An American Blue Zone
The Longevity Oasis in Southern California

MARGE JETTON BARRELED DOWN the San Bernardino Freeway in her rootbeer-colored Cadillac Seville. Peering from behind dark sunshades, her head barely cleared the steering wheel. She was late for one of the several volunteer commitments she had that day, and she calmly but firmly goosed the Caddy’s throttle to move it along.

It was early on a Friday morning, and Marge had already accomplished quite a lot. She had walked a mile, lifted weights, and eaten her oatmeal breakfast. “I don’t know why God gave me the privilege of living so long,” she said, pointing to herself. “But look what he did!”

Marge, born September 29, 1904, is one of some 9,000 Seventh-day Adventists who live in and around Loma Linda, California, 60 miles east of Los Angeles. For the past half century, members of this community, whose faith endorses healthy living, have participated in a groundbreaking health and dietary study of Californians over the age of 25. The results of this study hold promising clues to another remarkable fact about these Adventists: As a group they currently lead the nation in longest life expectancy.

Marge Jetton, I decided, was the Adventist poster girl. She had sucked me into the whirlwind of her 100-year-old orbit an hour earlier at the Plaza Place hair salon just outside of Loma Linda. For the past 20 years, Marge has kept an 8 a.m. Friday appointment with stylist Barbara Miller.

“You’re late!” Marge shouted as I burst through the door at 8:25. She’d been flipping through a copy of *Reader’s Digest* as Barbara uncurled the bluish-white locks of hair that now dovetailed around Marge’s head like a small cumulus cloud. Behind Marge, a line of stylists coifed hair on other ancient noggins. “We’re a bunch of dinosaurs around here,” Barbara whispered to me.

“You may be,” Marge shot back. “Not me.”

Half an hour later, Marge led me to her car. She didn’t walk, quite, but scooted with a snappy, can-do shuffle.

“Get in,” she ordered. “You can help.”

The mission: Deliver recyclable bottles to a woman on welfare who will later redeem them for deposits. But first we hopped on the freeway and drove to the Loma Linda adult services center, an activity center for seniors, most of whom are several decades younger than Marge. She popped open her trunk and heaved out four bundles of magazines she’d collected during the week.

“The old folks here like to read them and cut out the pictures for crafts,” Marge explained.

Old folks?

**Island in the Big City**

Despite its location in the smoggy orbit of greater Los Angeles, Loma Linda appears to be one of the few places in the United States where a true Blue Zone has taken root. Adventists like Marge Jetton follow a faith that expressly discourages smoking, alcohol consumption, or eating foods deemed to be unclean in the Bible, such as pork. In fact, the religion discourages the consumption of meat in general, as well as rich foods, caffeinated drinks, and even “stimulating” condiments and spices.
Some of the most conservative Adventists don’t believe in going to the movies or the theater or indulging in any other form of popular culture. All of these tenets seem to have helped turn Loma Linda into a longevity oasis right in the middle of America’s second largest city.

Driving to America’s Blue Zone from Los Angeles International Airport was a classic California freeway experience. As I sped along in my lane no more than a foot or two from vehicles on either side, I felt as if the road itself was propelling us along. Looking at the brownish-yellow air draped over the mountains beyond the strip malls, it wasn’t hard to figure out where all the exhaust was settling. When I took the Anderson Street exit for Loma Linda, I passed a smorgasbord of fast-food franchises all fighting for attention. Could this really be the doorstep to an American Blue Zone?

After just a half mile of steadily climbing up the road (Loma Linda is Spanish for “lovely hill”), I found myself surrounded by the manicured lawns, parking lots, and large buildings of the Loma Linda University and Medical Center (LLUMC). Privately owned and operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and founded in 1905, LLUMC is a modern facility with a proud tradition of service. I knew that physicians at the medical center had played key roles in the Adventist Health Study and had collected a wealth of data on Adventist behaviors.

Julie Smith, LLUMC’s director of public and media relations, took me on a quick tour, starting on the roof of the medical center where a pair of busy helicopter pads serves the only Level 1 trauma center in the area. In the basement of the Children’s Hospital Pavilion, the world’s first hospital-based proton radiation treatment system treats about 160 patients five days a week (many for brain or prostate cancer) and provides research for NASA scientists. Down the hall is a wall covered with pictures of happy, healthy children. Through the pioneering work of Dr. Leonard Bailey, a few hundred of the United States’ infant heart transplants have occurred at LLUMC. The photographic display is a montage of survivors, including a strapping young man in his early twenties who was the world’s first successful infant-to-infant heart transplant recipient in 1985.

After the tour, I made a long trek through the courtyard to a far corner of the campus. There I found a side entrance to Evans Hall, a building that once housed unassuming classrooms for medical and dental students and now housed the university’s Center for Health Promotion. The stairs under the frayed carpet creaked and moaned as I made my way to the second floor offices of Dr. Gary Fraser and Dr. Terry Butler.

As soon as the introductions were made, Dr. Butler asked me if I’d like a drink. Since it was a hot day, I said yes, imagining a cold soda or iced tea. Butler drew me a glass of room-temperature water from a large jug on his desk. More than a gesture of hospitality, this act was Butler’s way of practicing what he preaches—and he and Fraser had shelves full of data to buttress their dietary message.

When LLU researchers first embarked on a study of the dietary habits of nearly 25,000 Adventists in California a half century ago, it was good news to the American Cancer Society, which had just initiated its own study of the effects of tobacco smoke on lung cancer. Because the overwhelming majority of Adventists were nonsmokers, they provided an ideal control group, and they were promptly folded into the ACS study.

As we now would expect, the subsequent data (collected from 1958–1966) revealed that Adventists contracted lung cancer at a rate of only 21 percent of that of the original ACS group. But what caught even early anti-smoking advocates offguard was that the
Adventists also had a much lower incidence of other cancers, as well as less heart disease and diabetes. Even when compared to nonsmokers in the original ACS group, the Adventists produced generally healthier outcomes.

The results were intriguing. If the Adventists had created a longevity culture, was it possible to determine which of their dietary and lifestyle behaviors was most responsible for it? That was the thrust behind what became known as the Adventist Health Study-1 (AHS-1), a survey funded by the National Institutes of Health that examined nearly 34,000 California Adventists over age 25 from 1974–1988.

Dr. Fraser came to LLU to teach medicine and epidemiology in 1979, shortly after AHS-1 was initiated. Since 1987 he has been the principal investigator of the Adventist Health Study projects. (A second version, AHS-2, began gathering data on 97,000 Adventists in 2002 and will start reporting results in the next year or two.) A slim man with a precise manner, he is frequently asked to sit on panels that review grant proposals for other NIH studies.

