

TRANSFORMING INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

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I want to begin by challenging you to reflect with me and dream a little. What if Adventist school campuses could become vibrant centers of outreach and evangelism? What if all of our Adventist institutions could re-discover their original mission? Would the students attending our schools find spiritual vitality and satisfying meaning and purpose?

Do you think it's possible for American Christians to replace the materialistic American dream with God's dream of leading others to fuller lives in Him? Would the way we interact with and influence the world change? Do you think it's possible to re-claim that incredible early Adventist passion that seemed to flood down from heaven like the early rain of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? Do you think it's possible for Laodicea to give way to vibrancy in our denomination in north America once again? Indeed, this is possible! With God, everything is possible! I would LOVE to be a part of something like that—wouldn't you?

Campus-based Youth Evangelism and Adventist Mission

Lisa Beardsley-Hardy chose to entitle her cover story for *Adventist World* (Feb 2017), "Adventist Education: Rediscovering Our Mission." This seems to be a very strong title coming from the Director of the Department of Education at the General Conference. In her article Beardsley-Hardy quotes George Knight as saying:

"Both the birth and the expansion of Seventh-day Adventist education were stimulated by the explosive fuel of apocalyptic mission as the denomination sought to educate the coming generation of young people not only about that apocalyptic mission but [also] to dedicate their lives to it."

In this quote Knight makes it clear that Adventist schools were indeed originally campuses focused on evangelism in every way imaginable. Training students to reach out to the world around them, both globally and locally, was the core of their *raison d'être*.

Do you think Beardsley-Hard is correct in her assessment that Adventist schools need to re-discover this original mission? In order to begin doing this, must we first come to grips with the fact that we have indeed strayed from our mission? Is it possible to admit that? What have Adventist schools become over the last 100+ years? Could the loss of identity and mission be at the heart of the decline in Adventist education? These are indeed difficult but necessary discussions for our churches and schools to have just as we must each look at our own lives and passions to see how we as individuals are doing in our walk with Jesus.

Laodicea is definitely a difficult culture to navigate and we will never navigate it well without regular, deliberate, Holy Spirit-led introspection and reflection.

But there is hope. There is always hope. In this case we have concrete examples of that hope and inspiring instances of schools that are in fact re-discovering their missions in the midst of Laodicean culture and they are beginning to thrive and grow!

Some Inspiring Examples

Last Spring I took some of my *Collaborative Ministry* students (this course teaches seminary students—many of them will become pastors—effective ways of working with their church schools) on a field trip to visit some thriving Adventist schools near Portland, Oregon. Here's what we found:

We found a large academy where the students testified that they felt like a big family. They said the school environment was loving and supportive and they felt like they could be themselves and that other students were there to support them. The students also attested to the fact that the faculty and staff were loving mentors whom they respected and that they loved the pastors who came on campus to interact and spend time with them. There were even young students at the Adventist elementary school across the street that talked about the love and respect they had for the pastors from their churches who would come on campus to spend time with them talking about God and getting involved in outreach. One student said that because of the time the pastor spent on campus he felt like that pastor was “his” pastor rather than merely “the” pastor from his church.

As I talked with the pastor of the large Adventist church that was right in between these two schools he told me about the dozens of outreach projects and opportunities that were available to the students on an ongoing basis. From a free health clinic, to community gym nights, to homeless ministry, to cooking schools, to evangelistic crusades and a variety of forms of personal evangelism. There are far too many ministries to list here but suffice it to say—there seemed to be a ministry that everyone would be able to relate to and enjoy being involved in. The students' vibrancy and contagious spirituality were a testimony to the evangelistic partnerships between the schools and churches.

My students and I visited another school where the pastors from all the constituent churches spent time at the school every week. Each pastor adopted a classroom and lead out with spiritual activities as well as helping meet every other need they could find from maintenance to studying the Bible with the families of non-Adventist students. One of the core spiritual elements in that school was TAG time. TAG time stands for, “Time Alone with God.” The seminary students in my class witnessed 9 year olds being led by their teacher to engage individually in personal devotions for 45 minutes each day. One little girl testified that her life would, “fall apart” without this time!

The stories go on and on. Another small church school contained 80% community students (non-Adventist). The parents of several of these students stated that they were not church attenders at any church. They said that this Adventist School was the center of their spiritual community and that they felt like the pastor from the church that supported this school was “their” pastor even though they never attended his church services.

