

Urban Ministry *in the End Time*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 18:1–28; Exod. 2:23–25; Matt. 13:3–9, 18–23; John 15:12, 13; 2 Pet. 3:9.*

Memory Text: “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (*Jeremiah 29:7, NIV*).

The three angels' messages call for the gospel to be preached to “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (*Rev. 14:6, NKJV*). Thus, wherever people live, the message must be brought to them. And because so many now live in cities, to the cities we must go.

In fact, urgency for city work intensified in 2007, when the United Nations statistical experts declared that for the first time in recorded history, the majority of the world's population was living in metropolitan areas. Today, urban ministry has become the central issue for Seventh-day Adventist mission strategy.

In many nations, Adventist outreach has accomplished more in the small towns and rural areas outside the metropolitan regions than it has in the cities. Surveys have shown that in some major urban complexes, the majority of people have never heard of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and thus know nothing of the three angels' messages.

Hence, it's clear that to reach out to the world, we must reach out to the cities.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 17.

The Nature of Cities

Cities bring together many different cultures, ethnic groups, languages, and religions. Traditionally, each group had its “quarter,” or defined territory. Increasingly, all kinds of people live next door to one another throughout metropolitan regions. This multicultural reality creates risk and complexity, but it also provides great opportunity for the gospel. There is greater tolerance for new ideas, a greater willingness to listen to new religions, than often exists in the more traditional cultural settings outside the cities. The city could provide access to many people who otherwise might never come near the Seventh-day Adventist message.

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

In these urban centers, there was a mosaic of many languages, cultures, and ethnic groups, just as cities have today. Paul found specific types of people with whom he connected. He found people who shared his connections to the Jewish faith, to Roman citizenship, and to the tentmaking business in which he was trained. He used these skills to support himself. He lived in the household of a couple who became believers and evangelists themselves. He taught in the synagogue until he was kicked out, and then he started a house church in the home of a believer. He trained and mentored enough new believers so that when he moved on, he could appoint people to lead the group.

Clearly, Paul understood and was comfortable working in the multicultural, multifaith context of the city (*see also 1 Cor. 9:20–23*). He knew how to adapt 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 individuals, and our local church as a whole, be better equipped to mingle with our communities so that we can reach them?

A Hurting Place

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

In the city, there is more of everything—more people, more buildings, more traffic, and more problems. This presents a real challenge for churches. Those sharing the gospel cannot simply ignore the massive human needs around them and concentrate on the message alone, because to do so discredits the message. If our actions do not demonstrate the compassion, grace, and hope of which we speak, then what we speak will be powerless. It will be heard as just another one of the many voices competing for ears of the masses.

Read Exodus 2:23–25, 6:5, Psalm 12:5, Romans 8:22, and Job 24:12. What’s the message found in these texts for us?

Our world is a hurting place. It groans under the weight and suffering of sin. None of us, no matter who we are, escapes that reality.

This pain also offers us powerful opportunities for witness. But we also need to be careful here. When it comes to how a church is perceived by nonmembers in terms of its neighborliness, it is important to understand the difference between community events and an ongoing service that actually meets needs. There is a difference in the minds of a community between a church that delivers food to families once a year during a holiday and one like a particular Adventist church plant 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 that large of a church. It has only about seventy-five members, but they are fully committed to meeting the needs of their neighbors in an urban neighborhood. This is a great work but one that takes dedication and a sense of obligation to help those in need.

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

Sowing and Reaping in Cities

Read Matthew 13:3–9, 18–23. Though this is a familiar story, how can we take what it teaches in order to help us better understand how to minister and to witness to our communities, including the cities?

Though set in a rural context, this parable is, in fact, more important in urban ministry than in small towns and rural areas, because urban areas have a greater variety of “soils.” This explains why it is more challenging to conduct evangelistic campaigns in cities than in more rural areas.