Born and raised in New Zealand, he started out as a cardiologist, an endeavor he describes as “seeing people who after 40 or 50 years of not taking care of their bodies were reaping the results. It was like trying to close the door to the barn after the horse has bolted—very frustrating. When I discovered I was very good at math,” he continued, “I decided to become an epidemiologist and see if I could help ward off heart disease on the front end, which is much more satisfying.” His coinvestigator, Dr. Terry Butler, is an Adventist pastor as well as an epidemiologist. Fraser credits him with helping to stimulate high levels of Adventist participation in the AHS studies.

“There are a lot of things in AHS-1 to hang our hats on,” Fraser said with a prominent down-under accent. “First, we can say with certainty that Adventists live longer.” In California, the study showed, a 30-year-old Adventist male lives 7.3 years longer than the average 30-year-old white Californian male. A 30-year-old Adventist female lives 4.4 years longer than the average 30-year-old Californian white female. “If you go to Adventists who are vegetarian,” said Fraser, “it becomes 9.5 years longer for men and 6.1 years longer for women. It is not surprising why this is so. About two-thirds of people either die of heart disease or cancer, and the Adventists do a number of things to protect themselves from heart disease and different cancers.”

One of the key discoveries of the AHS-1 survey was that approximately half of the Adventists were vegetarians or rarely ate meat, which gave Fraser and Butler a solid demographic foundation to look at the advantages of a plant-based diet. “We learned that nonvegetarian Adventists had about twice the risk of heart disease as vegetarian Adventists,” Fraser said, “particularly men but also younger and middle-aged women.”

Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that finding was relatively controversial. “It didn’t automatically mean that meat did the damage by itself, so we dug deeper,” Fraser said. “But meat remained a consistent contributor to heart disease, which isn’t that surprising, because it has a high level of saturated fat. So out of that we started asking questions about other fatty foods, and one of the ones we focused on was nuts.”

At the time, clinical nutritionists were telling people to stay away from all fatty foods and snack foods, including nuts. “But,” Fraser said, cleaving the air with both palms for emphasis, “it turns out that most of the fat in nuts is unsaturated fat. And when we looked at that data, it was really so clear: The Adventists who consumed nuts at least five times a week had about half the risk of heart disease of those who didn’t. This was true of
men, women, vegetarian, nonvegetarian—we split the population up about 16 or 17 different ways and each time asked the question, ‘Does nut consumption matter?’ And every time we saw that it did.”

Since their findings were published in 1992, at least four major studies have confirmed that eating nuts has an effect. The American Heart Association has a positive recommendation about nuts. “So now everybody’s asking, what is it about nuts?” Fraser said. “I’m not sure we have all the answers, but one thing certainly is that they have an effect on lower blood cholesterol.”

“What about nuts that are roasted in oil?” I asked, glancing quickly behind Butler to see if there’s a bag of cashews or almonds beside his jug of water.

“Doesn’t matter,” Fraser replied. “Nuts have hard, thin skin, so that doesn’t have much impact.”

“Now when you talk about AHS-1 and cancer, it gets a little more controversial,” he cautioned. “Because, despite hundreds of studies and huge amounts of press, what epidemiologists know with certainty about diet and cancer can be stated in a single paragraph. And that would say that consuming fruits and vegetables and whole grains seems to be protective for a wide variety of cancers.”

AHS-1 was one of the first studies to really demonstrate that, Butler added. “But exactly which fruits and vegetables and how protective they are with which cancers is hard to say with certainty, although we have some very interesting data. For example, we found that women who consumed tomatoes at least three or four times a week reduced their chances of getting ovarian cancer by 70 percent over those who ate tomatoes less often. Something like that gives you pretty good evidence that there is protection, but because of our limited sample size, knowing the degree of protection may be more up for grabs. Eating a lot of tomatoes also seemed to have an effect on reducing prostate cancer for men.”

“Colon cancer also,” Fraser said. “We found that the Adventists who ate meat had a 65 percent increased risk of it compared to the vegetarian Adventists. And Adventists who ate more legumes like peas and beans had a 30 to 40 percent reduction in colon cancer.”

For pancreatic cancer there was again a small sample size, but researchers did see that those who ate fruits and legumes had a much lower risk. “Those who ate meat were at twice the risk of getting bladder cancer and a 65 percent increase in the risk of getting ovarian cancer,” Fraser said.

“For lung cancer, we found an extensive relationship with smoking, which is no surprise, although most Adventists are past smokers if they smoked at all. We naturally have a large percentage of Adventists who never smoked, and when we looked at them, the ones who ate two or more servings of fruit per day had about 70 percent fewer lung cancers than those nonsmokers who ate fruit only once or twice a week.”

“Tell him about water,” Butler prompted.

“Right,” Fraser said. “My personal view is that this is a potentially very interesting—although overall still tentative—finding. But if you look at the AHS-1 data, it is very clear that men who drank five or six glasses of water a day had a substantial reduction in the risk of a fatal heart attack—60, 70 percent less—compared to those who drank considerably less water. The difference for women hasn’t been seen as much. Yet if you looked at drinking nonwater fluids, consuming a lot of soft drinks, coffee, cocoa, seemed to be hazardous and increased the risk of attack. Imagine if you could really make a
sizable dent in heart attack rates just by increasing the number of glasses of water you
drink! That would be a major public health finding.”

Fraser stared into his lap for a moment and pursed his lips. “For whatever reason,
people just aren’t looking into this,” he said simply. “But we are looking at it again with
AHS-2, and with 97,000 people, we should find it much more strongly if it is real. If it is
proven again, it is huge for public health.”

He grabbed his glass and offered a toast. “I’ll tell you this: As a result of what I’ve
seen, I make sure I drink five or six glasses of water a day.”

Benefits of a Lifestyle
So what were the key Blue Zone lessons about longevity from the Adventist studies?
Fraser and Butler listed five things we can do to add as much as an extra decade to our
lives.

“First, vegetarian status will get you about two years,” Fraser said. “Not eating meat is
clearly important, and our studies have shown us it is because it seems to have an impact
on heart disease and some cancers.

“Second, we found that nut eaters also had a two-year advantage, which seemed to
relate largely to heart disease. Of course there are causes of death not related to cancer
and heart disease, and we suspect some of these behaviors might also be protective for
some of those causes.”

“Third is being a smoker,” added Fraser. “Or even a past smoker, as we found among
the Adventists. If you have ever been a smoker, it has a moderately strong impact on lung
cancer and some impact on heart disease.”

“Fourth is physical activity,” he continued, “which again accounted for an extra couple
of years, and that seems to run very clearly to heart disease and to certain cancers like
breast and colon cancer. The evidence is fairly clear that most of this benefit comes from
modest but regular physical activity. It really flattens out once you get to the marathoner
level, which is not necessary for longevity.”

