

PCM: EVANGELISM IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD

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A Case for the Public College & University

It is estimated that more than 75% of our Adventist college students are attending non-Adventist institutions of higher learning.¹ The challenges are many and complex. First is the financial challenge. Simply put, Adventist education is significantly more expensive than public education². Furthermore, a growing segment of the North American Division church membership is made up of minority groups. These individuals—especially African-American, Asian, and Latino students are viewed as a growing asset by colleges and universities in some of our nation’s most populous states. Backed by substantial government support, these state colleges heavily target minority groups in an effort to “embrace our demographic future.”³ This poses a significant problem for Adventist institutions of higher learning.

Another major challenge lies in Adventist attitudes toward and differing views on Adventist education. For example, a crucial question is whether Adventist professors teaching in Adventist schools should be at liberty to promote educational material that is contrary to the teachings of the church (even though the church funds and owns the school). While some advocate for academic freedom, others argue for the protection of the youth of our church. The resulting point is that some have concluded that Adventist Education should be blamed for the estimated 50% of our Adventist young people that are leaving the church.⁴ Regardless of the validity of the arguments, the reality is that an increasing number of Adventist students are finding a growing list of reasons for not attending Adventist colleges and universities.

In essence, Adventist education is facing several challenges so that a much higher percentage of our youth are attending public colleges and universities. While Adventist education is still very relevant and important, and while much efforts and many resources should be invested to reach the youth in our universities, at least equal energy and resources should be dedicated to ministry on public campuses.

Reach the Campus, Reach the World

Another good reason to make intentional and dedicated efforts to do evangelism on campuses is the high number of international students that attend colleges and universities in North America. According to the Institute of International Education (the leading non-profit educational exchange organization in the United States), more than one million or 10% of students studying in our country’s colleges and universities are international students. The majority of these individuals are studying at universities offering doctoral degrees, indicating that many of them are seeking graduate education. The international

student's family provides an overwhelming 60% of their primary source funding. These statistics indicate that the international students on our public college campuses are highly educated and financially wealthy. There is also a significant possibility that many of these individuals will return to their homes to become their country's leaders.

Compounding the missional significance of their education, wealth, and future are the countries of origin of most international students in the United States: Saudi Arabia, China, India, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Japan make up more than 60% of the international student population on public college campuses⁵. These countries are from a region of the world known as the 10-40 Window—the area with the greatest number of unreached people groups. Thirteen of the top 25 places of origin for international students are nations whose populations are predominantly or entirely non-Christian.⁶

Although sending missionaries on overseas mission trips is critical to the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it is hard to justify a more efficient method of world mission outreach than reaching international students on public university campuses. In addition to engaging the future leaders of the world and the wealthy and educated, public campus ministry is more effective from a pragmatic standpoint. International students of non-Christian religions who are studying on American college campuses have already overcome the language barrier. Also, we are engaging them on safer grounds. Furthermore, in many cases, we have an easier time engaging with them on a cultural level than we would if we were guests in their home countries.

In essence, reaching the public college campus has the potential of being the most effective missional way to reach the world of non-Christian global religions, as well as the North American Division's largest unreached people group in its territory.⁷ Moreover, it places the youth and young adults of our church at the very center of this crucial evangelistic endeavor.

Evangelism on Campus: Four Suggestions, One Goal

Although there are many creative approaches for evangelism on the public college campus, the next section provides four suggestions and an overarching goal:

1. **Build Community.** First, community is becoming more crucially important for college students. For many students, loneliness—the feeling that social needs are not being adequately met—is a common experience on college campuses.⁸ In fact, some experts say that loneliness has hit epidemic proportions among millennials in the United States.⁹ If this trend is true with American students, how much more true is it with international students who are separated from their family by greater distances? Providing space for wholesome community and simply being friends with students can be a great way of ministering to their needs. Having barbecues, wholesome game nights, and meaningful meetings are simple, effective ways to build community among students.
2. **Facilitate Cultural Acclimatization.** Second, many international students have an appreciation for American Culture. However, students from other countries often discover that there are major differences between our educational system and what they're accustomed to at home: professors have office hours, the grading system is different, group projects

are sometimes required, and more.¹⁰ The Harvard International Office describes three phases of culture shock that are typically experienced by international students: the Honeymoon, the Rejection, and the Recovery.¹¹ Becoming aware of these phases and applying them to campus ministry in the local context is a good way to culturally engage and minister to international students. Inviting international students to celebrate holidays—American or from their native country—or learning about other aspects of our culture is a good way to reach them.

