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**NATION-BUILDING: THE
CONTRIBUTION OF THE SDA
CHURCH IN JAMAICA**

Livingston Smith

PhD

In Matthew 16: 18, Christ declares ‘On this Rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’ By his church, I believe Christ meant all believers in him, irrespective of time and place. Miller¹ puts it thus: ‘The church is ecumenical in essence but divided into doctrinal lines into denominations of believers in Jamaica’. This paper focuses on one of the denominations that comprise the church of God.

It is said that one in nine Jamaicans is a Seventh-Day Adventist. Whether or not the one in every nine is committed and active, is quite another question. Irrespective, this is an extraordinary statistic for any denomination to achieve. This essay examines the contributions of this denomination to the Jamaican society. In order give this essay some historical grounding, a brief history of the general SDA church and its genesis in Jamaica precedes this analysis.

A Brief History of the SDA Church

That the Seventh-Day Adventist denomination has a current global baptized membership of some twenty one million and twenty five million adherents is impressive for a church that began out of the speculations of the 19th century William Miller who had taken a special interest in understanding Daniel 8: 14. This chapter mentions that ‘after 2, 300 days, then shall the sanctuary be

¹ Professor Errol Miller’s keynote speech ‘The Church and its Impact on Nation-Building: Real of Imagined?’ Bethel Baptist Church, 60th Anniversary Lecture, November 11, 2015, is an excellent and detailed examination of the contribution of the Christian church, broadly speaking, to Jamaica’s nation-building.

cleansed'. Miller's interpretation of this prophecy was that Christ would return in about 1843. Miller began to preach this in 1831. A popular movement was birthed out of Miller's preaching. Later, Miller would refine his predictions to an exact time frame for Christ's return: between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. However, Christ did not return, and the disappointment left thousands vilified, bewildered, and disillusioned. Remnants of the disappointed group continued to meet; they located the error in Miller's explanation and produced a different way to interpret Daniel 8: 14 and related scriptures. Key names such as James and Ellen White and Joseph Bates emerged to give leadership, and a new denomination, later taking the name of Seventh-Day Adventists, was born.

The SDA Church in Jamaica

The Seventh-day Adventist Church entered Jamaica in 1890, through William Arnold's work as a colporteur. William Arnold was selling religious books in the tiny Caribbean island of Antigua. He sold a book, *The Coming King* to Henry Palmer in Antigua. Palmer sent it to his son, James, in Jamaica. Shortly thereafter, the young Palmer reportedly found a religious tract at the Kingston Wharves where he worked but paid little attention to it until he realised it came from the same publishing house as the book his father had sent him. He wrote to the publishing house, received additional literature, and passed them out in the city of Kingston.

Palmer reportedly gave a tract to a Dr Ross of the Kingston Public Hospital, who, not being a very religious man, passed it to a Margaret Harrison. Harrison, a devout Christian, was immediately fired up with the message and started sharing it with her friends and family members. Soon, they were holding Sabbath worship at her house and then in a rented room on Highholborn Street in Kingston. These were the first recorded Adventist worship services in Jamaica.

By 1903, the church had grown by such leaps and bounds to the extent that the world governing body, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, voted to make Jamaica a conference.²

² Not much has been published on this topic except for a small book entitled *Thy Light Is Come: A Short History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Jamaica*, by Linette Mitchell, and a few unpublished term papers by seminarians at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. Mitchell's

This status meant that the Adventist Church could now formally organise its work throughout the island. Three years later - in 1906 - the World Church organised the West Indian Union with headquarters in Kingston, Jamaica, to manage its affairs in the Caribbean, Central America, and sections of South America.

In a short time, eleven Adventist high and preparatory schools began operations and the Advent message spread like wildfire. Conferences were organised, churches were erected across the country and, by 1959, the West Indian Training School broadened its scope immensely, changed its name to become West Indies College, in anticipation of the dawn of a new era.

By 1962, the year Jamaica became an independent nation, the Seventh-day Adventist Church had positioned itself to become one of the most influential organisations in the country. Having already reorganised itself into East, West and Central Jamaica Conference, the church intensified its operations to meet the needs of the newly independent nation.

Having grown its membership to more than 33, 000 by 1962, the church continued to spread its wings across the country, evangelising, ministering, offering social, educational, and medical services, and setting up more schools, health centres, social and spiritual programmes, geared towards empowering the newly independent society.

Contribution to Education

A well-trained mind is a country's most important resource and the developing of its human potential the single most important responsibility of a progressive society. It is central to development both from the individual and broader societal perspective, as highly educated people are needed to achieve sustained good governance, strong institutions, and a developed infrastructure.³

The SDA church entered Jamaica in the 1890's, and so unlike such denominations as the Anglican, Roman Catholics, the United

book is a chronological narrative of the development of the Adventist work in Jamaica, focusing on significant people and events.

