

“The Impact of the Student Volunteer Movement on the Seventh-day Adventist Church”

By Edward Allen, Ph. D.
Professor of Religion
Union College
Lincoln, Nebraska

In the summer of 1886 Dwight L. Moody invited 251 students to attend a conference at Northfield, Massachusetts on personal evangelism. Unplanned addresses at the conference, including a significant one by A. T. Pierson, highlighted the needs of foreign missions. By the close of the conference, at the instigation of Robert P. Wilder, 100 men signed the pledge of the Princeton University Foreign Missionary Society that read, “We the undersigned declare ourselves willing and desirous, God permitting, to go to the unevangelized portions of the world.” One author has suggested that, “The Commitment of the Mt. Hermon 100 changed the course of the history of Christianity.”¹ That is because the Mt. Hermon 100 chose to set up a means to carry on the inspiration of the conference to colleges and universities throughout the United States.

Two of the 100, one of which was Robert P. Wilder, dedicated themselves to visiting college campuses during the next year in order to recruit more students to foreign missions. At the end of their touring season more than 2000 recruits had signed the pledge. There were no recruiters sent out in the 1887 to 1888 year and the movement appeared to be on the verge of collapse. However, with the appointment of another of the Mt. Hermon 100, John R. Mott, as the chairman of the movement in the summer of 1888, the movement received a leader of boundless vision and energy, and a name, the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions (SVMFM or simply SVM).

¹ Dana L. Roberts, *Occupy until I Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 149

Beginning in 1891, quadrennial conferences were held by the Movement. The purpose of the Movement and its conferences was to recruit students for lifelong service in missions, not to fund and send them. The recruits were referred to the various mission boards who made the actual arrangements for them to go overseas. Very early the watchword of the Movement became “The evangelization of the world in this generation.”²

In 1890 there were 350 American missionaries overseas from all denominations. By 1915, 25 years later, there were 4000, many inspired by the SVM.³ By 1920 John R. Mott reported to the SVM convention that 8140 student volunteers who had signed the pledge had sailed for overseas mission service. 2524 of these made their way to China.⁴ These missionaries were the major part of a significant missionary movement that sent men and women from North America and Europe to fields around the globe between 1900 and 1940. The result is that today, while Christians remain about 32% of the world’s population, their presence in the “Global South” has increased from 17.8% in 1910 to 60.8% in 2010.⁵

Many of those who signed the SVM pledge and sailed as missionaries were the elite students in the best colleges and universities of the United States.⁶ I would argue that

² For a history of the Watchword see Dana L. Roberts, “The Origin of the Student Volunteer Watchwords: ‘The Evangelization of the World in This Generation,’” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, October 1986.

³ Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 17.

⁴ John R. Mott, “Report of the Executive Committee,” in *North American Students and World Advance* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1920), 61-62.

⁵ <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>

⁶ Yates, *Christian Missions*, 15.

they laid the foundations of modern medicine and education in nations like China, where the bulk of the volunteers eventually went. So it does seem that the Student Volunteer Movement did change the course of the history of Christianity.

I would argue that Seventh-day Adventist involvement with the SVM began in 1880, long before the Northfield conference and the Mt. Hermon 100. In that year the first reference appeared in the *Review and Herald* to the periodical *The Missionary Review of the World*. It had been founded in 1878 by Royal G. Wilder, who had just returned from a lengthy mission in India. He could trace his interest in missions to the organization that began with the Haystack prayer meeting at Williams College in 1806. It was his son, Robert P. Wilder, that sparked the interest in missions at the 1886 Mt. Hermon conference and who promoted the SVM pledge. When in 1880, the year before James White died, the *Review and Herald* quoted Wilder's magazine for the fact that the Greek Orthodox Church was making as rapid progress in Japan as was the Protestant church, the *Review* was tapping into the source that would result in the Student Volunteer Movement.⁷ In the ensuing sixty years, the *Review and Herald* would cite the *Missionary Review of the World* 339 times.

