Ellen White as Philanthropist

By Michael W. Campbell

Most Seventh-day Adventists view Ellen White as a prolific writer, counselor, and popular speaker. She was all of those things and more, but she also cared deeply for those around her, the church, and for the uplifting of humanity. As such, Mrs. White personifies the principles of philanthropy. The term “philanthropy” comes from the Greek word philanthropos, which in turn comes from two words: philo,s or “love,” in the sense of benefiting or caring for something; and anthropos, meaning “humanity” or “humankind.” Thus, a philanthropist is someone who is conscious of the well-being of the human race, typically expressed through charitable aid or donations. In this sense, Ellen White was a model philanthropist. During her lifetime she and her husband showed that they were fully committed to the movement they loved by contributing sacrificially to the Sabbatarian Adventist cause. As early as 1857, Mrs. White noted that some Adventists were too much in love with their own money. Such selfish hording both hindered their spiritual growth and stifled the cause of God. Ellen White challenged the church to use the resources entrusted to each to advance the mission and work of the church. She wrote about various aspects of philanthropy—everything from the management of personal finances to encouragement to wealthy members to plan for the disposition of their estate. She also personally solicited funds for projects, and when other sources were not available, she pledged money for them.

The importance of relationships

Philanthropy experts write about the concept of philanthropy as part of a unified cycle that centers on building and maintaining relationships. The “asking” for a gift should not happen until after a series of steps is taken. In her own life, she lived this cyclical process. It wasn’t just about the “asking” for Ellen White—instead, she authentically cultivated friendships with people and remained in touch with many of her well-to-do friends who were able to use their “means” to advance God’s work. As early as 1859, Ellen White wrote her earliest letter of appeal to an Adventist businessman to give more of his money to advance the Advent cause. Ellen White’s commitment to maintaining close and personal relationships with people shows her ability to raise money. For example, one of Ellen White’s stalwart financial supporters was Anna Rasmussen, who lived with the Whites in their home in California during the 1870s and then traveled with Mrs. White through the European mission field later on after both had become widows. For many years after their travels, Mrs. White wrote to Anna asking her for money for various ministries and the translation of her books.
Another example of Ellen White's commitment to relationships was the long-standing relationship with the family of Gilbert and Deborah Collins from Dartmouth, Massachusetts. Their parents, Philip and Nancy Collins, had been Millerites who supported James and Ellen White when the Advent cause was in its infancy. As a youth, Ellen White wrote a letter of encouragement to Philip and his sister. Later, in 1849, when Philip was deathly ill, his parents invited the Whites to their home and he was miraculously healed. By the 1890s, Ellen White, while in Australia, felt comfortable enough to write several times to Gilbert Collins to solicit funds for the work in Australia. In 1902, after she learned that he was gravely sick, she wrote to him again about her desire to visit him personally on her next trip. She wrote numerous letters of encouragement. At one point, she felt comfortable enough with the family that she urged them to consider making a will so that “after your life ends, it is your privilege to carry forward His work.” When a church leader wrote to Ellen White complaining that the Collins family was not willing to donate funds for a new sanitarium in New Bedford, Massachusetts (which later became the Acushnet Sanitarium), she asked the leader to back off. She made it very clear that he was not to pressure Collins into giving if he did not feel free to give to this particular cause.

Another wealthy Adventist with whom Ellen White had a close friendship with was Josephine Gotzman (1855–1935). Originally from Minnesota, she and her husband made a fortune in the shoe industry. During the 1880s, Josephine’s husband was killed in a train wreck and she went to the Battle Creek Sanitarium for treatment. It was while she was there that she invited a young colporteur, E. A. Sutherland, to board at her home. Through this friendship, Mrs. Gotzman became a Seventh-day Adventist. She later moved to California where she lived near the St. Helena Sanitarium and became a close friend and confidant of Ellen White. On several occasions, Ellen White recommended that Mrs. Gotzman provide loans for students. Ellen White also made a personal “ask” for sizable financial gifts to help purchase properties for the Avondale Health Retreat, Paradise Valley Sanitarium, and later the Loma Linda Sanitarium. It appears that Mrs. Gotzman gave whenever Mrs. White asked her for help. After Ellen White’s death, Mrs. Gotzman was one of the largest contributors and led in the fundraising effort to build a hospital in Los Angeles that was named in honor of her close friend, Ellen G. White.