³ The World Bank Development Report 2008, for example, explains that education is central to development both from the individual and broader societal perspectives. For the individual, education improves health and nutrition, increases productivity and, earnings--and reduces inequality. This report details a host of other benefits of education to the society and the individual.

Church, Methodists, Baptist, Presbyterian, et cetera, was not part of the early thrust of denominational provision of education in Jamaica that began just after emancipation.⁴

However, once the SDA began to grow its numbers in Jamaica, the provision of educational opportunities was a main thrust of this denomination. It may not be well known that the SDA currently operates 7, 500 educational institutions worldwide in some one hundred and fifty countries, one hundred and eighteen being tertiary institutions. This involves some one and half million students. This is bettered only by the Catholic Church.⁵

The SDA Church in Jamaica has been making a stellar contribution in this area. It operates eleven high and preparatory schools and one major university, Northern Caribbean University. NCU, granted university status in 1999, is one of the nations three major universities with some five thousand students and graduating up to nine hundred students per year.⁶

The nature of Adventist education is praiseworthy as it sees as its goal character development, and that the biblical worldview must provide the matrix in which the Christian understanding takes

⁴ The SDA Church was not part of some of the most vital contributions that the Christian church made to nation-building in Jamaica just after the emancipation of slaves in 1834. For example, the Free Village Movement was an outstanding success. By 1844 there were 116 of these and the many of the churches on the island had taken part in this movement described by Morris as ‘constructive, radical and transformative.’ With regards to education, it was the denominations that provided elementary education to the children of the newly freed. For example, the Anglican Church used the Negro Education Grant that was allocated by the British Government, to import teachers.

Because of the tremendous work done by the various denominations, by 1900 Jamaica was 14th in the world in the provision of elementary education to its population. Miller, in his assessment, concludes that ‘Prior to independence, from emancipation to independence, the church was the prime mover in creating education capacity.’ See, for a masterful analysis, Professor Errol Miller’s ‘The Church and its Impact on Nation-Building: Real of Imagined?’ Bethel Baptist Church-60th Anniversary Lecture: November 11, 2015. <https://errolmiller.com/the-church-its-impact-on-nation-building/>.

⁵ The SDAs operate one of the largest Christian educational systems in the world. Their first school was opened in 1853 in Buck’s Bridge, New York.

⁶ Since it received its charter, the university has graduated close to 15,000 persons. Its nursing graduates continue to be hailed for their impressive passes in the national nursing exams. Its information technology programme is now considered one of the best in the world, with teams from the Department of Information Science constantly winning international prizes in the prestigious Microsoft Imagine Cup Competition. See various NCU reports as well as Jamaica Gleaner articles- <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20130111/news/news7.html> See also “History of the Northern Caribbean University.” *Northern Caribbean University: A Seventh-day Adventist Institution*. Accessed January 23, 2019. www.ncu.edu.jm/weare.

place, leading to the emphasis on a life of service. For the SDA, true education, with redemption, is virtually the same. ⁷

Contribution to Health Care and Diet

According to Melbourne (2015) ‘Seventh-day Adventist medical work in Jamaica began in 1912. That August, “Massage and Hydropathic Treatment” rooms opened in Kingston with four nurses. This endeavor was highly supported and received recommendations from leading doctors in Jamaica. However, this medical facility discontinued operations in 1918 due to lack of funds. Yet, interest in the medical work persisted. Occasionally, classes in home care were taught at the West Indian Training School. The leaders saw the potential benefits that the medical work could provide as the “right arm of the ministry.”

The account given in the SDA Encyclopedia further explains that:

In the June 1, 1944, the church purchased property in Kingston to build a modern Sanatorium and Hospital with the first phase to be completed in 1945. The next phase involved building a modern 52-bed hospital, including auxiliary facilities for a nurses’ training school, outpatient office, and maternity ward. The members of North Street Church firmly supported the project and, with their own funds, purchased the property on which the facilities would be built. The new hospital, Andrews Memorial Hospital, was named after the church’s first foreign missionary, John Nevins Andrews. When the hospital’s doors were first opened, it was then the most modern hospital on the island. Its impact on Jamaica’s health care environment was significant. The hospital celebrated its 75th anniversary in March 2019. It collaborates with Northern Caribbean University to offer a baccalaureate nursing program. (Melbourne, 2015, p. 5)

⁷ The impact of education on the society must not be underestimated. As UNESCO points out: ‘The impact of improved education permeates the entire labor force, thus supporting links between increasing commitment to education and rising productivity and income. In short, individuals who acquire more years of learning influence the relative opportunities of others in the labor market. In doing so, rising incomes for the educated promote the accumulation of years of schooling for the nation at large (UNESCO-UIS/ OECD 2003).’