Different soil conditions produce different kinds of results, suggesting the need to study the soil conditions before investing in evangelism activities. If, after studying the community “soil,” your church discovers that it has limited “good ground” in its territory, you must plan to improve that soil by softening the hard pathways, removing the rocks, and pulling up the thorns. That is, for evangelism to be successful, the church must work ahead of time, preparing the soil. This can make a great deal of difference in how effective an evangelistic campaign can be.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4, the Scriptures teach about spiritual gifts. They say that there are a multiplicity of different gifts but only one mission. The types of soil mentioned in the parable show the need for many different gifts to be included in reaching the cities. In the large cities, “men of varied gifts are to be brought in,” Ellen G. White has written. “New methods must be introduced. God’s people must awake to the necessities of the time in which they are living.”—*Evangelism*, p. 70. Through the gift of divine insight, she saw what is necessary to be effective in urban ministry. It is even more necessary today to have a wide variety of approaches and gifts working within a large, multifaceted strategy. A single campaign or one major project will not achieve much in the long term. The massive scale and complex structure of the city simply swallow such programs, and within a few weeks there is no trace of an impact. More needs to be done beforehand.

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

Make It Personal

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

Because of the massive size of urban populations, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that faith is personal. The bottom line in reaching the cities, or any other place, is individuals finding a personal relationship with Christ. Research has shown that the vast majority of converts to the Seventh-day Adventist Church say that they joined because of a relationship with an Adventist acquaintance. And oftentimes friendships, especially in the case of outreach, involve death to self and a willingness to work for the good of others.

Plowing the ground, planting seeds, nurturing the sprouts to harvest, and preserving the harvest—all of these things work best if there is a strong relational element. 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 essential elements for any outreach, how much more so in urban ministry, in which individuals can, at times, feel lost and uncared for amid the vast and teeming population?

The vital element of urban small-group ministries might take the form of the “house church” as it existed in the New Testament (*Acts 2:46*), or it may simply be small groups within a larger congregation. Wherever there is an urban neighborhood or suburban town that does not have a local church, but where there are three or more Seventh-day Adventists, some kind of small-group should be organized and begin to function in that community. (See Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, pp. 21, 22.)

This approach is essential to urban ministry for several reasons. One is the complex mosaic of cultural, ethnic, language, and socioeconomic groups to be reached within the hundreds of communities and subcultures in even medium-sized cities. Unless there are small groups targeting each of these segments, 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 pressures, temptations, and encounters with alternative faiths and ideologies. Some believers simply give in to the pressures and drop out of church, while others develop a hard shell to protect their feelings and become insensitive to the people around them who need a loving representation of Jesus.

Reaching Out to the Cities

No one is saying that outreach and ministry are easy. The fact is, they are not. Humans are fallen, corrupt, and not naturally spiritual. As Paul said about himself: “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin” (*Rom. 7:14, NKJV*). If Paul says that, what about those who don’t know the Lord or who have never had a life-changing experience with Jesus?

And if our natural fallen natures weren’t bad enough, cities have always been known for their notoriously bad influence on people. People face so many temptations that the enemy of souls uses to ensnare them and keep them bonded to sin and the world. Thus, no wonder that outreach to cities especially is not a simple task; it is, though, a task that must be done, and we as a church, to be faithful to our calling, must be doing it.

What do these verses say to us about the importance of outreach in general?

2 Pet. 3:9 _____

1 Tim. 2:4 _____

According to the Word, Christ’s death was universal: it encompassed all humanity, from Adam and Eve down and all who follow. This would, of course, include the endless masses living in the great metropolitan centers of the world. They, too, need to hear the great truths that are so dear and precious to us.

“There is no change in the messages that God has sent in the past. The work in the cities is the essential work for this time. When the cities are worked as God would have them, the result will be the setting in operation of a mighty movement such as we have not yet witnessed.” —Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry*, p. 304.

The call to reach the cities is personal. It is a call to a deeper experience with Christ ourselves and a call to earnest intercession as well as comprehensive planning and implementation. It is built completely on the foundation of revival and reformation, for it is going to be accomplished only by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Read Romans 10:14, 15. What is being said there that, in principle, applies to all of us who claim to be followers of Christ? How can we all be more active in outreach and ministry, regardless of where we live?