**Mission versus specific projects**

Ellen White on an ongoing basis reminded church leaders that the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was global. At times she found herself frustrated, especially when she lived in Australia during the 1890s, because she felt church leaders had lost a sense of the worldwide scope of the denomination’s mission. She wrote repeatedly about the need for self-denial that should characterize every denominational employee. She feared that those who tried to implement a wage scale in which some church employees were paid significantly higher than others would make “extinct” the “spirit of self-sacrifice” that was “the great heart of the work.”

At significant junctures, Ellen White challenged church leaders to look beyond the immediate and see the long-term needs of the worldwide church. These needs were just as important if not more important than their own immediate environs. From the late 1880s up to the end of her life in 1915, Ellen White began to more aggressively appeal for funds for specific projects. Some of the specific things that she made personal appeals to individuals for funds included the new Oakwood Industrial School (now Oakwood University), the work in England, the southern work in the
United States, the translation of her books, foreign missions, and upon occasion the construction of specific churches.

Ellen White knew that fundraising is not simply asking people for money. It was part of a process that revolved around a relationship with that person. In at least one instance she wrote to an Adventist who was considering make a contribution, pointing out the great need of Adventist missions and what a difference such a gift would make. She was especially careful to make sure she wrote Thank-you letters to people after they made their contribution too. In fact, this type of correspondence accounts for a significant amount of her letter writing during the last three decades of her life. Although she had literary assistants, at times she even took the time to write a handwritten Thank-you letter. One such example was a letter she wrote to Harvey and Emma Gray, church members in California. The Grays had converted at a camp meeting during the 1880s at which she had spoken and presumably first met this couple. The Grays gave generously to many projects during their lifetime—the Pacific Press, then later Healdsburg College and St. Helena Sanitarium, and then soon after the turn of the century, the newly established Paradise Valley Sanitarium. After one of their contributions, Ellen White sent them a letter of appreciation along with a glowing account of the discovery of water at the Paradise Valley Sanitarium—thus encouraging these wealthy members that the money that they gave was a worthwhile investment.

Ellen White frequently was very specific about how the funds would be used. For example, she wrote to a potential donor an appeal for an automobile for the same newly formed sanitarium in southern California to help transport guests from the railroad station to the facility.

Ellen White always had a soft spot for students. At times she sponsored them through school or at other times gave them employment and thus helping them work their way through school. A number of the physicians at the Health Reform Institute (later the Battle Creek Sanitarium) received their medical education because James and Ellen White helped them financially. She was also very practical in her advice to students. In at least one instance Ellen White counseled a student not to leave for the mission field until he had paid off his education loan.

Ellen White not only solicited funds from others, but also personally gave to projects. Perhaps the largest streams of revenue for her personal giving came from the sale of her own books. Toward the end of her life, she dedicated all royalties from the sale of Christ's Object Lessons (published in 1900) to benefit Adventist educational institutions; then later The Ministry of Healing (published in 1905) to similarly benefit Adventist health institutions. She encouraged church members to raise money by selling her books door-to-door and relieve institutions of debt. During this same period, she worked actively to raise money for possibly the largest fundraising project of her lifetime—funds for the Loma Linda Sanitarium. Ellen White wrote numerous letters to many benefactors to either ask them for donations, or at the very least, she solicited personal loans on her own line of credit to make sure that they were able to meet their scheduled payments and secure the property for the denomination.
Money a “delicate subject”

Money frequently can be a delicate subject for many people. During her lifetime, Ellen White dealt with church members who came from a variety of social and economic backgrounds. Some church members were destitute and she at times had to advise people that although they had good intentions that they shouldn’t be giving for projects until they had their own finances in order. In one such instance, Ellen White returned the money she received. In the tactfully written letter that accompanied the returned funds, she cautioned them that they had not exercised good judgment since their own family was destitute.23 There were others who wrote asking Ellen White for divine guidance with regard to their business transactions. One such individual actually asked Ellen White to personally endorse his real estate and mining company. Such an endorsement would not only be financially lucrative but would help him to give more to the Adventist work. He furthermore sought counsel from her about future business dealings that he should make. In reply to his letter, Mrs. White told him that this was not her work to do this.24

Ellen White’s personal finances

During James and Ellen White’s earliest years, they were destitute. Gradually, through their lifetime, they were able to save up money or build up their net worth. In their early years, Mrs. White was known to keep a stocking behind the back kitchen door where she squirreled away some funds, and occasionally when some financial setback came their way, they were able to make do because of her planning.