3. **Provide Tutoring.** Tutoring is a third significant way to reach the needs of students. Helping others academically is a strong way to serve others and practice Christ's method of reaching people. For instance, in the case of international students, English is not their first language and they'll have to study longer hours in order to fully grasp material; this provides a great opportunity to meet a real felt need as well as to build community.
4. **Foster Spiritual Conversations.** Fourth, students welcome spiritual conversations more than many anticipate. The reason why some do not experience successful spiritual conversation with students is usually because they lack a tactful approach or unwise timing. In most cases, it is fairly easy to engage in spiritual discussion when it becomes a natural part of your everyday living. When spirituality is not something we put on and take off, but is instead who we are, spiritual conversations lose their awkwardness and become meaningful for the Adventist student and the non-Christian student, alike.

Ultimately, the main goal of campus evangelism should be, not only to share truthful biblical information, but also and especially to reveal Christ in one's life. In the early Christian church, as Ellen White puts it, "one interest prevailed; one subject of emulation swallowed up all others. The ambition of the believers was to reveal the likeness of Christ's character and to labor for the enlargement of His kingdom."¹² In other words, central to any evangelistic effort, and particularly to evangelism on campus, is the goal to share the person and the character of Jesus Christ.

In closing, public campus ministry today, has the potential of being one of the most effective models of ministry, mission and evangelism, by and for youth and young adults, both from North America and beyond. Now, more than ever, the church cannot afford to neglect that.

Endnotes

- 1 Sauder, Vinita. "Providing Our Youth With Access and Opportunity to Attend Adventist Colleges." *The Journal of Adventist Education*, 2012, pp. 5-15.
- 2 Even though our schools receive a large sum of funding from local conferences, unions, divisions, and—in some cases—the General Conference, church subsidies make up about 10% of operating funds, making it difficult for our tuition-dependent institutions to compete with other better funded public and private schools in our nation. See Willey, T Joe. "'A Wall Unto Them on Their Right Hand and on Their Left': Adventist Education in the Midst of a Sea of Science." *Reports of the National Center for Science Education*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2012, pp. 4.1-4.10., reports.ncse.com/index.php/rncse/article/view/106/93.
- 3 Phillips, Brad C. "Top 10 Education Trends to Watch in 2015 and Beyond." *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 18 Feb. 2015, www.huffingtonpost.com/brad-c-phillips/top-10-education-trends-t_b_6345056.html.
- 4 Willey, T Joe. "'A Wall Unto Them on Their Right Hand and on Their Left': Adventist Education in the Midst of a Sea of Science." *Reports of the National Center for Science Education*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2012, pp. 4.1-4.10., reports.ncse.com/index.php/rncse/article/view/106/93.
- 5 For example see <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/international-students-united-states>. Also see <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/.../u-s-colleges-see-a-big-bump-in-international-students>.
- 6 These countries include Indonesia, Turkey, Malaysia, Nepal, and Iran. Check the document: "Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange." *Institute of International Education*, Institute of International Education, 2017, www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors.
- 7 "Year-End Meeting 2017: New Perspectives (Parts 1-11)." *Year-End Meeting 2017: New Perspectives (Parts 1-11)*, North American Division, 26 Oct. 2017, www.facebook.com/pg/NADAdventist/videos/. Watch the entire NAD Year-end meeting reports from Secretariat and Youth Ministries where the public college campus is identified as the largest unreached people group in the North American Division.
- 8 Morris, Marcia. "The Cure for Campus Loneliness." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 20 Nov. 2016, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/college-wellness/201611/the-cure-campus-loneliness.
- 9 Loria, Kevin. "Loneliness May Be a Greater Public Health Hazard than Obesity—and Experts Say It Has Hit Epidemic Levels in the US." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 1 May 2018, www.businessinsider.com/cigna-loneliness-study-americans-millennials-lonely-2018-5.
- 10 Pham, Danh D. "5 Key Facts for International Students About U.S. Academic Culture." *U.S. News & World Report*, U.S. News & World Report, 18 Nov. 2014, 8:00am, www.usnews.com/education/blogs/international-student-counsel/2014/11/18/5-key-facts-for-international-students-about-us-academic-culture.
- 11 "Adjusting to a New Culture." Harvard.edu, Harvard International Office, www.hio.harvard.edu/adjusting-new-culture.
- 12 *The Acts of the Apostles: in the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, by Ellen Gould Harmon White, Pacific Press, 2002, pp. 48-49.