Further Thought: Read *Ministry to the Cities* (Hagerstown, Md.: 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 urban ministry.

A Seventh-day Adventist expert in urban ministries did a study in the Ellen G. White periodical index regarding her counsel on moving in or out of the cities. Out of 107 articles, 24 articles gave instruction on moving out or establishing institutions outside cities. But 75 articles gave specific instruction to move into the cities to reach the cities. The other eight articles were neutral. A church historian summarized Ellen G. White's counsel on city work, showing that relating to institutions, she advocated working from outpost centers outside the city, and when dealing with local church work, she advocated working from within the city.

What are the plans in your church to reach the cities? Where is your local church located in relationship to the nearest major metropolitan area? No church should think that reaching the cities is irrelevant to them. Every Adventist congregation needs to make some contribution toward this most important missionary goal. Ignoring the cities and focusing only on reaching the areas outside the metropolitan regions is not a faithful response to the mission that Jesus has given us.

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

Discussion Questions:

- 1** Think about the wonderful message that we have been given. 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 texts, texts that especially reveal the hope that we have in Jesus? Why are they so meaningful to you? Share them together in class on Sabbath.
- 2** Try to imagine what it must be like not having any hope, just thinking that this life is it, with all its struggles and toils and hurt, and then you die and just rot in the grave. This is what many, especially the vast masses 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?

A Changed Heart: Part 2

by AGNES MUKARWEGO and ALITA BYRD, Rwanda

At church the people greeted me and made me feel that I was part of their loving family. It seemed as though the sermon was preached just to comfort me. I returned the next Saturday and attended the midweek service too.

But a few weeks later, my husband woke up early and stopped me from going to the church. “You have been wandering around on Saturday wasting your time,” he told me. “Today I will be home at noon to eat lunch. Go to the market to buy food; have it ready as soon as I get back,” he demanded.

Reluctantly, I stayed home and cooked lunch for my husband. But he did not come home to eat. The next Sabbath the same thing happened.

The third week, when my husband ordered me to have lunch ready for him at noon, I thought, *The devil is trying to keep me away from church. I will not let him!* I decided to go to church first, then cook when I returned.

After church, I went to the market to buy the fish my husband wanted for lunch. That is when my husband’s friend saw me dressed in my best clothes.

I bought the fish and hurried home to cook them just the way my husband liked them. But again he did not come home. I waited for him all day, but he did not return until late that night. He knocked on the door, and I opened it. He stumbled in, drunk, and began hitting me. I tried to get away from his blows, but he followed me into the bedroom and dragged me back to the front room. Then he left me there, closed the door of the bedroom, and went to bed, leaving me alone in the sitting room.

In the morning when he awoke, I took him some water to wash with, for I did not want him to be angry.

“Why did you hit me last night when I let you in?” I asked him.

“Because you do not respect me!” he shouted. “I told you to go to the market in the morning and buy the fish, but my friend told me that you were at the market late and had been to church. You are not an obedient wife, and this will not continue any longer!” he yelled.

To be continued in next week’s Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Exodus 2:23–25*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand the special mission challenge of urban areas and realize that Jesus’ model of wholistic ministry is the only approach that will bring true success.

Feel: Respond passionately to God’s question: “ ‘Should I not have concern for the great city?’ ” (*Jon. 4:11, NIV*).

Do: Identify specific ways to respond to the challenge of urban mission.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Challenge of the Cities

A The book of Jonah ends somewhat ambiguously, with God posing a pointed question (*Jon. 4:11*). What does this question tell us about God’s essential nature?

B More than one hundred years ago, Ellen G. White wrote that the Seventh-day Adventist Church had neglected the cities (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 537). Why have Adventists ignored the cities? What makes cities so difficult for mission? What makes them so important for mission?

II. Feel: Concern for City Dwellers

A Have you shared with God any fears or worries you may have about being involved in urban mission?

III. Do: Action in the Cities

A God told the exiles to Babylon to pray for “the peace [*shalom*] of the city” (*Jer. 29:7, NIV*). Take time this week to pray for the peace, welfare, and prosperity of a major city in your state or country and its people.