The fifth and final recommendation is to maintain a fairly normal body weight, an
increasingly important issue in the United States. “It turns out a lot of the very active
chemicals that relate to inflammation probably have some impact on increasing the
likelihood of cancer developing,” Fraser said. “Those chemicals could well come from fat
cells. One huge advantage of a vegetarian diet is how much it is associated with lower
body weight. In fact we just cracked some numbers from AHS-2 that show that
Adventists who are what we call lacto-ovo vegetarians, meaning they eat eggs and other
dairy products, still are an average of 16 pounds lighter than Adventists of the same
height who are nonvegetarian. And Adventists who are strictly vegan, which is only 4
percent, are 30 to 32 pounds lighter than nonvegetarian Adventists of the same height.
That has a huge impact on cardiovascular disease, on blood pressure, on blood cho-
lesterol, on inflammation related to hormones and the way it stimulates cells in the body.”

I noted with a pang of regret that my nonvegetarian body was starving and could also
still use a shot of caffeine. I drained my second glass of water, hoping that one of these
good gentlemen would break out the nuts. But Fraser wasn’t quite finished. “If I could
stress just one point to you, it would be this,” he said. “The Adventist experience, or
lifestyle, we are studying doesn’t have to be that unique. In many, many ways they are
fairly typical Americans. I think the most exciting thing about our results is that even
with modest changes there is no reason why non-Adventists can’t benefit from these things in the same way.”

**Genesis of the Adventist Way**

Directly across from the hospital is the Loma Linda Market, as large as most national chain grocery stores but stocked with soy “beef jerky,” egg-free ice cream, and more than 80 bins of various seeds and nuts. Lest you think this is an anomaly or the sole epicenter for the health food crowd, about a mile away is Clark’s Nutrition Center, another supermarket-sized outlet for organic foods and supplements. One entire wall at Clark’s is devoted to gluten-free nourishment. Another aisle contains huge, 50-pound bags of organic carrots, and coffee-table-sized flats of organic wheatgrass that could be mistaken for miniature lawn plots. And everywhere you look there are nuts: showcased in plastic-sealed gift boxes; in heaping piles beside the onions and potatoes in the produce section; and sorted—raw cashews, dried pistachios, honey-roasted almonds, yogurt-dipped peanuts, shelled and unshelled walnuts—in dozens and dozens of hanging bins that can be emptied into flask-sized paper bags with the pull of a lever.

Most of us have the best intentions of getting more exercise or eating more nutritiously. But religion has provided Adventists with the extra nudge that seems crucial for turning intentions into habits. We’ve all heard the phrase, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” For Adventists, healthiness is next to Godliness.

“Being healthy has always been a fundamental part of the Adventist message,” said Dr. Daniel Giang, vice president for medical administration at LLUMC. I met Giang in a spacious conference room in the Chan Shun Pavilion. “Maybe it’s because I grew up in Takoma Park, Maryland, which is one of the world headquarters of the Adventists, but I’ve always been very interested in the history of our church, which is really fascinating when it comes to health,” he said. An amiable man of Chinese-American ancestry, Giang was both enthusiastic and easygoing as he sketched out the Adventist story.

“I think most Adventists, especially if they grew up in the 1950s and 60s, think the church was formed simply because God spoke to Ellen G. White and she wrote down what He said,” Giang told me. “But if you go and read the history, the early Adventists said there was a lot of hammering things out as the church was being formed in the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s, with Ellen White being influential in saying whether people were on the right track or the wrong track,” he said. That was especially true of the period between 1844, when White had her first vision from God, and 1863, when the Adventist Church was officially organized.

“Along with Ellen G. White, there were two people crucial to the way the church was formed. One was James White, Ellen’s husband, who provided the administrative genius and ran a publishing company. The other major figure was Joseph Bates, a very successful sea captain and intellectual who introduced this whole health emphasis,” Giang said. “Long before it became a part of the Adventist religion, Bates had decided to give up smoking, alcohol, and consuming any meat, coffee, tea, or spices. Imagine: As far back as the 1820s, Bates ran a temperance ship; he wouldn’t allow his crew to drink on a voyage across the ocean.”

Bates was much older than the other early church leaders, yet he was the only one who stayed healthy, Giang continued. “There’s actually a picture from the 1860s of all these
church leaders in their twenties who were sick in hospitals and sanitoria, and the guy running the show is this sea captain in his sixties, which back then was really old.”

James White had a series of strokes in his 30s and 40s. Ellen G. White took him to a sanatorium, or “water-cure place,” and helped him rehabilitate through physical therapy baths and massages and walking. Then she had this prophetic vision that the body is important. “Adventists believe in the body and soul as one,” Giang said, “that when you die there isn’t a conscious soul floating around, but that you are lying in an unconscious state and God will resurrect you later upon the return of Christ. We truly believe that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and that God communicates to us through our bodies. So the things you do to impair your thinking and impair your health are cutting you off from God’s revelation.”

Many of the ideas Bates adopted were thus based on health reasons as well as religious ones, and a number of them became centerpieces for Adventist practices, Giang explained. Many focused on preventative medicine. “What strengthened this health message, of course, was that it seemed to work. God wants us to be healthy, and if we did these things, people were healthier.”

The Adventists’ affinity for health and longevity didn’t stop at personal diet and exercise. A respectful emphasis on medical science also became a part of their religious outlook, in part because of their low tolerance for frivolity and their realization that it provided opportunities to evangelize their faith. As much as Ellen G. White and other church leaders embraced the healing done at “water-cure” spas and sanitoria, they frowned upon the dancing and card playing that frequently took place at such facilities and decided to provide a more straitlaced, Adventist alternative.

In 1866, a hydrotherapy clinic known as the Western Health Reform Institute was founded in Battle Creek, Michigan. After doing sluggish business during its early years of operation, White determined that the place needed a credible medical professional, and chose the smartest young prodigy from a staunch Adventist family she could find, sending him off to medical school at the church’s expense. The young man’s name was John Harvey Kellogg.

When Kellogg returned to Battle Creek in 1876, he shifted the focus of the institute from water cures to a mixture of Adventist-oriented preventative medicine based on a combination of diet and exercise and cutting-edge medical and surgical procedures. He also changed the name of the place to Battle Creek Sanitarium (a clever variant on sanatorium, the common word for water-cure facilities at the time), which, as business boomed over the next few decades, became known as the San.

Kellogg was a tireless, somewhat eccentric innovator who authored nearly 50 books and was eventually credited with inventing everything from granola and corn flakes to electric blankets and a mechanical horse for exercise—and perhaps peanut butter, which he certainly refined and popularized if not outright originated. By 1888 the rich and famous were making the pilgrimage to the San, which had expanded its dorms and treatment facilities to accommodate more than 600 patients at a time.