In fact, it was a report in the *Missionary Review* of the Mt. Hermon meeting by John R. Mott that prompted the first articles in the *Review and Herald* on the Student Volunteer Movement in 1889. It described the details of the founding of the movement and its progress, closing with a positive reflection on the wisdom of enlisting "the

⁷ "Notes of News," *Review and Herald*, Jan. 22, 1880, Vol. 55, no. 4, p. 62.

interests of young men and women in missionary labor before their purposes in life become fixed.”⁸

In 1890 a foreign missions band had formed at Battle Creek College, apparently independent of the SVM.⁹ On February 17 of 1891 the *Review and Herald* published a notice of the first International Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement.¹⁰ By the time the convention began on February 26 the leader of the Battle Creek foreign missions band, Frederick Rossiter, was a delegate to this first SVM convention in Cleveland, Ohio.¹¹ In addition to this, the only school in the state of California to send a delegate was the Pacific Bible School of Oakland, an institution that apparently provided evening education in association with the Pacific Press between 1891 and 1895. That delegate was Georgia Burrus, who became the first official SDA missionary to India.¹²

⁸ M[aria] L. H[untley], “The Student Missionary Uprising,” *Review and Herald*, Dec. 17, 1889, Vol. 66, no. 50, p. 62. Huntley refers to an article by John R. Mott by virtually the same title in the November 1889 *Missionary Review*. Huntley was the corresponding secretary of the International Tract and Missionary Society. She died four months after the article was published on April 18, 1890.

⁹ Frederick M. Rossiter, M. D., “Our First Foreign Missionary Society,” *Review and Herald*, August 21, 1913, Vol. 09, No. 34, pp. 16. Similar stories are told by Mrs. C. H. [Ruth] Haskell Hayton, “The First Seventh-day Adventist Colldge Mission Band,” *Review and Herald*, June 19, 1925, Vol. 101, No. 25, pp. 18-9. The information is repeated with some significant changes in “Battle Creek College Mission Bands,” *Review and Herald*, March 31, 1938, Vol. 115, No. 13, pp. 21-2.

¹⁰ “International Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement,” *Review and Herald*, February 17, 1891, Vol. 68, No. 7, p. 102.

¹¹ P. T. Magan, “Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement,” *Review and Herald*, March 10, 1891, Vol. 68, No. 10, pp. 150-151. The named delegates from the Battle Creek Sanitarium included Dr. A. N. Loper, Mrs. M. Foy, Mrs. E. H. Whitney, Miss Jean Whitney. Battle Creek College sent Fred M Rossiter and P. T. Magan: See the official proceedings *The Report of the First International Convention* (Boston, 1891), p. 198. Perhaps Leon Smith, and even John Harvey Kellogg were in attendance though not official delegates. See unsigned note in “Literary Notices,” *Good Health*, vol. xxxii, no. 10 (October 1897), 652 where the reviewer of one of Mott’s books states, “We met the author at the first great convention of the Student Volunteer Movement, held in Cleveland, O., some years ago are were then impressed with Mr. Mott’s enthusiasm.” See also Smith’s article to be mentioned later.

¹² *The Report of the First International Convention* (Boston, 1891), p.194.
<https://ia601406.us.archive.org/31/items/studentvolunteer00unknuoft/studentvolunteer00unknuoft.pdf>

However, the story of that convention contains a further surprise. In 1889 S. N. Haskell embarked on a two year round-the-world journey to survey opportunities for SDA missions. He was accompanied by P. T. Magan. They returned from that trip in late February 1891. While Haskell remained in Battle Creek to give a report of their lengthy mission trip at the General Conference meeting, Magan traveled immediately to Cleveland, Ohio for the first SVM convention held February 26-March 1.¹³