B The psalmist describes the Jewish exiles in Babylon as crying out, “ ‘How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land?’ ” (*Ps. 137:4*). For many Adventists, cities are a “strange land.” What practical ways can we sing God’s song in the cities?

► **Summary:** God was concerned about Nineveh. He told the Jewish exiles to be a blessing in Babylon, and Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Cities have a special place in God’s heart. We cannot follow the Great Commission to go into all the world if we overlook the cities, wherein the majority of the world’s population now live. As we enter the cities, we are called to follow Christ’s method of ministry.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Jeremiah 29:7*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: As we face the growing mission challenge of the cities—a challenge we have largely neglected—we are called to follow Jesus’ example of wholistic ministry.

Just for Teachers: We are called to be a blessing to the cities. This week, examine with your class the mission priorities of your church. Are there areas or people groups that are being neglected? What can be done to reach people in urban areas more effectively?

Opening Discussion: The old story is told of a man standing under a streetlamp, head down, intently looking for something. His friend David stops to help.

“What did you lose, John?” he asks.

“I dropped my watch and can’t find it anywhere.”

“That’s a shame,” says David. “Let me help.”

So, David drops to his hands and knees and for the next 10 minutes helps John look for his watch on the pavement under the streetlamp.

Finally, after covering every last bit of ground several times, he turns to John and says, “Are you sure you dropped it here?”

“Well, not exactly here,” John replies.

“What do you mean?” exclaims David. “Where did you drop it?”

John points out into the darkness. “About 20 meters over there.”

David can’t believe what he hears. “You dropped it over there, but we’ve been searching here all this time? That’s ridiculous. Why on earth have we been looking here?”

“Well, that’s obvious,” says John. “The light’s better here.”

As strange as this may seem, the Christian church has tended to preach “where the light is better.” We’ve spent the vast majority of our resources on areas where there’s already a strong Christian base—where the light is stronger. And we’ve often ignored those parts of the world where the name of Jesus has never been heard.

We can clearly see this in the fact that today the Adventist Church is stronger in rural areas than in cities—where most of the world’s population now lives.

Consider This: Discuss how local church resources—personnel, time, and money—are spent. How much, for example, is spent on maintenance of the church and resources for church members, and how much on outreach to the

community? What steps can we take to direct church resources to where the light is less strong? If you are a church in the city, how can you direct more time and resources to outreach in your community? If you are a rural church, what can you do to help support urban mission?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Scripture indicates that God has a special concern for city dwellers. Today urban areas present a huge mission challenge for the Adventist Church. Review with your class biblical principles for how we can best reach people in cities with the love of Jesus.

Bible Commentary

I. Should We Not Be Concerned? (Review with your class *Exodus 2:24, 25; Jonah 4:11; and Matthew 9:36.*)

When God heard the cries and groans of the Israelites, He “looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them” (*Exod. 2:25, NIV*). Scripture reveals God to be engaged in human affairs and vitally concerned in the welfare of His creation.

We see this clearly shown in the book of Jonah. Nahum describes Nineveh as “the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!” (*Nah. 3:1, NIV*). He asks, “Who has not felt your endless cruelty?” (*Nah. 3:19, NIV*). And yet, the book of Jonah shows us that God loved the people of that city, and it concludes with God asking a rhetorical question: “Should I not have concern for the great city?” (*Jon. 4:11, NIV*).

Centuries later, Jesus showed His concern for crowds of people. On one occasion He had been touring Galilee, preaching, teaching, and healing. No doubt He was physically exhausted, but He was still concerned for the people. Matthew tells us that when Jesus looked at the crowds, He had “compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (*Matt. 9:36, NIV*).

Consider This: Today why is urban outreach often considered so difficult? What fears or prejudices may have made us less than willing to listen to the needs of the cities? What steps can we, as a church and as individuals, take to change our basic attitudes toward urban mission?