Kellogg also had started sanitariums in other places, which perpetuated a demand for more trained people, Giang said. “But again, he and Ellen G. White realized that the worldly medical schools might not offer the same mix of preventative Adventist medicine with traditional therapeutic practices, so he started the American Medical Missionary College in Chicago in 1895.” By the end of the century, the Adventists had their own
medical and nursing schools. They had also discovered that medical missions could be very effective at reaching people they might not otherwise reach, who weren’t necessarily interested in the theology. And it was consistent with the church message of compassion.

Soon, when they went on missions to China or to other countries, they sent medical professionals to perform curative and restorative medicine as well as preachers to teach theology and preventative medicine. “The term Ellen White used was ‘the right arm of the church.’ That was her phrase for the health message,” Giang said. “I think what she meant was that this right arm could reach across cultures and shake hands and open doors. And it also became a good way for paying the bills.”

Later Kellogg grew skeptical of White’s visions and teachings and was eventually excommunicated from the Adventist Church. He continued to operate the San, which in the early 20th century counted some celebrities among its clientele—including Amelia Earhart, Sarah Bernhardt, Thomas Edison, and President William Howard Taft. While experimenting with shredded wheat cereal, Kellogg and his brother, W. K. Kellogg, accidentally discovered the process for creating flaked cereal. W. K. formed the Battle Creek Toasted Corn Flake Company in 1906. Kellogg was also convinced by his younger brother Will to market his new breakfast foods in what became the wildly successful Kellogg Company, still one of the largest employers in Battle Creek. He died in 1943 at the age of 91.

Ellen G. White, meanwhile, decided to close the Adventist-sponsored medical school in Battle Creek and open another one, to be named the Loma Linda College of Medical Evangelists. CME eventually changed its name to Loma Linda University.

A Little Exercise to Stay Young
Marge Jetton always wanted to be a nurse. “I was working in a cannery when the preacher came and saw me,” she said. “He told me, ‘Margie, you know you want to be a missionary, and I’ll take care of it for you.’ Well, that changed my life. I had dreamed of becoming a nurse since I was a little girl, and this was my chance. I feel God arranged for me to get my way.”

We sat in Marge’s cozy apartment at the Linda Valley Villa, and she kept her end of a bargain we’d made: If I helped on her volunteer rounds about town, she’d tell me her life story.

Marge had been in high gear since 4:30 in the morning. After getting dressed, she did what she called “my devotions,” reading lyrics in the song hymnal, and then the Bible. “Every morning,” she said, “because who is my friend?” She smiled, then answered her own question. “If you don’t have Him, you’re out of luck.”

After prayers and reflection, it was power-walking time. Marge’s corner apartment was in the independent-living facility. If she made her customary beeline down the hallway to the other end of the building and back six times, it worked out to a mile. “I circle through the dining room and get a glass of water each time; six glasses of water before breakfast. Then I come back and get my face on, make the bed, clean up the bedroom, and go to breakfast,” she said. Most mornings, she eats oatmeal, but since the Adventists operate Linda Valley Villa, the cafeteria has no shortage of healthy options.

“I can have whatever I want,” said Marge. “There isn’t anything you can eat that can’t be made out of something healthy. My daughter just sent me some waffles made out of
soy and garbanzo beans. Mostly I just eat the oatmeal in the morning, and then make up a nice raw fruit and vegetable salad for later in the day.”

After breakfast, Marge came back to her room to reflect on the Lord and His blessings. Then she did her exercises. “Today I knew you were coming so I saved some for you,” she said. “Let’s go.”

Marge hit the carpet with both feet before the words left her mouth and led me out the door and down the hallway (past the big, framed poster celebrating her 100th birthday, adorned with dozens of signatures and well wishes) and into the elevator to the basement.

“This is our laundry and exercise area,” she said, shooting her left arm out in the direction of the washers and dryers as she wended her way through rows of chairs made festive by brightly colored, patterned ties hanging from the armrest of each chair—props for sitting isometric exercises.

She hopped on the lone exercise bicycle, quickly adjusted the resistance with a spin of the thumb and forefinger, and started churning.

“I ride between six and eight miles a day, except for the Sabbath,” she said over the whirring bike. “But yesterday I only rode five because another girl was in a hurry and wanted to get on, so I’ll go a little longer today. I set the timer for 15 minutes and try and keep the speed between 25 and 30 miles an hour.” She glanced down, saw the speedometer hovering between 20 and 25, and picked up her pace. Then she looked over at me expectantly and nodded at my tape recorder. She began to recount her life story almost nonchalantly, without gasping, never letting up on the pedals.

She grew up poor in what was then rural California, close enough to San Francisco to have a vague memory of water sloshing around in the family animal trough during the great 1906 earthquake. Her father was a mule skinner. Her mother converted to Adventism when Marge was 9 months old, so Marge rarely ate meat and hadn’t now for more than 50 years. “My father was a fun man; he’d laugh and pull jokes on us and torment my mother. I’m like him a little bit. I always wanted to do things for people. When I was a little girl I used to tell my mother to go to bed so I could bring her things. I waited on tables when I was 14, and then I worked in a fruit cannery to help the family, but I knew I had to stay in school to become a nurse. My father died of pneumonia before I graduated, but I knew he was proud of me.”

Marge met her husband while she was at nursing school in Napa Valley. “He was 16 and I was 18 and he followed me around for three years, if you can call that courting. I told him, ‘I’m not going to marry anyone until I’m an RN.’ But after that happened, I told him, ‘If you really want to be a doctor, we’ll get married and I’ll support you.’ ” And she did, through two years of college and then four more of medical school. When her husband was called to serve in World War II for nearly five years, she stayed at home with two small children. (“My children are both 72 now—a son and a daughter we adopted when she was three. I had a hard time having one child and wanted another,” she said.)

For 30 years, they lived in Bellflower, California, where her husband was a surgeon and she was a nurse. In accordance with Adventist philosophy, they volunteered together for two international missions, spending three months each in Ethiopia and Zambia.

Always ready to tackle new things, Marge began riding a bicycle at age 12 on a dare from her father, who called her too fat, and she’s never stopped pedaling. She took up golf at age 40 and played for decades. At 90, she decided to go to Disneyland and sit in
“one of those rides that swirl you around.” When she was 96, she finally decided she was
tired of cooking and cleaning and moved with her husband into Linda Valley Villa. One
day in August of 2003, she returned to their apartment after carrying his food tray back to
the cafeteria and he was lying on the floor. “He said, ‘I hit my head,’ and then his arms
got . . . [Marge slumped her shoulders], and he was gone.” It was two days before their
77th anniversary.

