Seventh-day Adventists and health: Celebrating 150 years of the Adventist health message

The year 2013 marks 150 years since the beginning of the Seventh-day Adventist health message. On June 6, 1863, in Otsego, Michigan, God revealed through Ellen G. White that Adventists should begin to pay attention to their health and lifestyle. This first major vision on health transformed the Seventh-day Adventist Church to become a leading entity in health and health science around the world.

Health in nineteenth-century America

Health practices at the beginning of the nineteenth century in America were deplorable and far from what we consider normal today. Rennie Schoepflin notes, “In the early nineteenth century, American patients and physicians shared a common understanding of health and sickness that contrasts sharply with that of most Americans today.” Doctors and nurses had little or no education. Tobacco and other deadly drugs were used for medicine, and patients were bled to death. One in six infants died before reaching their first birthday. The average life expectancy was about mid-thirties. Little or nothing was known about nutrition as “fruits and vegetables were largely avoided.” Much was also to be desired about hygiene. Some reports claim that the average American at that time seldom or never took a bath during their entire lifetime.

In this context, health reformers began to appear and appeal for new ways of healthful living. Sylvester Graham, for example, came up with his new Graham diet, teaching people new eating habits. Dr. James C. Jackson established a water-cure institution near Dansville, New York, to heal patients through water and other natural methods.

Initial Sabbatarian attitudes toward health in the 1850s

The majority of Sabbatarian Adventists and their leaders in the 1850s, however, were not interested in health since they were busy preaching the “present truth.” By 1851, the Sabbatarians gave priority to certain theological doctrines that defined who they were, and they were excited to share their faith with others. When some believers, for instance, began to ask if eating pork was not healthy, James White replied that dealing with such health issues “will only distract the flock of God, and lead the minds of the brethren from the importance of the present work of God among the remnant.” Ellen White supported her husband. She wrote in 1858, nearly five years before she received the health vision of 1863:

I saw that your views concerning swine's flesh would prove no injury if you have them to yourselves; but in your judgment and opinion you have made this question a test, and your actions have plainly shown your faith in this matter. If God requires His people to abstain from swine's flesh, He will convict them on the matter... If it is the duty of the church to abstain from swine's flesh, God will discover it to more than two or three. He will teach His church their duty.

But Adventists were forced into the health discussion because of practical
concerns. While they were preaching the present truth, they were suffering and dying from unhealthy lifestyle habits. In fact, Adventism faced the threat of possible collapse because its spiritual leaders did not pay attention to their health.

By the 1860s, for example, James White’s health was failing as he was suffering physically, mentally, and emotionally. Ellen White noted how he dwelt upon “unpleasant memories” from the past that caused him deep emotional distress. He was also upset with those working for him, was easily angered, and had an unforgiving spirit. A lot of her 1863 vision on health, therefore, was directed toward James White and his lifestyle. By 1865, he suffered his first paralytic stroke because of overwork and exhaustion.

J. N. Andrews, who became the first official missionary of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, also reflected on his health habits at that time:

“I was kept from the use of tobacco, and from even tasting strong drink; but I learned almost nothing of the evils of unwholesome food.... I supposed old cheese was good to aid digestion! Do not smile at my folly; unless my memory is at fault, I had learned this out of ‘standard medical works.’ As to mince-pie and sausage, I had no thought that these were unwholesome, unless too highly seasoned, or, as it was termed, ‘made too rich.’ Hot biscuit and butter, doughnuts, pork in every form, pickles, preserves, tea, coffee, etc., were all in common use. Of ventilation I understood almost nothing....

“When I entered the Christian ministry, at the age of twenty-one, I did not enjoy firm health....

“... Had I understood the laws of life in the right use of food, and in the principles of hygiene generally, I could have gone longer than I did... could not rest by day, and I could not sleep well at night.”

J. N. Loughborough, the first historian of the movement, also described part of his diet. “I was a great lover of animal flesh as food,” he wrote. “I wanted fat pork fried for breakfast, boiled meat for dinner, cold slices of ham or beef for supper. One of my sweetest morsels was bread well soaked in pork gravy.” Obviously, Seventh-day Adventism and its leaders needed a turning point.

1863 and onwards

It was in this context that God reminded the Adventists of the importance of health through a vision that Ellen White received in June 1863. Ellen White wrote,

I saw that now we should take special care of the health God has given us, for our work was not yet done.... The work God requires of us will not shut us away from caring for our health. The more perfect our health, the more perfect will be our labor.... I saw that it was a sacred duty to attend to our health, and arouse others to their duty.... We have a duty to speak, to come out against intemperance of every kind—intemperance in working, in eating, in drinking, and in drugging—and then to point them to God’s great medicine, pure, soft water—for diseases, for health, for cleanliness, and for a luxury.

The message from God was simple: health is important and Seventh-day Adventists must begin to pay attention to it.

This simple idea would turn Adventism around and transform the movement in gradually becoming a leading promoter of health and healthful living. As a result, Seventh-day Adventists would build their first medical institution—the Western Health Reform Institute—in 1866. Later, it became the renowned Battle Creek Sanitarium. The same year, they also began their first health periodical—the Health Reformer. Young Adventists, including John H. Kellogg, were also encouraged to get medical education. Later, in 1905, through the visionary leadership of Ellen White and the help of John A. Burden, Adventists bought the property for what would become Loma Linda Sanitarium in Loma Linda, California.11 In 1906, they also started the Loma Linda College of Medical Evangelists (Loma Linda University).

Today, Seventh-day Adventists have the largest Protestant health system in the world, with more than 500 institutions in 65 countries. Notably, their holistic approach to health has made Adventist contributions to health science and health education unique in the twenty-first century. But everything started with the simple message from God 150 years ago: health is important. Today, Adventism continues to proclaim the same simple message, helping people live better and healthier lives around the world. 1

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