II. Seek the *Shalom* (Review with your class *Jeremiah 29:7.*)

Jeremiah 29 contains the only specific recorded instruction from God about how His people should live and work in cities. And His direction

would have surprised, if not shocked, the Jewish exiles in Babylon. He makes it clear that they should not expect to return home in a hurry. That in itself would have been deeply painful for the exiles. Rather than packing their bags ready to go home, they are to make Babylon their home for the foreseeable future—find husbands and wives, plant gardens, and seek the shalom of the city: “But seek the welfare [*shalom*] of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare [*shalom*] you will find your welfare [*shalom*]” (*Jer. 29:7, ESV*).

Shalom, of course, is a rich, multilayered Hebrew word, meaning—among other things—peace, prosperity, welfare. And God is telling them to pray and work for the *shalom* of the city. In doing so, He says, they will find their own *shalom*. This is startling counsel. They are not to set up a separate Jewish enclave in the city of Babylon, which would perhaps be their natural inclination. After all, it would be so much easier if they kept together as a cultural and religious family. Easier to keep the Sabbath, to eat kosher food, to stay separate from idolatrous Babylonian practices, and to comfort each other with shared memories and hopes. But God tells them to do the exact opposite of keeping separate—to engage in the society of their captors, to bring *shalom* to the city.

This instruction should caution any today who might suggest that urban mission can be done through short-term approaches or conducted only from a distance, with only passing contact with the city.

Consider This: Discuss with the class the Hebrew word *shalom*. What specific steps can we take to seek and pray for the *shalom* of urban communities near us?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The Jews exiled to Babylon were alienated emotionally, physically, and spiritually from home. The psalmist describes one of the most poignant scenes in the Bible as the exiles gather together beside Babylonian rivers and weep as they remember their homeland, especially the city of Jerusalem. Their heartless captors order them to sing, but that’s the last thing they feel like doing. They exclaim, “How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land?” (*Ps. 137:4*).

Historically, the Adventist Church has tended to focus its attention and resources on rural areas, and more than one hundred years ago, Ellen G. White said we had “neglected the cities.” So, with some notable exceptions, the cities of this world are “a strange land” for many of us, and we need to learn how to sing the Lord’s song in these challenging mission fields.

Activity: Take the opportunity to explore with your class practical ways we can sing God’s song in urban areas where we may not feel naturally at home, among people who may think and behave differently from us.

To begin with, focus on the closest urban community to the church where you are worshipping. What do church members already know about this community? Does anyone in the class live in this community—or is your church mainly a commuter church, where church members travel some distance to the church each Sabbath?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: If we're going to minister effectively to the needs of urban communities, we need to know what those needs are. We need to study our communities. We're told that when the apostle Paul arrived in Athens, he took time to walk around and "[look] carefully" (*Acts 17:23, NIV*) at his surroundings.

When was the last time we walked through our communities to understand people and their needs better? What are people reading, watching, and listening to? How do they spend their spare time? What are they "worshipping"? (They may not believe in God, but everybody worships something.) What's causing them pain? What's bringing them joy? In the following activity, try to help the class to understand the importance of understanding their community.

Activity: Depending on your resources and the location of your class, choose one of the following activities:

1. If you are located in an urban community, take the class on a 15-minute walking "field trip." Hand out paper and pens before you leave. Ask them to observe and to jot down anything they see under the following categories:
 - A. Wealth of the community
 - B. Needs of the community
 - C. Interests and activities of the community

As you walk together, help direct attention to such indicators as types of shops and services, sporting facilities, community centers. Is there litter and graffiti? Are the parks clean? What activities and events are being advertised?

2. If activity 1 is not feasible, do an "in-class field trip." Ask members to describe their nearest urban center and what they know about it. Discuss how to find out more information about local needs. Some ideas could include reading the local newspaper, shopping in local stores, walking through the neighborhood, or making an appointment to see local community leaders, such as the police chief or fire chief.

After these activities, discuss ways your local church may be equipped to help meet community needs. What specific skills or resources in your congregation could be tapped? How could your presence in an urban area—working and praying for the *shalom* of the city—make a tangible difference? Could parks be cleaner? Poor people be better fed? Families happier? People better able to connect with public resources?