Converting Strangers to Friends
“It took me a year to realize that the world wasn’t going to come to me,” Marge said.
“That’s when I started volunteering again, and it was the best thing to ever happen to me.
I found that when you are depressed, that’s when you do something for somebody else.
There, that’s eight miles,” she said, abruptly changing her mood and the subject. “See
what you can do on this bike—one of the girls here taught me this.” She cackled,
suddenly pedaling furiously in the other direction. “It uses a whole different set of
muscles.”

“I can’t believe you aren’t the slightest bit winded,” I told her. “I would be.”
“Really?” she answered, and in the space of a few seconds I saw three reactions move
across her face: contempt that I’d let my body go, skepticism that I was pulling her leg,
and then genuine concern that I was telling her the truth. “Well then, let’s get you going,”
she announced, hopping off the bike and moving toward a series of hand weights in the
corner. “Pick up a pair of five-pounders; that’s what I’m using. Now go sit in that chair.”
She demonstrated an eight-part, dual-hand, lift-and-stretch exercise as she counted it off,
and barked for me follow along. Then we started with twisting trunk contortions,
followed by side-to-side stretches with the weights held over our heads. “I’ve got to go to
the bathroom,” she said, after about ten brisk minutes. “Why don’t you take a little ride
on that bike while I’m gone?” Although I can’t be sure, I think I heard her linger an extra
minute or two out of sight in the basement hall while I dutifully pedaled.

“All that water,” she said by way of explanation as she returned. “C’mon, I want to
show you our garden.” On the way up, I asked if she ever got lonely. “Well, sure, you
miss people. Most of my friends have died. My husband is dead,” she said matter-of-
factly. “But I just like to talk to people. My motto is: A stranger is a friend we haven’t
met yet. I don’t know a lot of non-Adventists. I don’t go to movies or dances. But I still
have a lot of friends around this place and other places in town. I think I was probably
shyer when I was younger. There are days when my forgetter is working overtime. I
remember just as many things as I did before, but after a hundred years or more, I have so
many things in my computer I don’t know what button to push.” She walked off the
elevator laughing at herself.

“Look at this: I have an ear of corn! This is the first time I have ever grown corn,” she
said, as we walked in the courtyard. Plants, flowers, and vegetables were growing in long
rows against all three walls of the fence that squared off the yard from the main building.
“These are my tomatoes—oh, look, I’ve got a ripe one! See that hydrangea over there?
When I first came here, there were some as tall as me. Then somebody cut ‘em down, and
now they are growing back.”

Some people walked by and Marge waited until they were out of earshot, then said,
“There are some folks in here who are 80 years old. I was out still working when I was
80. I tell them, ‘I’m old enough to be your mother!’ ”
“Ahh, the roses,” she gushed, leaning forward into a brilliant red trio of them. “I can’t look at a rose without thinking of Jesus. When I was a girl, we used to go on long family walks on the Sabbath and look at all the wildflowers. It was such a special time. And the Sabbath still is special you know,” she said, finally stepping back from the flower. “It is a time to come apart from the things of the world. It is something to look forward to. You get to go on hikes, stop pushing. I don’t know how to describe it to you. I think the Sabbath gives you peace, and that contributes to your health.”

A few minutes later, it was time for me to go. When I complimented Marge on her firm handshake bidding me adieu, she replied, “I’m a strong woman. That comes from all the massages I have given in my life. Say, you need to remember to send me what you write. People come and talk to me because I’m old, and that’s the last I hear from them. They probably think I’m going to die, or have already died. But I’m still here.”

Sanctuary In Time
Inspired by Marge’s pep talk about the Sabbath, I decided to attend an Adventist service at the church on the Loma Linda University campus. Adventists observe the Sabbath from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. The number of Adventists in Loma Linda is high enough to warrant that postal carriers deliver mail only from Sunday through Friday.

At first, the tenor and content of the service itself didn’t seem so different. As in many “mega-churches,” video cameras swung over the pews on boom cranes, their images shown on large screens over the stage as well as being broadcast to viewers at home. Hymns were sung. A sermon was delivered. The collection plate was passed. I wasn’t sure what I was looking for—signs of why this faith promotes a longevity culture, I guess—but I wasn’t finding it.

After the service, the hundreds in attendance seemed to hang around longer than usual, and in larger groups. It was the social equivalent of comfort food. One cluster of eight to ten young people, a diverse mix of race and gender but all between their teens and their thirties, had locked arms and were standing around the Good Samaritan sculpture near a side entrance of the church. More than half of them were chanting the biblical parable cited on the plaque of the sculpture, from Luke 10: 25-37. The passage is about helping the downtrodden.

But what was striking was not the message, so much as the variety of expressions. One student was reading from a Bible; another had her eyes shut and was reciting it from memory; two others were only occasionally chiming in, and mostly doing can-can kicks in clownish, spontaneous choreography. It was an ad hoc, perhaps fleeting community, and everyone seemed happy. It reminded me of what Marge Jetton had told me about why she volunteered so much: “Because it makes me feel good,” she’d said. “Don’t you like to help people up when they need a hand?”

Randy Roberts, the pastor of Loma Linda University Church, told me more about the spirit of the Sabbath and why he thinks it helps people live longer. “I think even for those who may slip away from the faith and from the Adventist Church, observing the Sabbath remains a lingering reality, a way to stay connected,” he said. “It is meant to be a sanctuary in time for rest and rejuvenation, and I think it accomplishes that on a number of levels.
“Ellen White had this whole-health emphasis that you should use the time to value exercise, get out in nature, and move around. Another way it is healthy—I don’t have any studies or hard numbers for this, just a lifetime of observing it myself—is as a pure stress reliever that allows some peace to occur.”

“I’ve heard over and over again from students in rigorous programs like medicine and dentistry, and from faculty too, that they can’t wait for the Sabbath to come because they have a guilt-free time when they don’t have to study or do some other obligation. They can just be with their family and friends and with God, and just relax and rejuvenate. When you have that as a pattern in your life 52 times a year, it can make a big difference. Some call it a ‘sanctuary in time.’ Another part of Adventist beliefs is that the Sabbath reminds us we are creatures and not creators,” he said. “It reminds us that we don’t need to have all the answers, that we recognize our finite capabilities, and that we are dependent on God. That also is part of the sanctuary.”

Roberts said he’d seen studies showing that people with two or three significant ties in their lives, to family and friends and community, tended to be healthier, both emotionally and physically. “The Sabbath gives most Adventists a time to do that: to shut off the television, not think about your work or business, and just spend time with the people who are important to you. Unfortunately, this is becoming more unique. You used to see it more in other faiths that set aside Sunday—it would be like old Andy Griffith Show reruns. That doesn’t happen as often now. But it is still an important part of our faith.”