‘Education also boosts democratization and functions as an engine for general social cohesion and a means to fight poverty. Better educated citizens are more likely to participate in the democratic process and have a tendency to support democratic regimes over other political systems (Ganimian and Solano Rocha, 2011).’

In addition to the fine reputation of the quality of nurses that NCU graduates and their contribution to the delivery of health care in the country, the Adventists are also well known for the promotion of a healthy lifestyle that is holistic in nature, embodying physical exercise, sunlight, fresh air, a spiritual focus, and a vegetarian diet. Much of this has been influencing the society, especially as persons become more health conscious.

This lifestyle is also well supported by scientific research. There is now a well-established body of research by Adventists which supports a vegetarian lifestyle. Major Western cohort studies have also generally demonstrated vegetarian diet health benefits, such as reduced cardiovascular disease, cancer, and overall mortality rates as well as better mental health (Beezhold et al. 2009; Key et al. 1999; Tonstad et al. 2009).

There is significant documentation that Adventist who practice the diet recommended by their denomination have lower overall mortality, incidence of cardiovascular disease, and many cancers. Vegetarian Adventists have less hypertension, lower blood lipids and C-reactive protein (CRP—associated with inflammation), less diabetes, and lower body mass index (BMI) values, when compared to Adventist non-vegetarians. Vegetarian Adventists have less cardiovascular disease, lower rates of colorectal cancer, and vegans especially have lower rates of prostate, and probably breast cancer, than non-vegetarian Adventists.

Adventists in California live 7.3 years (men) and 4.4 years (women) longer than non-Adventist California men and women, adjusting for educational differences. Higher nut consumption is associated with much lower risk of coronary heart disease, etcetera. ⁸

Social Intervention and Community Outreach

Because of its Biblical perspectives, the Seventh-day Adventist Church regards as germane its involvement in development and relief aid. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) has been established globally as a humanitarian, disaster relief and

⁸ See, for example, Orlich et al, Vegetarian Dietary Patterns and Mortality in Advanced Health Study 2, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PM> . See also, the most widely cited research on the health benefits of the Adventist lifestyle are three prospective-cohort studies, conducted over a period of 50 years at Loma Linda University Health. Collectively known as the Adventist Health Studies, the National Institutes of Health-funded projects evaluate data gleaned from 96,194 Adventists in North America.

community development Non-governmental Organization (NGO). It's concern for the very poor, the deprived, the sick, the malnourished and the victims of natural and man-made disasters, results in the commitment by the Church in using its own funds and resources for the benefit of such needy people.

The work of ADRA in Jamaica is quite considerable in its relief supplies throughout the island. In addition, each church has an outreach arm with a mission to assist the communities in which they are located.

The church also has other outreach activities. For example, the Central Jamaica Conference (CJC) of Seventh-day Adventists, on July 13, 2019, opened doors to its 'Life Hope Centre' for the poor and homeless on the compound of the Mandeville Seventh-day Adventist Church, Mandeville, Jamaica. In this model, those who come for assistance will receive counselling, medical, dental, or other interventions. Yet another area of contribution is youth ministries.

Youth Ministries

With Jamaica's population pyramid showing 29% of below fifteen years, all programmes to reach as many, are vital. The SDA's have a very detailed programme to reach their own young people and to keep them in the church.

Their Pathfinding Programme is well known and is a well-established way of reaching their youth with a tailored programme for each age group. The Master Guide, Adventurers, Pathfinder, and other Adventist Youth programmes teach practical survival skills, discipline through drill, church history and Bible knowledge.

In addition to the above, the Central Jamaica Conference acquired the Camp Verley property for the development of its youth center.

Other initiatives include its first mobile clinic dubbed HYPE, or Helping Young People Engage. HYPE is the coming together of Adventist young people, pooling their resources to serve God and humanity.

The main objective of HYPE is to engage youth in acts of service, while providing healthcare, and promoting lifestyle changes, as well as an intentional sports program to connect youth of the church with youth of the community. It is non-discriminatory and will seek to serve across religions, ethnicity, and political persuasions.

The mobile clinic will go across Jamaica and will engage volunteers throughout the Island to have resource personnel to execute its mission. Funds and medical equipment were donated by the HYPE initiative by The Dental Place Cosmetics and Spa.