In a subsequent article in the *Review and Herald*, Magan wrote how he was impressed with a number of emphases at the convention. He stated that “Theirs is a MOVEMENT,--a scattering out to heathen lands; --not a *theory* that the world ought to be evangelized, but a movement which is destined to accomplish that event.”¹⁴ He highlighted the address by A. J. Gordon on the subject of “The Holy Spirit in Missions.”¹⁵

Magan, describing the importance of the pledge, wrote how “the pledge means that the one who has signed it will go to a foreign land as soon as he has completed his education, and that he will leave no stone unturned to find the means necessary to take him there.” The pledge not only indicates a willingness to go in mission service but also a desire to go. Magan describes the expected process. The volunteer should first apply to the Foreign Mission board of their denomination, but if the Board refuses their application due to lack of means, the volunteer will do what he can to get his home

¹³ Magan, “Convention,” 150. For Haskell, see note in *Review and Herald*, March 10, 1891, Vol. 68, No. 10, pp. 160. Haskell and Magan were expected in Battle Creek on February 27, *Review and Herald*, February 24, 1891, Vol. 68, No. 9, p. 119.

¹⁴ Magan, “Convention, 150. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵ *The Report of the First International Convention* p. 7-20.

church to send him. If that endeavor failed, rather than giving up on going, he should “work his passage before the mast. GO must be the watchword.”¹⁶

The closing session of the convention was particularly impressive according to Magan. He describes how the meeting lasted three hours with every moment of the time being well occupied. He reports, “God by his Spirit was manifestly present. The solemnity of this occasion was nearly equal to that of any other meeting the writer ever attended.”¹⁷

A week later, in the *Review and Herald*, Uriah Smith’s son Leon, an associate editor of the *Review*, wrote another lengthy article about the SVM convention. He also noted the impact of Gordon’s address on the Holy Spirit. Smith restated the story of the beginning of the SVM at length, concluding with the amazing statistic that 6200 volunteers had signed the pledge. He notes that “In each institution the volunteers are organized in what is known as the Volunteer Band.” They hold weekly meetings for prayer and the systematic study of missions. They also seek to extend the movement by securing new recruits. Smith mentions that once a person has signed the pledge, he is bound to go, unless directly hindered by Providence, without waiting for any special call from Heaven to do so.¹⁸

For Smith, the movement suggested a “fulfillment of the prophetic utterance of Christ, that ‘this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations,’ before the end shall come.” Mentioning the motto “The evangelization

¹⁶ Magan, “Convention, 150-1.

¹⁷ Magan, “Convention, 151.

¹⁸ L. A. S[mith], “The World’s Convention of Student Volunteers for Foreign Missions,” *Review and Herald*, March 17, 1891, Vol. 68, No. 11, pp. 168-9.

of the world in this generation,” Smith notes that it does not indicate an expectation of the conversion of the world, but a commitment to carry the gospel to the world. Quoting one of the convention speakers, Smith notes, “The aim is not to bring the world to Christ, but to bring Christ to the world. The latter, man can do; the former, is the province of God and the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹

Smith then addresses the issue of Seventh-day Adventist attitudes toward the movement. He says, “It is hardly necessary to add that the Student Volunteer Movement is one which merits the full sympathy and co-operation of Seventh-day Adventists.”

According to Smith, it is “part of the great gospel work which God is doing for the world in this last generation of its history, and in which it has pleased him to assign us [SDAs] so wonderful a part.” He describes four marks that demonstrate this assertion: 1. The movement is unselfish; 2. It is unsectarian as far as it concerns Protestant sects; 3. It is animated by a pure zeal and devotion to the cause of Christ; and 4. It seeks only to bring the sound of the gospel to the millions whose ears it has never reached.²⁰

With such a ringing endorsement, it is not surprising that for the next sixty years Adventist colleges sent delegates to all the SVM conventions and that their attendance had an impact on the church as a whole.

One notable example is from the 1894 convention. H. Camden Lacey was a delegate from Battle Creek College to the 1894 convention in Detroit. His sister, May Lacey, had just married Ellen White’s widowed son Willie. In remembering the convention Lacey recalls conversing with Georgia Burrus, apparently attending her

¹⁹ Smith, “the World’s Convention.” 169.