**Open-Heart Surgery on Tuesdays**

It was a hot, breezy afternoon on a rare, smog-free day in the San Bernardino Valley when I dropped in on Dr. Ellsworth Wareham, who was hard at work in his backyard. From his property on Crestview Drive you can look out on the valley’s mountains receding like brown waves, and when the air is as clear as it was that day, you could even make out the shirt colors of people walking on the LLUMC campus a mile and a half away.

For all the sweat rolling into his eyes, however, Wareham couldn’t see much of anything. When he wiped his brow with his forearm, it was as if he had used a squeegee to send water down the rest of his body, soaking his clothes. His shoulder muscles showed through his clinging T-shirt as he struggled to corkscrew the post-hole digger through the packed soil. Recently, a contractor had presented Wareham with an estimate of $5,000 to install an eight-foot-high wooden fence along a steep hillside on the edge of his property.

By consulting his local discount hardware store, he had learned that the fence materials would cost only about $2,000. So he decided to do the work himself. Thus far he’d sunk a couple of poles and sealed a couple of holes, but there was an imposing pile of posts and fence sections left. There was also a potentially significant complication: Ellsworth Wareham was in his 90s. He was born in 1914.

Four days later, Wareham was in open-heart surgery at a community hospital on the edge of Los Angeles. But he was not the one on the table. He had a scalpel in his hand.

“I am a man of good fortune,” he said, when we next met for our first extensive conversation. “My hands are still steady, my vision is good, and I don’t have Alzheimer’s disease, which may occur in about 50 percent of the people my age.”
“Now, I want to make it clear that I am no longer the lead surgeon; I am either the first or second assistant, and I do the minor parts of the operation. If I had to, I could step in and do the major parts—that’s one of the reasons I’m in the room. But cardiac surgery is inclined to be long and sometimes quite taxing, lasting anywhere from three to six hours.

“Sometimes I’ll go out and rest for a half hour, and that’s very refreshing. To increase my endurance I exercise regularly by doing my own landscape maintenance and gardening. But in recent years, in spite of adequate exercise, my stamina is decreasing. The hormones that build the muscles are diminished.

“So yes, I am sensitive about my age,” he said. “If someone tells you the assistant on your heart surgery is in his 90s, well, that’s not a comfortable thought. But the way I see it, the cardiac surgeons who want me there to assist them can judge my ability better than I can. And when I start to do less than top-quality work, I trust them not to use me.”

Eventually, he won’t renew his license, he added. “And a deficit in mental or physical ability may appear at any time and make the decision for me.”

As I parked on the steep hill near his driveway, I spotted Wareham on his hands and knees, cleaning leaves out of the gutter in the road. Tall, thin, clad in a short-sleeve red shirt and khakis, he greeted me with a firm handshake and a ready smile. His face was framed by a mustache and hair that was balding in the middle but thick on the sides. As we entered the house to the cacophony of three dogs (a mutt, a golden retriever, and a Chihuahua), Wareham’s wife was unpacking suitcases from a trip to Canada to celebrate the centennial of tiny Canadian Junior College (now Canadian University College) in Lacombe, Alberta, where he graduated from a two-year premedical course in 1933. Wareham had driven them home from the airport last night.

“I think it is important for me to keep active,” he said, gesturing for me to take a seat in his study. “People say, ‘Oh, I don’t drive at night.’ Well, I drive over 2,000 miles a month on Southern California freeways, much of it at night. I think it keeps me alert.”

Through the double doors over his shoulder and past the patio, I noticed the long, regal, wooden fence in the backyard.

The walls of Wareham’s study are laden with prestigious academic and honorary degrees, along with photographs from his missions abroad. As a doctor in the Navy during World War II, he once took out an officer’s appendix on a destroyer being tossed around in a typhoon off the coast of Okinawa. Later, on a medical mission to Pakistan sponsored by the U.S. State Department in 1963, he was a surgeon on the Loma Linda heart surgery team that brought open-heart surgery to that country for the first time. He pointed to a photograph of a girl who, with her family, had walked 100 miles to get an operation. In Vietnam, a year before South Vietnam fell, the work of the heart surgery team in Saigon was featured on the Walter Cronkite TV program.

As a surgeon he was a pioneer of open-heart procedures. (Dr. Leonard Bailey, who has performed more infant heart transplants than anyone in the world, unabashedly refers to Wareham as “my mentor.”) When rudimentary open-heart surgery was first practiced in the early 1950s, Wareham saw the emergence of a new field and extended his residency to acquire the necessary expertise. But what he saw on the operating table would have a profound effect on his own health habits.

“In the early days, when we used the heart-lung machine, we connected the arterial line to a cannula in the leg artery, later it would be straight into the aorta,” he said. “But I
observed when I was cutting into the thighs of these patients that those who were vegetarians had better arteries.”

“When we did the surgery,” he continued, “if it was a nice, smooth artery, I went back later and asked the patient, and it turned out that he or she was a vegetarian. And those who really had a lot of heavy calcium and plaque in the arteries, their diet would not be toward the vegetarian side. Now that wasn’t true 100 percent, and I didn’t keep any statistics or write any papers or anything; it was just something I observed. But I began thinking about it. And I saw people getting their toes cut off or their feet cut off because of vascular disease, and that motivated me. So it was a gradual thing.” In middle age, he decided to become a vegan.

“Now, I must admit, it is no problem for me to be a vegan,” Wareham said, leaning forward. “My mother was an Adventist, and my father was not. I grew up on a farm, and I milked the cows, and I never did care for milk. I don’t particularly care for eggs either.”

“For quite a few years, I read the concerns about vegans not getting enough vitamin B12 or protein or calcium; you know how it goes,” he said. “They said even the amino acids in vegetables were not adequate. But we began to find out that much of these were old wives’ tales. With the exception of lack of B12 being of some concern, you aren’t going to become deficient in protein and all these things. I use soymilk, and as far as eggs are concerned, my wife knows suitable substitutes.

“My wife is not a vegetarian, but she is changing. Again, it is no credit to me that I am a vegan—I just love it. There are so many tasty fruits, vegetables, and nuts. This morning we had wonderful strawberries, for example.”

The longer Wareham talks, the more apparent it became that he’s a walking advertisement for the Blue Zone lifestyle of the Adventists. “I am very fond of nuts, all kinds of nuts,” he said happily. “I have to restrain myself. Most days I eat two meals, first around ten in the morning and then again around four in the afternoon, so I can keep my weight down. When I eat, I really enjoy it, and twice a day is enough. Nuts are usually part of the menu. I know walnuts are reported to be very good for you, but I don’t eat them because I enjoy peanuts and cashews and almonds so much. Sometimes I get purist and think I should eat them raw, but really, whatever is handy. I am not a nutritionist, and I don’t profess to be.”