Media and Communication

The university's communication studies programme constantly receives applause from media managers for the high-quality students it produces. A recent graduate, Vashan Brown, was voted most outstanding junior reporter, only a few months after being employed to the RJR group. In addition, a recent film festival staged by the department gained the attention of Hollywood producers and Canadian broadcasters, who have expressed an interest in working with Jamaican student filmmakers and producers.

In November 2010, the university took the business of media and communication to another level when it launched its media group, comprising an island-wide radio station - NCU Radio - aired on 91.1, and 91.3 FM, NCU TV on Channel 188 on the Flow digital network.

Contribution to 'Smadidization' and Inclusion

The church, carrying out its mission, believes that each member, as part of the body of Christ, has an important role to play. Each has a gift in so doing, as Miller (2015) points out. We then are transformed into authentic and Christlike servant-leaders through the roles of choir director, choir member, organist, worship leader, lay preacher, elder, deacon, evangelist, prophet, President, pastor, secretary, treasurer et al.

This is an important psychic contribution of what Nettleford had dubbed 'smaddization,' that is, the defiance of inferiority and the bestowment of importance to each child of God in the church. The church and its various activities have drawn together, in 'fellowship and communion' at the Lord's Table, people from various backgrounds and so have been a force for inclusion. I have left what is arguably the most important matter for the last.

Evangelism and Contribution to the Development and Practice of Strategic Evangelistic Strategies.

Perhaps, even more important, is the church's impact on thousands of lives in its unswerving determination to rescue men and women

from crime, immorality, and hopelessness through a rigorous evangelism programme.

As their numbers indicate, SDA's have been most effective through their evangelistic strategies which are as important to nation building as are their educational, health and other thrusts, once seen within the Kingdom perspective.

From the very beginning, the church membership took an active part in the missionary work which included house to house, district to district meetings.

The SDA's developed and perfected the 'tent crusade' style of evangelism. The first tent pitched was in 1894, by Elder F. I. Richardson and the aftermath was overwhelming, resulting in the first organized SDA church in Jamaica at 32 Text Lane, Kingston.

This first tent meeting by F. I. Richardson would mark the beginning of an evangelistic explosion that is now part of the storied legacy of Adventist evangelism in Jamaica. All across the island, for the next one hundred years, laymen and pastors alike would engage in this method of evangelism.

The role of colporteurs must be noted. According to the Adventist Encyclopedia, in the very early years Adventist colporteurs scattered 18,000 Signs of the Times and other periodicals, and 510,450 pamphlets--and tracts distributed. The books sold are as follows: "Patriarchs and Prophets" 2,670, "Prophecies of Jesus" 450, "Helps to Bible Study" 530, "Christ our Saviour" 1,720, "Mount of Blessing" 950, "Gospel Primer" 3,450, "His Glorious Appearing" 5,650, "From Eden to Eden" 5,285, "Steps to Christ" 8,862, trade and miscellaneous books 2,088, besides hundreds of health books; total number of religious books 32,480. As the result of this and other work, there was an interest to learn more of the truth in nearly every district in the island.

G. A. King, colporteur from the United States, writing in 1894, described hundreds of books sold in Kingston which resulted in many accepting the truth, attending meetings, and keeping the Sabbath. Books were sold from one end of the island to the other, resulting in believers springing up all over. A. J. Haysmer testified to the conversion of several families based on Adventist literature. In the early years of Adventism, the majority of the people who

accepted the truth did so because of the direct work of the canvasser or from the publications that they sold.

Another major factor that contributed to the success of the SDAs in Jamaica was the early focus on lay leadership and the enthusiasm and passion with which these local lay leaders embraced the work. Scores of reports testified of active laymen and women preaching, teaching, giving Bible studies, engaging in house to housework, doing public evangelism, and accepting the work as their own. They did not wait on clerical or conference leadership to launch out in new territory. Without pastoral leadership or conference resources, many faithful laymen and women advanced the work of God using their own time, efforts, and resources.

J. B. Beckner described the Jamaican believers as having great zeal for the message and eagerness to take it to others. They were willing to build the Lord's house, make sacrifices, carry stones on their heads, saw lumber, and do whatever was necessary for success of the work.

Conclusions

The SDA cannot claim involvement in such weighty and earlier contributions just after slavery ended, such as the free-village movement, the denominational system of education that emerged around 1834 and onwards, nor the founding of building societies, the first of which was by the Reverend William Gardner of the Congregational Church in 1872.

However, the contribution of the SDA church in Jamaica since their arrival in the 1890's has been enormous and consequential. This essay focused on what it has done in education, health care, youth, communication, and social development as well as its spiritual contribution in molding the nation. Not enough was said about what each believer in their private settings as an SDA Christian does in their workplaces and communities as exemplars of the Christian lifestyle. However, this too must be added their illustrious and profound contribution, under God.

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