²⁰ Smith, “the World’s Convention.” 169.

second convention and one of only two delegates from California, both of which were from Healdsburg College.²¹ They were both impressed by the spiritual teachings and appeals of John R. Mott, A. T. Pierson, A. J. Gordon, J. Hudson Taylor, and others. Lacey later wrote, “I recall her [Burrus] saying something like this: Brother Lacey, these men are not Sabbath-keepers, as we understand it, but the Lord is certainly using them mightily: I have never felt the deep moving of the Spirit of God upon my heart, as I have here at this convention.” Lacey commented, “I couldn’t help agreeing with her exactly.”²²

Lacey was impressed with the emphasis on the personality of the Holy Spirit. On his way back to his homeland in Australia during September of 1895 he made the personality of the Holy Spirit a subject of special study. He had come from a Church of England background and had always felt that there was something wrong with the way that Adventists spoke of the Holy Spirit with the impersonal “it.” During his study he became convinced of the Personhood of the Spirit and presented a series of Bible studies on the subject at a convention in Cooranbong in 1896. Ellen White’s literary helper, Marian Davis, was present at the studies and Lacey well remembered her very evident interest, and the fact that she took copious notes. He recalled that A. G. Daniells was also frequently present and expressed his interest and appreciation. Reminiscing many years later, Lacey noted that an article published in *Testimonies to the Church*, Vol. 8, pp. 61-6 entitled “The Holy Spirit in our Schools” was written by Ellen White on May 10, 1896 from Cooranbong, either during or shortly after Lacey’s presentations on the personhood of the Holy Spirit. In it Ellen White uses personal pronouns “He,” “Him,” and “His” to

²¹ Max Wood Moorhead, ed., *The Student Missionary Enterprise*, (New York: Fleming H. Revel, [1894]), 353.

²² H. Camden Lacey to L. E. Froom, August 30, 1945, p. 2.

refer to the Holy Spirit. Lacey seemed confident that the content of his presentations had been conveyed to Ellen White and they she had modified her language about the Holy Spirit as a result.²³

Another couple of examples will suffice. In 1898 the SVM convention was held in Cleveland, Ohio again. The *Review and Herald* reported the events of the convention in a lengthy article W. E. Cornell.²⁴ He described how Seventh-day Adventists gathered on Sabbath afternoon to hear stirring addresses by Professor E. A. Sutherland, P. T. Magan, Doctors Winegar and Paulson, and others, all of them apparently attendants at the convention. These Adventist speakers discussed the relationship of the SVM to the Adventist perspective, suggesting that SVM was good as far as it goes, but that the Adventist message to the world was even superior: “*Jesus is coming! Get ready, get ready, get ready!*”²⁵

However, it is the next paragraph of Cornell’s *Review and Herald* article that contains probably the most significant message to impact the SDA world. The article describes a message given at the 1898 SVM convention by John R. Mott on “The Morning Watch.” It describes the benefits of paying the price of communing with God first of all in the morning.²⁶ The idea made a powerful impact on the attendees and later reports indicate that Mott’s presentation on the Morning Watch was instrumental in

²³ H. Camden Lacey to L. E. Froom, August 30, 1945, p. 3.

²⁴ W. E. Cornell, “The Volunteer Convention,” *Review and Herald*, March 15, 1898, Vol. 75, No. 11, pp. 174-5.

²⁵ Cornell, “The Volunteer Convention,” p. 175.

²⁶ John R. Mott, “The Morning Watch,” in *The Student Missionary Appeal* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1898), pp. 233-239.

influencing its adoption by the Adventist Church.²⁷ The mechanism whereby this happened needs further study, but it seems likely that M. E. Kern, who was apparently the sole delegate to the 1898 Convention from Union College, advocated the idea when he became the Secretary of the General Conference Young People's Department in 1907. He also led out in renaming the department as the Missionary Volunteer Department.²⁸ One of the pledges of the Missionary Volunteer is to "Keep the Morning Watch." The Motto of the Missionary Volunteers, "The Advent Message to all the world in this generation," is clearly modeled after the SVM watchword, "The evangelization of the world in this generation."