Another thing that helps keep the weight off is drinking water, Wareham noted, as, almost in gentle rebuttal, his wife entered and gave us both a glass of cranberry juice. “I became aware some years ago that water is highly important to health, and I do make an effort to drink a lot of it. I’ll drink maybe three glasses of water when I first get up, because I want to make sure before I get busy and forget to have some. Then when I get home I have some more. And one of my little rituals is to never pass a water fountain without having a drink. It adds up.”

“But there is something else,” Wareham said, lowering his juice glass just before he was about to take a sip. “I know people that have had problems who are just as careful in health habits as I am. There’s a colleague my age, who in addition to his M.D. has a doctoral degree in public health from Harvard University, and he has followed a good program—he walks, eats right. Now this fellow has had cancer of the prostate and the neck, and two heart attacks, each followed by heart surgery and bypass grafts. Why wasn’t he protected? Luck? Genes? Maybe stress. Remarkably, ten years after the last onslaught of these diseases, he is alive and active. I would conjecture his good health
habits helped him recover. I know that it really helps me to have purpose to what I’m doing, to have a job and finish the job and have another job, and to enjoy that process. As I say, I am blessed.” But the tone was not totally content this time. It was hard for me to tell whether Wareham was gloating, feeling guilty, or experiencing a little of both.

“A few individuals relating anecdotes about their lifestyles and health histories do not prove anything. But the Adventist health study by Dr. Fraser and his coworkers is a highly significant work,” he said. “It examines lifestyles and health outcomes of more than 34,000 people over a period of 12 years. The study should have serious consideration.”

As we negotiated our way through the dogs and walked toward my car, Wareham closed with his own little pep talk. “It is so simple just to get on a good program. I don’t have great genes. I just try to observe broad principles that anybody can pick up, and I still don’t take any blood pressure medication. We are especially blessed out here in California, where there are so many good things to eat.”

“People talk about curing cancer and heart disease, and of course it is an important and worthy goal that can’t happen soon enough. But there are simple things everyone could be doing right now that would save so much money and suffering—like drinking enough water every day, exercise, and eating healthy food. But hey,” Wareham said, suddenly catching himself in his fervor, “everybody has his own idea about these things—it’s their lives, after all. You can tell somebody what to do, but it’s up to them whether they do it. But you can tell them how good you feel.”

Part of the Club
Shortly after three on Friday afternoon, I visited the Mock family in Yucaipa, a burgeoning hillside town about seven miles east of Loma Linda. I was hoping to see how a typical Adventist family observes the Sabbath to witness how it might contribute to a culture of longevity. When I knocked on the door of a large new suburban home on a cul-de-sac, the door opened and I was met by three males—Jesse Mock and his two sons, Justin, 15, and Austin, 13—who looked remarkably alike, with lithe, athletic builds, full faces with toothy smiles, and thick, fair, curly hair. Jesse’s wife, Rhonda, greeted me from the kitchen, where she was getting dinner ready.

Inside, the conversation flowed easily, as Jesse and Rhonda told me how they had just moved here a few months ago from Denver, Colorado, so Jesse could take a job as a vice president at LLUMC. They’d lived in the area years ago, and were happy to be back in an area with a robust church school program, which gave them options after a positive, six-year experience with home-schooling. (Adventists believe in a parochial education and operate a large, church-sponsored school system in the United States.)

The family was vegetarian, Jesse informed me, “But I think the boys have had meat before. Remember that birthday party, Justin?”

“Yeah, I’ve had meat,” Justin said with a shy smile, and added, with a tone of surprise, “It wasn’t that bad.” Austin disagreed. “Uhhhh, I didn’t like it much. I don’t know. It just didn’t taste right.”

The doorbell rang, and it turned out to be Dr. Daniel Giang, with whom I talked earlier at LLUMC, and his wife and two children. His son and the two Mock boys dashed outside to play basketball, while his younger daughter stayed behind with the adults. Again, the conversation flowed easily. The women caught up on the past week, while
Jesse and I took turns explaining how we knew Dr. Giang. Ever since they moved to Yucaipa, the Mocks have received helpful advice from the Giangs about local schools, recreational opportunities, and all the other aspects of daily living in the community. That both Giangs are medical doctors and both Mocks are not seemed less important than their common religion and the similar ages of their sons. After about 15 minutes, Jesse called in the boys, and the families sat around the living room to listen to a brief Bible passage. Then it was time to eat.

Everyone grabbed a plastic plate and loaded up in the kitchen before heading to the dinner table. There were soy “chicken” salad sandwiches in small, not quite bite-sized buns, and a beautiful salad that included some of the largest, most succulent blackberries I’ve ever seen. I enjoyed the sandwiches much more than I expected, and was a little embarrassed to realize that some of it was the presentation: The soy was served American style, slathered on a bun with some celery for crunch, and perhaps some mayo for creamy richness. Among the desserts was dried hibiscus, something Rhonda picked up on a lark, she said. It tasted candied, like dried apricots or mangoes.

The Giangs lingered a while after dinner, and the two couples gossiped about the university and the Giangs’ daughter’s dance classes. There was also some intelligence sharing about which sports teams the sons should try to play for in summer.

After the Giangs left, I was invited to accompany Justin and Austin to a rehearsal, or jam session, with other youth members of the church the Mocks attend, as they prepared for a performance at the service the next morning. Austin’s drum set was loaded into the van. Jesse drove over with me, talking mostly about college basketball and how the boys have adjusted to the move.

The ten or so members of the youth band aren’t about to top the charts anytime soon. But it was entertaining listening to the music director good-naturedly cajole slight refinements on two or three takes of a song, while his charges alternately ignored or obeyed him with about equal results—especially with the parents gathered around the back of the garagelike rehearsal room. Two coltish girls, close friends and tandem vocalists, spiced things up by acting out some of the lyrics. For Bill Withers’s “Lean On Me,” for example, they leaned against each other on the chorus and flexed their biceps on the line, “when you’re not strong,” and cradled their arms for imaginary babies during, “I’ll help you carry on.”

So this was a slice of the Adventist Sabbath. If you’re not part of the community, it might seem almost quaint. But for members of the community, this kind of repetitious, casual intimacy provokes good memories and a subtle sense of safety and well-being—the same kind of constant, subtle reinforcement of healthy habits that seems to give Adventists a better chance for longer life. It’s no wonder that most Adventists seem to hang out with other Adventists.