In these schools mission is happening. People's lives are being touched by the eternal gospel—both the students and the surrounding community. This is youth evangelism in one of its purest forms and is driving back at the core of what Adventist education was in its earliest days. This is all happening in a way that is contemporary and relevant to the world we live in now in 21st century America. These experiences are not limited to the Oregon Conference. Stories like this are coming out from across the country. It's not as widespread as we would like to see—but it seems that God is up to something special—He's on the move!

Becoming Gospel-Centered Institutions

I believe that one of the first and most foundational ways to change the culture of our institutions and to try and help more Adventist schools to re-discover their mission is to put the gospel at the very center of everything we do. The Three Angels' messages of Revelation 14 are at the heart of Adventist identity, and the first picture in these messages is that of an angel with the “everlasting gospel” (Revelation 14:6)

Simply put, Adventists must become preachers of the gospel! I believe this is also a core reason why we are losing so many children born into Adventist homes from the church—we seem to struggle with the basics of how to convert people to Christ before teaching them our distinctive, beautiful truths that describe God's character so well. But without the gospel foundation everything falls apart and we lose even our own children!

For this reason we must make our schools centers of gospel power and influence—not just for the spiritual health of our own children and families—but for the spreading of the good news about Jesus to the world around us as well. I believe that this gospel focus—without sacrificing distinctive truth—is the center of the core requirement for the revival of Adventist education and also for the revival of Adventism as a whole. Revelation 14:6 tells us that the gospel is “everlasting”—it never goes out of style and we can never live without it!

Also, if we do not have a gospel focus, we are straying away from the example set by one of our church's early founders, Ellen G. White, for she wrote far more on the life and teachings of Christ than she ever did on prophecy and doctrine. When I look at the books (not compilations) that Ellen White wrote, it seems to me that she focused far more on Jesus and the gospel than any other topic. *Steps to Christ*, *Desire of Ages*, *Confrontation*, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* and *Christ's Object Lessons*, are a few good examples of this Jesus-gospel-centered focus.

Transforming Adventist School Campuses

In the Discipleship and Religious Education department of which I am a part of (at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary) we have worked together to develop a 4 step process for encouraging churches and church schools in a collaborative growth process that leads to greater institutional health, vitality and witness to the community, for both the church and the school.

Pastoral Involvement in Schools.

The first thing we do is to encourage pastors to get involved in their church schools. The brief overview of this concept is for pastors to show up at the school regularly and participate in activities like: Developing caring and

supportive relationships with the faculty, staff and students by simply showing up. Being involved in everything from work bees to teaching baptismal classes to being a spiritual companion and mentor for faculty, staff and students is key. Attending school board and committee meetings and frequently verbalizing support for the school and sharing good on-campus experiences at church on Sabbath is vital. Also, making sure the church members know and understand the tremendous benefits of Adventist education and all the in depth studies that are evidence of these benefits is important.

Training Students for Community Outreach.

The second step we encourage is for the pastor to work together with the school principal and staff to help teach the students how to get involved in community outreach activities. These activities can be humanitarian or overtly spiritual in nature. Things like: local park clean up, homeless ministry, highway cleanup, shut in visitation with the pastor or an elder, or being a partner in giving Bible studies. Another activity we encourage is going door-to-door in the community around the school spreading God's love through simple holiday greetings, baked goods, taking prayer requests or offering to help needy neighbors with yard clean up or other chores. These are all excellent ways to let your community know you care. It's all about breaking out of the fortress mentality and being the hands and feet of Jesus in the world around us.

Inviting the Community to Entry-level/Non-threatening Events.

The third step we encourage is to invite the community on campus to experience non-threatening events and opportunities that Ellen White refers to as, "dis-interested acts of kindness." These are events without a "hook." That means there is no catch at the end—we just want to help people where they are in life for the sake of helping them. This can include things like hosting cooking schools and financial peace seminars at the school instead of at the church. In most cases a school campus is a less threatening and a more welcoming environment for non-Adventists to come and get to know us than the church is—especially for the non-Adventist Christians and non-Christian families that may be sending their children to our schools. Other on-campus activities to invite your school neighbors to might be gym nights, softball games, craft fairs or even a 5K charity run benefiting a local community non-profit organization.

Planning Special Worship Experiences Tailored for the Community.

