25; Exodus 6:5; Psalm 12:5; Romans 8:22; and Job 24:12. What is the message for us found in these verses?

Our world is a hurting place. It groans (cries of suffering) under the weight and suffering of sin. None of us, no matter who we are, escapes this fact.

This pain also offers us powerful opportunities for witnessing. But we need to be careful. We need to think about how non-members think of a church. Is it a giving and helpful church in the neighborhood? It is also important to understand the difference between community events and an ongoing service that meets and cares for needs. There is a difference in the minds of a community between a church that gives food to families once a year during a holiday and one like a certain Adventist church planted in a large city.

What does this church do? It meets in a community center that operates on a daily basis. People can go there any morning and get a hot breakfast. And it is not even a large church. It has only about seventy-five members. But they are very faithful in serving the needs of their neighbors in a city neighborhood. This is a great work, but it takes faithfulness and responsibility to help those in need.

Imagine the influence on our communities if all our churches were doing something to help with the groans that are surely rising up in our neighborhoods.



The pain of the world offers us powerful opportunities for witness.

DEFINITIONS

6. disabled—people who have a physical or mental disability (a loss of powers). Someone who is unable to perform one or more natural activities (such as walking or seeing) because of illness or injury and so on.

7. grace—God's gift of forgiveness and mercy that He freely gives to us to take away our sins.

SOWING AND REAPING⁸ IN CITIES (Matthew 13:3–9, 18–23)



The church must plan to improve the soil of the community by removing the rocks and pulling up the thorns.

DEFINITIONS

8. reaping—cutting and collecting a crop from a field.
9. parable—a short story that teaches a moral (having to do with right or wrong) or spiritual truth.
10. evangelistic—having to do with traveling from place to place to preach the good news of Jesus.

Read Matthew 13:3–9, 18–23. This is a well-known story. But how can it help us to understand how to minister (serve) and to witness to our communities, including the cities?

This parable⁹ has a country theme. But it is more important in our understanding of city ministry than it is for work done for God in small towns and farming areas. This is because city areas have different “soils.” This fact explains why it is more challenging to hold evangelistic¹⁰ meetings in cities than in farming areas.

Different soil conditions offer different kinds of results. We need to study the soil conditions before investing in evangelistic work. After studying the community “soil,” your church may discover it has limited “good ground” in its area. So you must plan to improve that soil by softening the hard pathways, removing the “rocks,” and pulling up the “thorns.” For evangelism to be successful, the church must work ahead of time, preparing the soil. This work can make a great deal of difference in how successful an evangelistic campaign can be.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4, the Bible teaches about spiritual gifts. It says there are many different gifts but only one mission. The types of soil mentioned in the parable about soil conditions and sowing seed show the need for many different gifts to be included in reaching the cities. In the large cities, “men of different gifts are to be used for God’s work. . . . New methods must be introduced. God’s people must awaken to the needs of the time in which they are living.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, page 70. Through the gift of prophecy (special messages from God), she saw what is necessary to have successful city ministry. It is even more necessary today to use different methods and gifts in our plan to reach cities with many different kinds of people. A single program or a large project will not gain much success over time. A big city system swallows such programs, and within a few weeks there may be no example of success. More needs to be done beforehand.

Think about those you are trying to witness to. In what kind of ground are they? How can you help prepare the soil better?

MAKE IT PERSONAL (John 15:12, 13)

Read John 15:12, 13; James 1:27; and Galatians 6:2. Together, what are they saying to us that is so important for any serious outreach?

The very large size of city populations makes it easy to lose sight of the fact that faith is personal. The bottom line in reaching the cities, or any other place, is helping each person to find a personal relationship with Christ. Research has shown that many converts to the Seventh-day Adventist Church say that they joined because of a relationship with an Adventist friend.

Plowing the ground, planting seeds, taking care of young plants until harvest, and reaping the harvest—all of these things work best when new believers have a strong relationship with church members. We need to learn how to be friends with people. We need to learn how to listen to them. We need to learn how to love them. If these are important for any outreach, they are much more important in city ministry. In big cities, people can feel lost and uncared for.

A small-group ministry in a large city might begin as a “house church.” An example of such a house church in a large city can be found in the New Testament (Acts 2:46). Or it may simply be small groups within a larger church group. Suppose there is a city neighborhood or suburban town that does not have a local church. Or suppose there are three or more Seventh-day Adventists. Then some kind of small group should be organized and begin to operate in that community. (Read Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*¹¹ for the Church, volume 7, pages 21, 22.)