**Hold the Bacon**

I’m never going to be an Adventist. But you don’t have to convert to their faith to admire how they have generated a Blue Zone out of whole cloth by sticking together and reinforcing the right behaviors for longevity. Having spent more than a week in Loma Linda, I’d met some amazing characters: Marge Jetton and Ellsworth Wareham, of course, and more.
Just down the hill from Ellsworth’s place was a rambler owned by Minnie Wood, who will turn 100 in May 2008. Minnie was a 1925 beauty contest winner and said she would have gone into acting had she not converted to Adventism. Yet she had no regrets. “How many actors have gotten to perform in front of three presidents?” she thundered, ticking off Truman, Eisenhower, and Nixon as those who heard the choirs she directed while living in Washington, D.C. Minnie taught music while traveling with her husband in China and Singapore. She continued to teach some students, driving to their homes in her Oldsmobile, and could still carry a tune as long as she could synchronize the key on the piano. “I love what I do. I always have. I wouldn’t do anything else.”

There was Letha Graham, born in 1906, who lived in a home at the top of a mountain ridge and rented out rooms to patients undergoing proton radiation treatments at the medical center. Letha used to sell medical encyclopedias on horseback in Alberta, Canada. In recent times she lived with her 94-year-old sister, taking a daily walk around the house grounds, and pausing for a dip in the Jacuzzi.

Just down the hall from Marge Jetton at Linda Valley Villa was 94-year-old Dr. Wayne McFarland, creator of the first—now famous and highly successful—five-day anti-smoking plan. A wiry firecracker of a man, McFarland slapped things—his hands together, the back of a chair, your shoulder—for emphasis when he was excited. Remembering when he and Dunbar Smith were both staff physicians at the Battle Creek Sanitarium and Hospital conducting five-day plans to stop smoking, Wayne recalled finding two pamphlets, “More Nuts & Less Meat” and “The Simple Life in a Nutshell” by Dr. Kellogg. Indeed, the apartment he shared with his wife had numerous bowls filled with nuts. Later, McFarland took me out to the same garden where Marge showed off her corn and tomatoes, and he slapped the cement wall with glee when he noticed how much his own tomatoes had ripened.

Then there was Ethel Meilicke, 108, who lived in the nursing home part of Linda Valley Villa. With a history remarkably similar to that of Marge Jetton, she grew up on farms, worked in a cannery, and became a nurse as a young woman. When I visited, she was frail and hard of hearing, but when I asked what she enjoyed most during her days on the dairy farm, she blurted out the word “shneckens,” a German pastry her daughter (now 80) said she always used to make. Ethel passed away less than a month after my last visit to Loma Linda, on July 1, 2007.

It still amazes me that Ethel Meilicke, Wayne McFarland, Minnie Wood, Letha Graham, Ellsworth Wareham, and Marge Jetton all lived within a three-mile radius of one another, the youngest of them 93 (and still practicing open-heart surgery). As I prepared to leave Loma Linda, I remembered something Dr. Fraser from the AHS had told me. “Some Adventists get personally offended if they get colon cancer or some other disease,” he said. “They have a reputation for avoiding these things now, of course, but it begs the question, what do you expect to die of? And when we looked, we found that, by and large, the proportions of deaths from different causes in Adventists are about the same as everybody else. It is just that they die later.”

What does that mean? Are Adventists hitting some kind of fundamental rate of aging? “We see people get to age 98, or 103, or whatever, and as physicians we ask, what did they die of?” Fraser said. “We see they were experiencing heart failure, and their kidneys weren’t so good, and everything was slowly deteriorating. So aging seems to be about deteriorating cellular function and metabolism and so forth. And what I am saying is that
with the Adventists it almost looks as if that general deterioration and cellular function
may be impacted by lifestyle. If so, that would be very interesting.”

My last stop in Southern California was a pancake house. Tempting pictures of maple
syrup slathered over sausage and pancakes adorned the menu. I was hungry, and the
waitress had her pencil poised. “I’ll take the oatmeal with fruit,” I said. “And just water.”
We’ll see how long that lasts.

**Loma Linda’s Blue Zone Secrets**

*Try these tactics practiced by America’s longevity all-stars.*

**Find a sanctuary in time.**
A weekly break from the rigors of daily life, the 24-hour Sabbath provides a time to focus
on family, God, camaraderie, and nature. Adventists claim this relieves their stress,
strengthens social networks, and provides consistent exercise.

**Maintain a healthy body mass index (BMI).**
Adventists with healthy BMIs (meaning they have an appropriate weight for their
heights) who keep active and eat meat sparingly, if at all, have lower blood pressure,
lower blood cholesterol, and less cardiovascular disease than heavier Americans with
higher BMIs.

**Get regular, moderate exercise.**
The Adventist Health Survey (AHS) shows that you don’t need to be a marathoner to
maximize your life expectancy. Getting regular, low-intensity exercise like daily walks
appears to help reduce your chances of having heart disease and certain cancers.

**Spend time with like-minded friends.**
Adventists tend to spend lots of time with other Adventists. They find well-being by
sharing values and supporting each other’s habits.

**Snack on nuts.**
Adventists who consume nuts at least five times a week have about half the risk of heart
disease and live about two years longer than those who don’t. At least four major studies
have confirmed that eating nuts has an impact on health and life expectancy.

**Give something back.**
Like many faiths, the Seventh-day Adventist Church encourages and provides
opportunities for its members to volunteer. People like centenarian Marge Jetton stay
active, find sense of purpose, and stave off depression by focusing on helping others.

**Eat meat in moderation.**
Many Adventists follow a vegetarian diet. The AHS shows that consuming fruits and
vegetables and whole grains seems to be protective against a wide variety of cancers. For
those who prefer to eat some meat, Adventists recommend small portions served as a side
dish rather than as the main meal.

**Eat an early, light dinner.**
“Eat breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince, and dinner like a pauper.” American
nutritionist Adelle Davis is said to have recommended—an attitude also reflected in
Adventist practices. A light dinner early in the evening avoids flooding the body with
calories during the inactive parts of the day. It seems to promote better sleep and a lower
BMI.

**Put more plants in your diet.**
Non-smoking Adventists who ate 2 or more servings of fruit per day had about 70 percent
fewer lung cancers than non-smokers who ate fruit only once or twice a week. Adventists
who ate legumes such as peas and beans 3 times a week had a 30 to 40 percent reduction in colon cancer. Adventist women who consumed tomatoes at least 3 or 4 times a week reduced their chance of getting ovarian cancer by 70 percent over those who ate tomatoes less often. Eating a lot of tomatoes also seemed to have an effect on reducing prostate cancer for men.

**Drink plenty of water.**
The AHS suggests that men who drank 5 or 6 daily glasses of water had a substantial reduction in the risk of a fatal heart attack—60 to 70 percent—compared to those who drank considerably less.

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