Some allege that Ellen White did not follow her own advice to “avoid debt like the plague.” By the time of her death in 1915, she was in debt. But it is important to understand that not only did she encourage people to avoid debt, but that the debt she did incur were not because she exceeded her own living expenses. She borrowed money to expand the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (when was the last time someone you knew took out a personal loan for some missionary activity?). Especially during Mrs. White’s later years, she borrowed money when the work of the church had reached a critical point and no funds seemed available. She personally borrowed money to fund projects ranging from the translation of her books into new languages to contribute personally to the land for the newly purchased Loma Linda Sanitarium. At the same time, she wrote letters to her major benefactors asking for them to contribute as well. To use modern parlance, she had full “buy in” for a project and made sure she did everything she could personally before soliciting other benefactors.

Mrs. White was generous toward others with her own funds. At one time a person wrote to Ellen White claiming that she owed five dollars. Rather than dispute the claim, she wrote them a letter stating that she had no recollection for the claim she made, but rather than be the cause of a stumbling block, she agreed to pay the money and furthermore invited her to borrow her carriage so that they might attend some upcoming evangelistic meetings.25
Conclusion

Ellen White was a philanthropist who both raised money for and personally contributed significantly in terms of financial resources to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In many ways, had it not been for her vision for growth, the cultivation of personal relationships, and ultimately her solicitation of funds from wealthy church members, that helped to keep the growing Seventh-day Adventist Church solvent at times, many large institutions and the flow of funds would not exist within the church had it not been for her personal involvement and foresight.

As one of the co-founders of the denomination (along with her husband, James, and Joseph Bates), she was the prophetic voice for a movement that started in New England but spread around the globe. She outlived her husband and Captain Bates, thus ensuring the long-term financial stability of the denomination. One of the interesting things is that Ellen White was both a prophet as well as a pragmatist—at times she received providential insights about financial needs and counsels, but at other times she was not given any specific financial advice from heaven and used her own common sense and financial understanding prowess to give guidance to church leaders. In this sense, Ellen G. White modeled some of the “best practices” as a model philanthropist.

---

1 Letter 9, 1857.
2 Letter 4, 1859.
3 For biographical information, see Anna M. Rasmussen’s obituary, Review and Herald, August 27, 1931; for some examples of their correspondence, see Letters 28, 78, 1909; Letter 58b, 1910).
4 For the obituaries of Gilbert N. Collins (1836–1905) and Deborah L. Collins (1839–1852), see Review and Herald, December 23, 1852; June 29, 1905. For an overview of their lives, see The Ellen White Encyclopedia, s.v. “Gilbert N. and Deborah L. Collins” (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2010).
6 See Letter 7, 1849; Ellen White Encyclopedia, s.v. “Philip and Nancy Collins.”
7 Letter 6, 1902.
8 Letter 29, 1905.
9 Ellen G. White Encyclopedia, s.v. “Josephine Gotzian.”
11 Letter 221, 1904.
12 Letter 69, 1887.
13 Letter 213, 1904.
14 Letter 110, 1903.
15 Letter 77, 1894.
16 Cf. Letter 174, 1909, where Ellen White appealed for funds for the construction of a church in Portland, Oregon; see also Letter 113, 1897, where Ellen White appealed for funds to build a church in Cooranbong, Australia.
17 Letter 77, 1894.
18 For some examples of Thank-you letters, see Letter 23, 1900 (to Wesley Hare).
Letter 317, 1904 in Manuscript Releases, 14, 218–20; also see Ellen G. White Encyclopedia, s.v. "Harvey and Emma Gray."

Letter 118, 1909.

Letter 112, 1900.

Cf. Letter 303, 1905.

Letter 1, 1865.

Letter 192, 1905; see also Ellen White Encyclopedia, s.v. "Stonewall Jackson Harris."

Letter 88, 1887.