This method is important for city ministry for several reasons. One reason is that there are different cultural and geographic language groups and also high-income and low-income groups to be reached within the hundreds of communities and groups in even medium-sized cities. There must be small church programs working with each of these groups, or Christ’s mission will not be completed.

Small-group ministries also are needed because of how difficult it is for believers to follow Jesus in the city. There are many temptations and challenges and people of different faiths and beliefs. Some believers simply give in to the pressures and drop out of church. Others may become hard-headed. They want to protect their feelings and become insensitive to (without feeling for) the people around them who need a loving example of Jesus.



We need to learn how to be friends with people. We need to learn how to listen to them. We need to learn to love them.

DEFINITIONS

11. *Testimonies*—the writings of Ellen G. White.

REACHING OUT TO THE CITIES (2 Peter 3:9)



People face many temptations used by the enemy of souls to trap them and keep them chained to sin and the world.

DEFINITIONS

12. universal—available for everyone who believes in Him.
13. coverage—all those who are covered.
14. revival—growth after a long time of no growth or activity. To come alive again spiritually.
15. reformation—the act or process of improving something or someone by removing or correcting faults, problems, and so on.

No one is saying that outreach and ministry are easy. The fact is, they are not. Humans are sinful and not naturally spiritual. As Paul said: “We know that the law is holy. But I am not. I have been sold to be a slave of sin” (Romans 7:14, NIV). If Paul says that about himself, what about those who do not know the Lord or who have never had a life-changing experience with Jesus?

And if our natural sinful natures were not bad enough, cities have always been known for their terribly bad influence on people. People face many temptations used by the enemy of souls to trap them and keep them chained to sin and the world. So, it is no wonder that outreach to cities is not an easy job. But it is a job that must be done. We as a church need to be faithful to our work.

What do 2 Peter 3:9 and 1 Timothy 2:4 say to us about the importance of outreach in general?

According to the Word (the Bible), Christ’s death was universal.¹² It covered all people from Adam and Eve and all who follow. This coverage¹³ includes the endless crowds of people living in the great cities of the world. They too need to hear the great truths that are so important and dear to us.

“There is no change in the messages that God has sent in the past. The work in the cities is very important for this time. When the cities are worked as God would have wanted, the result will start a powerful movement such as we have not yet witnessed before.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry*, page 304.

The call to reach the cities is personal. It is a call to a deeper experience with Christ ourselves. It also is a call to act as a go-between for those who do not know Him yet. And it is a call to take part in the planning and operation of God’s work in cities. It is built completely on the foundation of revival¹⁴ and reformation.¹⁵ And this work is going to be done only by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Read Romans 10:14, 15. What principle (important rule) is given in these verses for all of us who claim to be followers of Christ? How can we all be more active in outreach and ministry, no matter where we live?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Read *Ministry to the Cities*, (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 2012). It is a collection from the Ellen G. White Estate of most of the Ellen G. White materials on city ministry.

A Seventh-day Adventist expert in city ministries did a study on the index of Ellen G. White's writings. This person wanted to study her counsel (advice) on moving in or out of the cities. Out of 107 articles, 24 articles give instruction on moving out of or establishing church programs outside cities. But 75 articles give directions about moving into the cities to reach the cities. The other eight articles do not take a side on the issue. A church historian summarized Ellen G. White's counsel on city work. When doing local church work, she supported the idea of working from within the city.

What are the plans in your church to reach the cities? Where is your local church located? How close is it to the nearest major city area? No church should think that reaching the cities is not its responsibility. Every Adventist church group needs to make some contribution toward this most important missionary goal. Ignoring the cities and focusing only on reaching the areas outside of them is not being faithful to the mission that Jesus has given us.

"Why should not families who know the present truth settle in these cities? . . . There will be laymen¹⁶ who will move into . . . cities . . . that they may let the light which God has given them shine forth to others."—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 29, 1891.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① Think about the wonderful message that has been given to us. Think about the hope that we have, the promise of a better life now and the great hope of eternity. What are some of your favorite verses that show the hope that we have in Jesus? Why are they so meaningful to you? Share them together in class on Sabbath.

② Imagine what it must be like not to have any hope. What if you thought that this life was it, with all its struggles and work and hurt, and then you died and just rotted in the grave? This is what many people in the cities believe. How then can we learn to have a great love for souls and a willingness to reach out to them, wherever they live?

DEFINITIONS

16. laymen—men and women who belong to a religion but are not ministers (preachers).