The fourth step is to develop some kind of spiritual worship experience that you can invite your newly found community friends to. Hosting a worship experience on-campus is an effective way to take the next step in your relationship with those who are now familiar with your campus and comfortable being there. As your sense of community and relationships deepen newcomers will be more interested in learning more about what motivates you to live life the way you do. Typically, trying to shift people to the church at this point is a real disconnect when it's the school that they have bonded with. These worship experiences can happen any night of the week or on weekends. In some instances, a youth or family oriented church plant may even be something to consider. Always move forward carefully with the leading of the Holy Spirit.

These 4 steps and the activities they entail work together to help the young people at your churches and schools to see and experience how to get involved

in non-threatening forms of friendship and evangelism that will help develop an outreach orientation in their own lives that will last a lifetime.

Testimony to the Effectiveness of these Steps

I have experienced these first three steps in my ministry personally and have documented research in this area as a part of my Doctor of Ministry program. I got heavily involved in running Christian clubs every week at my local Adventist elementary school, academy and also on one public high school campus just as step one suggests. I was there every week with students engaged in spiritually nurturing activities and from there we led into step 2 as outlined above—outreach. We had outreach activities specific to my groups in some cases and simply encouraged greater involvement in school sponsored outreach events in others. Students claimed that this helped them to grow spiritually.

From there, my students on the Adventist campuses also became more involved in activities designed to invite the public on campus such as our annual pet and hobby fair that included a 5k run for a local charity. This was one of the initial activities to invite community members on campus and since I have left that area more activities like this are happening, with high student involvement and participation.

The fourth step in this progression comes from Allan Walshe, the chair of the department I work in at the seminary. He testifies of a school in Australia that was voted to be closed but after much prayer was reopened, followed these basic steps, including step 4 where they planned a youth church on the academy campus. In a few years this campus went from being closed to having a student body of 1,000 students who are mostly non-Adventist and are learning daily about Jesus as well as distinctive Adventist truth.

In pursuing these same initial steps, the Oregon Conference education department has even hired a full-time outreach coordinator for their schools—teaching them how to fully engage step 2 in a coordinated conference-wide manner.

Breaking the Institutional Divide

When we can create this type of climate/culture change “within” our Adventist institutions I believe we will find much greater success in reaching out to the majority of Adventist youth who, unfortunately, attend school outside the system in public school settings. I say, “unfortunately” because somewhere near 70% of Adventist young people are not attending Adventist schools for a variety of reasons, such as proximity to a church school, finances or other extenuating circumstances.

Adventist students attending public schools are not necessarily there because they want to be—many would much rather be in a church school. Our goal is obviously to have more church schools rather than less, and to enable more children to attend through whatever means possible. But, until we can do that, we need to also reach out to our Adventist youth wherever they are attending, with whatever resources our churches and schools can muster. This leads us to yet another form of youth evangelism: public school outreach.

Right now there is too much of a feeling that “they” are not really a part of “us.” We absolutely **MUST** be more inclusive! As we develop more of an outreach orientation within our own schools, and as our members start feeling more

comfortable interacting with non-Adventists, it will help change our institutional mindset that has often times been an “us” vs. “them” mentality. Rather than condemning those outside our own system, we need to begin loving others in our communities. As this mindset develops it will become more natural for academy students to become friends with Adventist public school students and volunteer together with them in implementing many of the outreach ideas discussed above. This may take the form of adopting needy families during the holidays by giving Christmas gifts or food baskets. It may also be a way to find more community service projects or perhaps even another place to advertise the events being hosted at the church school. I have found that inclusion is a much better way to develop relationships than exclusion and by partnering very intentionally with our public school youth—even if they are attending schools some distance away—we can develop closer friendships with them and help them to feel much more a part of the Adventist church and school family. It also greatly expands the opportunities for all youth to participate in more forms of evangelism and thereby have their lives forever changed.

Conclusion

It is time to re-discover, re-claim and begin to re-live the Advent vision that so inspired our founding pioneers so long ago. We need to work and pray diligently to re-claim those founding principles and find ways to apply them to the 21st century in which we now live. It most certainly begins with a relentless proclaiming and living of the basic gospel of Jesus Christ and from there leads to as many forms of outreach and evangelism as our members from every tribe, nation and tongue can dream of with their imaginations led and inspired by the Spirit of the living God. Studies have shown that the younger generations of our day are drawn to service activities and humanitarian outreach. If we can re-claim these activities for Christ it will help to draw our young people to Him and towards His kingdom and it will undoubtedly help to re-turn our institutions into the vibrant, Christ-filled centers of outreach and evangelism that they were originally intended to be.