The most striking evidence of the influence of the Student Volunteer Movement watchword comes from a chapter in the book *Education* by Ellen White. First published in the *General Conference Bulletin* in 1902 with the title "The Definite Aim in Service" the chapter in the *Bulletin* begins with this paragraph:

Success in any line demands a definite aim. He who would achieve true success in life must choose and keep steadily in view the aim worthy of his endeavor. [Such and aim is set before the youth today.] The Heaven-appointed purpose of giving *the gospel to the world in this generation* is the noblest that can appeal to any human being.²⁹

The chapter includes an exhortation for children and youth to study the lives of missionaries such as Moffat, Livingston, and Carey as well as "the present daily-

²⁷ C. L. B[enson], "Chats with Leaders," *The Educational Messenger*, Vol. 2, no. 22, November 15, 1906; and E. M. M[allott] "W.M. C. Scores Again," *The Sligonian*, Vol. 4, no. 3, December, 1919.

²⁸ M. E. Kern, "North American Youth's Congress," *Review and Herald*, April 24, 1947, Vol. 124, No. 17, p. 32.

²⁹ Ellen White, "The Definite Aim in Service," *General Conference Bulletin*, Fourth Quarter, 1902, Vol. IV, No. 8, p. 669. The use of italics for emphasis is in the original. The bracketed words were added in for the final publication: *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903), 262.

unfolding history of missionary effort.”³⁰ The chapter concludes with the famous words, “With such an army of workers as our youth, rightly trained, might furnish, how soon the message of a crucified, risen, and soon-coming Savior might be carried to the whole world!”³¹ Later Adventist writers used these ideas, whether conscious of their source in Ellen White or not, to help draw a distinction between the Student Volunteer Movement and the Seventh-day Adventist movement. They noted that the SVM proclaims the message of a crucified and risen Savior, but that Adventists have a message about the crucified, risen, and *soon-coming* Savior.³²

There is a multitude of other evidence for Adventist engagement with the SVM. The minutes of the Seventh-day Adventist Foreign Mission Board record votes to send representatives to the SVM Conventions in 1894 and 1898.³³ The record of the 1898 vote notes that the action was in response to a communication from John R. Mott.³⁴ The General Conference Committee voted to send M. E. Kern to the 1910 Convention and to send the Secretaries of the Young People’s Missionary Volunteer Society to the 1914 Convention.³⁵ In 1907 the *Signs of the Times* published a World Missions Special. The

³⁰ *Education*, p. 269.

³¹ *Education*, p. 271.

³² Harry Cooper apparently presented this idea in a chapel talk at Union College in September 1914. “Union College News Notes,” *Central Union Outlook*, October 6, 1914, Vol. IV, No. 39, p. 8. See also C. A. Shull’s critique of the SVM message in “Student Volunteers in General Convention,” *Signs of the Times*, February 3, 1914, vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 5, 6.

³³ “Student Volunteer Convention,” in “Records of the Foreign Mission Board,” December 17, 1893, vol. 2, p. 90.

³⁴ “Jayne to Attend Student Volunteer Convention,” in “Foreign Mission Board Meeting,” December 5, 1897, in “Index of Proceedings of the Seventh-day Adventist Foreign Mission Board, March 16, 1897-January 6, 1899,” p. 129.

³⁵ “Student Volunteer Convention,” Seventy-Fourth Meeting General Conference Committee November 14, 1909, *General Conference Committee Minutes* for 1909 p. 185. Forty-Second Meeting

initial article is by Arthur T. Pierson, by then the Editor of the *Missionary Review of the World* and one of the initiators of the original Mt. Hermon 100.³⁶ Pierson was a close personal friend of John R. Mott and a perennial speaker at the SVM conventions. One of the articles in the special issue on missions is by General Conference President A. G. Daniells. It is entitled, “To the World in This Generation.” He describes how thousands of ardent Christians believe that

“the Gospel *can*, that it *should*, and that it *will* be carried by the church to all the world in this generation. ‘The Evangelization of the World in This Generation,’ is the ringing, thrilling, daring watchword of the Student Volunteer Movement. May the fullest success crown this Scriptural, and therefore consistent and timely, effort of this great movement.”³⁷

In addition to these major pieces of evidence there might be added the record of Adventist colleges sending delegates to SVM conventions through the 1930s and the articles in the *Review and Herald* about each quadrennial SVM convention through 1952.³⁸ However, it must be noted that those articles became increasingly more critical as the convention moved in a more liberal direction.³⁹

General Conference Committee November 19, 1913, *General Conference Committee Minutes* for 1913 p. 186.

³⁶ “God’s Open Doors for Missionary Work,” *Signs of the Times*, October 30, 1907, Vol. 33, No. 44, 3-4, 30. The article is a revised version of an article entitled “The Outlook and Openings for Missions” that was first published in a special issue of *Missionary Review* with the title “Signs of the Times.” *The Missionary Review of the World*, January 1907, Vol. 30, No. 1.

³⁷ A. G. Daniells, “To the World in This Generation,” *Signs of the Times*, October 30, 1907, Vol. 33, No. 44, pp. 10, 20.

³⁸ For the 1952 convention see “Student Volunteer Movement Holds Largest Convention,” *Review and Herald*, February 21, 1952, Vol. 129, No. 8, p. 2.

³⁹ See Edwin R. Thiele, “A New Day in Missions,” *Review and Herald*, February 16, 1928, Vol. 105, No. 7, pp. 15-6; F. D. Nichol, “A Latter Day Sign—Babylon Is Fallen,” *Review and Herald*, April 3, 1930, Vol. 107, No. 14, p. 5-7; and J. C. Thompson, “Convention of Student Volunteer Movement,” *Review and Herald*, July 16, 1936, Vol. 113, No. 39, p. 19-21. Thompson notes that in his final address John R. Mott lauded Seventh-day Adventists for their publishing work.

Adventist historians have forgotten this history. George Knight speaks of the Student Volunteer Movement as background to the Adventist mission work.⁴⁰ Russell Staples speaks of William Harrison Anderson, a pioneer missionary in southern Africa joining an SVM-style foreign mission band, but shows no awareness that it rapidly became an SVM affiliated band at Battle Creek College in 1891.⁴¹

Why was the SDA involvement in this movement forgotten? Two factors appear to have contributed to this amnesia. One is the direction that the SVM took in its acceptance of liberal theology and ecumenism. Adventists did not want to remember that they had once embraced a movement that came to stand for things they fundamentally rejected. The second reason appears to be the fundamentalist shift within Adventism that isolated it from other Christians. More study needs to be done in both of these areas. However, it is clear that at one time the Seventh-day Adventist church was fully engaged with a major Christian movement, saw it as a fulfillment of Bible prophecy, and participated in its endeavors.

⁴⁰ George Knight, *Lest We Forget* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2008), 315; George Knight, “The Missiological Roots of Adventist Higher Education and the Ongoing Tension Between Adventist Mission and Academic Vision,” *The Journal of Adventist Education*, Vol. 70, No. 4, April/May 2008, p. 23; George Knight, “Spiritual Revival and Educational Expansion,” in *Adventist Review*, Vol. 161, No. 13, March 29, 1984; in this later article Knight notes, “Events within the Seventh-day Adventist Church paralleled both the mission explosion of evangelical Protestantism and its educational extension,” p. 10, but he shows not awareness of Adventist participation in the SVM.

⁴¹ Russell Staples, s. v. William Harrison Anderson, in *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).